BLACK OR RED?: THE CREATION OF IDENTITY IN THE RADICIAL PLAYS OF LANGSTON HUGHES

A dissertation submitted by

Catherine Ann Peckinpaugh Vrtis

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Downing Cless

ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes, despite his reputation as the measure of an "authentic" black identity in art, was self-consciously performative in his creation of self through his writing. While this is hidden in most of his work due to his mastery of the tropes of "writing race," the constructed nature of his public personae is revealed through his profound shift of artistic position, from primarily racially focused to primarily class oriented and Communist aligned, during the decade of the 1930s. As demonstrated by his radical works, Hughes' professional identities were shaped by competing needs: to represent his sincere political beliefs and to answer the desires of his audiences. As he supported himself exclusively through his writing, Hughes could not risk alienating his publishers, but he was also not willing to support any ideology for profit. His radical plays, more so than his other Red writing, track Hughes' negotiation of this tension during his Communist years.

Hughes already had sympathies with the Communist cause when he broke with his patron, Charlotte Mason, at the beginning of the Great Depression, and instability of the period only deepened his radicalism. Freed from her expectations and in need of an audience, Hughes sharply shifted his public and artistic persona, downplaying his "Negro Poet Laureate" identity to promote his new Red one. His first radical drama, *Scottsboro Limited*, reveals his ambivalence to this abrupt change of persona, even as it announces the change. After his year in the USSR Hughes shifted to strictly orthodox Soviet forms for *Harvest* and *Angelo Herndon Jones*, but he then abandoned these models when he could not find an audience for the work. Finally, in his work for the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, Hughes successfully synthesized his Communist playwriting with his earlier,

racially focused and blues and jazz inspired poetry, creating something personally fulfilling and financially successful, before abandoning his radical persona at the outset of World War II and adopting new ones to fit the changing world. As a result, these works – historically undervalued by scholars – become the key to new understanding of Hughes' entire oeuvre.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes is best known as a poet, and one who wrote with a strongly racially conscious voice from the Afro-American perspective, leading to his commonly used but unofficial title, the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race."[1] However, this image of the writer, while not inaccurate, is severely limited, and, as a result, badly misrepresents his range as an artist. In addition to poetry, Hughes wrote short and long fiction, two autobiographies, essays, newspaper articles, and even stories for children, as well as dramatic, comedic, and musical works for the stage. Though his theatrical works made up a relatively small portion of Hughes' total output, his lifelong devotion to the theater – an interest he shared with his beloved but deeply negligent mother – gave those works an outsized significance in his own view of his extensive and varied oeuvre. His authorial perspective naturally shifted over the course of his long career, but there is only one period when his primary identification as a writer turns away from race. That was during the 1930s, when Hughes repositioned himself as a writer of class issues from the proletarian perspective.

This jarring change in Hughes' authorial perspective revealed what his mastery of the tropes of "authentic blackness" had previously hidden: that his approach to his writing and to his public identity as an artist was performative, and those performances were self-consciously crafted. He developed his personae, as artist and political activist, in response to the forces of the market, to ensure that he always had spaces to publish and audiences willing to pay for his work. However, this calculation is not evidence that his

[1] Larry Scanlon, "Poets Laureate and the Language of Slaves: Petrarch, Chaucer, and Langston Hughes," in *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity*, edited by Fiona Summerset and Nicolas Watson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 228.

positions were insincere; even as he adapted to the needs and interests of the various cohorts whose approval (and financial support) he courted, Hughes remained within the bounds of the identities he sincerely felt and the causes he truly supported. All of these varying identities, however, can be broadly divided into two major groups, best described as the "black Hughes" and the "Red Hughes."

He did not see these two fundamental identifications as irreconcilable, and both shape his career even when the other is dominant. However, Hughes' audiences were not always so accepting, and the resulting tension forced him to present only one as his "real" identity at a time. For the vast majority of his career, the facet of his identity he presented as primary was racial, and the combination of his deep love for Afro-American culture and his exceptional knowledge thereof allowed him to obfuscate his active work of crafting and refining this performance of self. During the Great Depression, however, this alignment reversed, and the proletarian Hughes took ascendance. It is through abrupt and profound change, inexplicable within a model of Hughes' writing that understands his racial identity as always primary, that his performative work becomes visible.

Furthermore, during this period Hughes was focused on building his reputation as a playwright, and his output of dramatic works was substantial. While not as well known as his poetry, his dramas are particularly revelatory in considering how Hughes crafted and revised his public selves, both professional and personal. Two major factors contribute to this. First, he already had an established reputation as a poet, and that reputation would shape the audience understanding of any new works. However, he had no such reputation as a dramatist – *Mulatto* was written in 1930 but would not premiere until 1935 – providing an opportunity to remake himself, minimally hindered by his

existing standing as a Harlem Renaissance poet. Furthermore, he shared with his mother, a failed actress herself, a devotion to the theater that bound his plays tightly to his personal understanding of himself, making the playhouse a natural space for Hughes to reveal his new self, and its major variations, to his audiences. As a result, Hughes' Red period, instead of being an insignificant detour away from his "true" self, contains the key to understanding his performative approach to all of his public identities, and his radical drama is the map to his self-conscious development of those personae.

Hughes' active Communist period spans the majority of the Great Depression, from after his 1930 split with patron Charlotte Mason until the summer of 1939 and the outbreak of World War II, though his sympathy with the radical cause started before this time and remained long afterwards. Until recently his work from this period has been neglected by researchers, for two reasons. First, Hughes went to considerable effort to obfuscate the depth of his connection with the Communists, to protect himself from Cold War era anti-Red bias. Second, the award-winning Hughes biographer and scholar Arnold Rampersad, in his field-defining two-volume biography of the writer, dismissed Hughes work from this period as an aberration, arguing that he only wrote for the radical left out of economic desperation, and that, ironically, by doing so he abandoned his "integrity as an artist" in favor of profit.[2] This understanding of Hughes' motives resulted in initial neglect of his Red period writing, but as other scholars have revisited this material and declassified government records revealing the depth of the FBI and Congressional anti-Communists' obsession with this work, particularly the infamous

[2] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221.

"Goodbye Christ," interest in Hughes' radical poetry has strengthened. His Communist dramas, however, remain neglected.

Only two scholars have seriously considered the meaning and significance of Hughes' radical dramas: literary scholar Joseph McLaren and theater historian Susan Duffy. Joseph McLaren was the first to take up the topic, in his 1997 book *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943*. However, he does not treat Hughes' Communist works as a unit, nor does he separate them out from the longer study. Instead McLaren emphasizes the continuity of themes of protest against oppression in all of Hughes' dramatic works through World War II. In this view Hughes never changes his authorial alignment, but rather always remains the same self-consciously racial playwright, continually "revitalizing black images through theatre of celebration, which presents models for African Americans and entertainment for general audiences without compromising political principles."[3] While this viewpoint provides an important counter to the tendency to treat Hughes' radical work as unrelated to the rest of his writing, in so downplaying the distinctiveness of this period McLaren effectively erases the dramatic changes to persona during this period.

Duffy, by contrast, focuses exclusively on Hughes' Red period. Her 2000 anthology of his Communist drama, *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, is the only prior attempt to treat Hughes' radical theater works as a set, apart from his other dramatic literature. The collection includes the *Scottsboro Limited*, which was first published in 1932, along with several of his previously unpublished plays: *Harvest*, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, and the libretto of the opera *De Organizer*. Framing essays on each script provide

[3] Joseph McLaren, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 170.

some basic information regarding the topics of the plays, while introductory and concluding remarks establish the ideological connections between them. However, Duffy offers almost no additional historical or biographical information to contextualize these works, instead referring readers to Rampersad's prodigious two volume biography for all such information.[4] Nor does she attempt to position Hughes' radical plays in relation to his political beliefs or artistic development; instead, the purpose of her book is simply to announce that these works exist and are "part of American literary labor history."[5] While an important promotion of these understudied works, Duffy's work would have been strengthened if it directly engaged with what these plays reveal about Hughes and his work.

Langston Hughes' Red dramas deserve study as a set because they are distinct from his previous and subsequent works, because of the value he ascribed to his theatrical writing, and because, due to both of these factors, they reveal how he used his writing to craft literary and personal identities according to his shifting needs and desired responses. While this process of performative creation of self is made visible in his radical works, due to their difference from his racially focused writing, he used the same process to create personae throughout his career, as his and his audience's experiences and perceptions of the world changed. Furthermore, because Hughes was determined to make his living solely as a writer, he was constantly negotiating between his sincerely held beliefs and the ideologies supported by the marketplace. This phenomenon is most readily observed in his writing for Communist and Communist-supporting audiences, although he made the same compromises throughout the course of his career.

[4] Susan Duffy, *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 3.
[5] Duffy, 4.

Significantly, this process can be made visible through the study of his neglected Depression era playwriting.

While Hughes' sincere belief in the cause of racial equality is unquestioned, his commitment to Communism has been debated since he first started presenting himself as a radical writer. As Duffy summarizes, there are two competing views of Hughes' relationship with the left:

> The first asserts that Hughes was foremost a professional writer who used the Left and the publication opportunities offered by well-placed leftist literary figures to advance his career. The second posits a purer idealistic commitment on the part of Hughes to champion the cause of the politically disenfranchised and write from a position of moral and political rectitude.[6]

As Rampersad champions the first view in his groundbreaking biography of Hughes, it remains the dominant interpretation of Hughes' writing, though the second view has gained traction in recent years as additional scholars have joined the conversation. Both views are well supported by the evidence; Hughes was deeply committed to the Communist cause during the decade of the 1930s, though his opinion changed later in his life, and he also used the infrastructure of the literary left to establish himself as an independent writer after leaving the patronage of "Godmother" Charlotte Mason. The performative model for Hughes' manipulation of his personae, therefore, provides a new way of interpreting this apparent contradiction.

While Hughes was a true believer in the Communist and Soviet causes, his formal relationship with the Party is more difficult to parse. Technically, Hughes joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in 1932, while in Carmel,

[6] Duffy, 3.

California. However, this appears to have been unintentional. Everyone who signed a particular John Reed Club petition was automatically added to the Party membership rolls, a fact that caused a local scandal at the time. Hughes signed the petition, and so inadvertently became an official Communist.[7] However, there is no evidence that Hughes ever willingly joined the Party, and he emphatically denied any suggestion that he had, as demonstrated in a 1947 letter regarding his entry in the *Negro Year Book*:

> The fact is that I have never been a member of the Communist Party, therefore I could hardly "desert the Communist Party." For years I have stated this fact in my public lectures, and several times in the printed form…recently in the enclosed articles from THE CHICAGO DEFENDER and PHYLON.[8]

However, in the same letter he asserts that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had confirmed he was not a Communist and never had been, a claim that is contradicted by the actual FBI records.[9]

Still, Hughes was almost certainly never an actual, dues paying member of the Communist Party. As a result, there are no membership records or other documentation to date when Hughes adapted and abandoned the ideology. Furthermore, in his autobiographies and other later writings, Hughes goes to great effort to downplay the depth and length of his involvement with the radical left, making him an unreliable narrator to his own ideological development. As a result, the only way to determine the span of Hughes' time as a devout radical is through his writing, and particularly through

[7] Duffy, 52-53.
[8] Langston Hughes to Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, December 2, 1947, Langston Hughes Papers, Series II: Professional Correspondence, Box 206, Folder 3519, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[9] J. Edgar Hoover to [redacted], April 11, 1944, Langston Hughes record, part 1, in *The Vault*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://vault.fbi.gov/langston-hughes/langston-hughes-part-01-of-04/view, 29.

his playwriting. His radical plays also reveal the arc of his involvement, from a skeptical newcomer to an enthusiastic devotee of the Soviet model, and then from an obedient follower to an innovator of new modes of art and thought.

In need of a new audience after his schism with his patron and inspired by the Communist involvement in the Scottsboro trials, Hughes turned to the radical left for a new audience, a new income, and a new self. Fittingly, he announced his new Red identity in a play, 1931's *Scottsboro Limited*. Yet that self fit uncomfortably at first, and close reading of the script reveals Hughes' ambivalence to this new persona. The play was meant to be his grand statement of ideology, but in fact it actually reveals the profound tension between race and class based modes of organizing, both for his audiences and for himself. However, that ambivalence proved to be short lived, as Hughes' dedication to the Communist cause intensified and as he refined his performed persona to find a more comfortable but still audience approved variation.

By the middle of the decade Hughes had fully embraced the approved messages and forms of the theatrical radical left and had perfected his performance of the Red Hughes. *Harvest*, a large cast documentary play in Soviet Living Newspaper style, and *Angelo Herndon Jones*, a strike play in the manner of *Waiting for Lefty*, are by far the most orthodox of his radical works. While race remains a significant factor even in these two plays, that issue is framed in terms of the needs of Party politics rather than the needs of the community. *Angelo Herndon Jones* tackles the issue of recruitment of Afro-American workers to the Communist cause, and *Harvest* addresses the issues and frustrations around the cross-racial organization of the striking agricultural workers.

Finally, at the end of the decade, Hughes successfully combined his two competing identities into one organic whole with *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, written for the newly founded Harlem Suitcase Theatre. The structurally innovative play tells the entire history of the Afro-American experience, from an Edenic Africa to contemporary Jim Crow oppression. In many ways his work with this company constitutes his clearest creation and revelation of an authentic self, both black and Red, balanced between his radical politics and his deep sense of black history, art, identity, and experience. In this work, Hughes was finally able to transcend the pressure to present only a single facet of his self in his public performance of identity. That moment of personal integration was short lived, however, as a series of personal and international crises diverted his attention. The promotion of United Front conformity during World War II and the pressures of the Cold War's abject anti-Communism pushed Hughes to move on and turn to other projects and other selves that would be more acceptable to the audiences he needed to support his writing.

This arc defines both the span of Hughes' involvement with the radical left and also traces his struggle to craft a literary and personal identity that satisfied both Hughes' practical need of audience support of his work *and* his sincere belief in the proletarian cause, even as he sought to integrate his lifelong dedication to racial justice with his new, Red persona. The process of creating and refining this identity was a performance of self, partially but not fully intentional, enacted through his writing. As such, this process can be best understood through the vocabulary developed in Judith Butler's work on the nature of gender and sexuality. In her seminal 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler thoroughly deconstructs the, then dominant, notion that identity – particularly but not

exclusively as it relates to gender – exists as a fixed truth. Instead, she defines gender, and, by implication, identity more broadly, as the ongoing result of continuous performative action, that is "always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses."[10]

Butler periodically gestures towards the potential application of this performative understanding of identity beyond the realm of gender, but rarely strays beyond that. However, in the decades since, numerous other scholars have applied this understanding to other characteristics, as well as to the intersections among them. With his 2000 article "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," Jonathan Xavier Inda expands Butler's work to racial identity, arguing "that 'race' resolutely does not refer to a pre-constituted body. Rather, it works performatively to constitute the body itself," and so is always open to resignification.[11] That resignification includes the potential for the body to be racialized differently within multiple contexts, whether through the self-conscious practice of "passing" or through cross-cultural disagreement on the necessary signifiers of racial categories. Hughes experienced both over the course of his life, watching his father pass in Mexico and traumatically encountering rejection of his self-identified blackness in Africa.

As a result, Hughes was highly aware that the meaning and signification of race changed across cultures and in the same culture over time. For this reason, even his racially focused writing, which Rampersad holds up as "sincere" in contrast to his radical work, is self-consciously performative and indicative of multiple personae created and

[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 143.
[11] Jonathan Xavier Inda, "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 75.

exploited to match his existing needs. Literary scholar David E. Chinitz explores this exact issue, drawing extensively on Butler's vocabulary and framework to do so, in his 2013 book, *Which Sin to Bear?: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes*. At the core, Chinitz argues, "racial authenticity is demonstrated through and constituted by behaviors, speech patterns, and attitudes that – thanks to their constant repetitions – are commonly held to be characteristic or intrinsic," and that, as a result, "for performers in various genres of African American expressive culture, the perceived authenticity of their art depends on their executing an assortment of gestures believably."[12]

By 2013, as Chinitz emphasizes himself, this was not a revolutionary argument. However, applying it to the work of Langston Hughes was. Instead, Hughes is positioned as "the Great Authenticator," alternatively glorified for the sincerity of his Afro-American poetics or condemned as too safe in his views of blackness, and even as "partly responsible for the reductive definition of black authenticity in force today in many quarters."[13] However, as Chinitz argues, this view is a profound misreading of Hughes and his work, as it mistakes mastery of the signifiers of "authenticity" for creative and personal limitation. In fact, Hughes was "hardly an obvious candidate for the *echt*-African-American writer," as he "was northern, educationally if not economically privileged, self-consciously racially mixed, given (even if ambivalently) to aestheticism, and sexually nebulous if not gay," making his elevation to the status of the ultimate writer of race in Harlem all the more extraordinary.[14]

[12] David Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16.
[13] Chinitz, 18.
[14] Chinitz, 19.

While Chinitz' book provides a much needed and highly detailed look at how Hughes constructed blackness through his racial poetry specifically, it does not stray beyond those parameters. He does not consider Hughes' writing in other genres, or Hughes' most visible identity shift, to proletarian writer and back. Because the anti-Communist attacks on Hughes were focused on his poems, Chinitz does analyze Hughes' 1953 testimony during Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous Hearings, particularly during the first, closed session, as that information was only declassified in 2003, too late for any of the major biographers to use.[15] However, this information is completely decontextualized as Chinitz does not otherwise discuss Hughes' involvement with the radical cause, much less the performance of his Communist identity or its relationship with his expertly crafted identity as the "Negro Poet Laureate."

While Chinitz, Rampersad, McLaren, and Duffy all present part of the picture, no previous scholar has considered the way in which Hughes' radical plays reveal how he constructs identity through his writing. During the 1930s, Hughes' competing identifications, as a radical and as a racially conscious Afro-American writer and intellectual, shape his plays as he tries to bring the two aspects of self into alignment. The conflict between the signifiers of his two personae reveals what his mastery of playing "the authentic Negro" hides: that these two identities were both performed and sincere, simultaneously calculated for maximum efficacy and revelatory of deeper truth. While this tension is visible in his other writings, it is his playwriting that most clearly displays the process of identification through the performance of self. As such, thorough analysis of this small segment of Hughes' numerous works provides deep insight into the man, the artist, and his entire oeuvre.

[15] Chinitz, 113.

However, it is important to remember that his Communist corpus does not include everything he published in the Red press. Hughes' relationship with the radical left actually started well before he adopted the ideology during the early part of the Great Depression. It began in 1926, while he was still an undergraduate at Lincoln University, when the vehemently Communist magazine *New Masses* started publishing his poems.[16] Initially the editors had mixed opinions about Hughes' writing, understandably finding his pre-Communist work "not radical enough" despite his focus on the experiences of the black underclass. Nevertheless they considered Hughes the leading poet of the ongoing Harlem Renaissance, and for that reason continued to publish his poetry.[17] However, this connection remained tenuous until after Hughes' return to New York from his Caribbean trip in 1931, when his political perspective took a hard left turn and *New Masses* became his primary publisher.[18]

While his views were already changing, the final trigger was his split from his patron, Charlotte Mason, who had already remade Hughes' professional and personal life once, by funding his writing, only to remake it again by breaking off her support. Hughes and his benefactress met for the first time in 1927, while he was still a student. In his description, she was:

> A beautiful woman, with snow-white hair and a face that was wise and very kind. She had been a power in her day in many movements adding freedom and splendor to life in America. She had great sums of money, and had used much of it in great and generous ways…Now she was very old and not well and able to do

[16] Rampersad, 136.
[17] Rampersad, 129.
[18] Rampersad, 215.

> little outside her own home. But there she was like a queen. Her power filled the rooms.[19]

Recently inspired by Alain Locke, Mason was determined to use her wealth to fund the artists of the "New Negro" movement.[20] He identified talent worth her time, Langston Hughes being one of the first, and she arranged patronage, which included generous funding but also tied numerous strings to the young artists in her care. Hughes rapidly became a particular favorite, allowed into her intimate circles and personal life as none of the others were, and in turn he adored her, elevating her to maternal status in truth, rather than considering her preferred title of "Godmother" an honorific.[21]

Despite this personal closeness, their professional relationship was fraught. Mason valued Afro-American art, but she did not see the creators as her equals. Instead, she saw them as sources of the "cosmic energy and the intuitive powers of primitive life," and their work as providing contact with the "spectral harmonies lost to the ears of overcivilized whites."[22] Later, reflecting back on Mason's motives, Hughes noted that:

> Concerning Negroes, she felt that they were America's great link to the primitive, and they had something very precious to give the Western World. She felt that there was mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls, but that many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony, and make of it something cheap and ugly, commercial and, as she said, "white."[23]

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[19] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 314-315.
[20] Rampersad, 147.
[21] Rampersad, 156-157.
[22] Rampersad, 148.
[23] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 316.

When his writing did not match her expectations for proper revelation of mystic primitivism, Mason would "correct" his vision, using, as Rampersad evocatively describes, "a firm tug at her golden hook in Langston's mouth."[24] In response to this unwanted control, Hughes would alternate between rebelling to prove his artistic independence and capitulating, terrified of losing Mason's maternal affection even more than of losing her money. This dysfunctional cycle played out repeatedly over the three years Mason patronized Hughes, from 1927 to 1930, with pressure building until the final rupture.

However, when the break finally came, this ongoing conflict between Hughes and Mason was only one small part of the explosion that demolished his comfortable life. The meltdown was triggered when, in April, 1930, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston set out together to adapt a folktale for the stage. Hurston, like Hughes, was funded by Mason, though the relationship between the two women was not close. Hurston's contract gave Mason direct control over her publishing, while Hughes' contract gave him the nominal freedom to write as he wished. Furthermore, Alain Locke acted as Mason's agent in her dealings with Hurston, a position he exploited to ensure his own status as one of Mason's favorites.[25] Then, once Hughes fell from his position as most favored godchild, Locke further manipulated Hurston, Mason, and Hughes to ensure the rupture could never be healed, removing his only competition in his quest to place himself at Godmother's right hand.[26]

Initially, however, the joint project with Hurston seemed just the type of project that would win Mason's approval. The heart of the play was a story Hurston collected

[24] Rampersad, 167.
[25] Rampersad, 157.
[26] Rampersad, 186-187.

during her travels through the South, called "A Bone of Contention." It depicts a fight between two hunters, in which one hits the other with a mule's bone. The Biblical example of the damage Samson did with a donkey's jawbone is used to justify treating this assault as attempted murder, and the wielder is banished.[27] From this slight beginning, Hughes and Hurston developed a three act script depicting a love triangle – the fight over the hunt in the story becomes a fight over a woman – that envelopes the entire town, revealing "religious and class divisions in a community structured hierarchically."[28] Working together, with Louise Thompson serving as secretary and typist, the two writers quickly developed the first act and third acts, and had just begun the second when Hurston abruptly abandoned the project.[29]

At the same time Mason went on the attack, accusing Hughes of "ingratitude and disloyalty" for failing to provide her with any new works in return for her payments, despite the facts that his contract did not require a specific output and that the failure of *Mule Bone* was caused by Hurston, who was refusing any contact with Hughes. In response, and almost certainly advised to do so by Locke, Hughes suggested that Mason dissolve his contract, not realizing that would be the end of any personal or professional relationship with her.[30] Traumatized by Mason's rejection, though still trying to change her answer, shocked by Locke's mocking responses to his resulting distress, still unable to get a response from Hurston, and exhibiting severe psychosomatic illness in response to the stress, Hughes fled to his mother's house in Cleveland, Ohio. There he accidentally

[27] Rampersad, 184.
[28] McLaren, 22.
[29] McLaren, 19.
[30] Rampersad, 185-187.

discovered that the simultaneous end of these three vital friendships was not a coincidence.

As part of his rest cure, he had gone to see a play by the Gilpin Players at Karamu House. Hughes had become friends with Karamu House founders Russell and Rowena Jelliffe while he was a teenager living in the city, and had even worked as one of their early teachers, offering drawing and painting lessons at the Jelliffes' first community center, the Playground House.[31] After the production he went to catch up with Rowena Jelliffe, only to hear that "she had just received an excellent Negro folk comedy by a talented young woman named Zora Hurston."[32] It was *Mule Bone*, copyrighted and sold under Hurston's name alone, part of Hurston's carefully crafted plan to "to sunder their link and affirm her total loyalty to Godmother."[33] Hughes was shocked and horrified. When he revealed the plagiarism to the Jelliffes, all parties entered brief negotiations, and Hughes even offered to take only one third of the royalties in return for recognition of his work. Hurston refused, so the play was set aside, unpublished and unproduced during either writer's lifetime. [34]

Then, when Alain Locke and Godmother Mason took Hurston's side – Hurston was sending Hughes' letters on to Mason, all the while complaining that *he* was attempting to steal *her* work – Hughes finally realized that this portion of his career was irredeemably over.[35] Mason, Hurston, and Locke had all betrayed him. The hope and wealth of the 1920s had turned to the Depression. Hughes was almost thirty. As far as he was concerned, the Harlem Renaissance was over. He had no choice but to find a new

[31] Rampersad, 26.
[32] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 331.
[33] Rampersad, 193.
[34] McLaren, 20-21.
[35] Rampersad, 195.

form and purpose to his life and work. In this moment of profound crisis, Hughes made a decision:

> I'd finally and definitely made up my mind to continue being a writer – and to become a professional writer, making my living from writing. So far that had not happened. Until I went to Lincoln I had always worked at other things: teaching English in Mexico, truck gardening on Staten Island, a seaman, a doorman, a cook, a waiter in Paris night clubs or in hotels and restaurants, a clerk at the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, a bus boy at the Wardman Park in Washington.
>
> Then I'd had a scholarship, a few literary awards, a patron. But those things were ended now. I would have to make my own living again – so I determined to make it writing.[36]

From this low point, cast down from New York high life to desperate poverty, once more living among the poor and desperate rather than observing them from the window of a chauffeured limousine, Hughes made himself anew, and, this time, he made himself Red.

[36] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 355.

CHAPTER 1:
LEFT TURN AT SCOTTSBORO

Traumatized by Zora Neale Hurston's plagiarism of his work on *Mule Bone*, the resulting dramatic split with his patron, "Godmother" Charlotte Mason, and Alain Locke's self-serving manipulation of the entire mess, Langston Hughes fled New York for the Caribbean, spending the spring and summer of 1931 exploring Cuba and Haiti with artist Rozell "Zell" Ingram. The trip was funded by the $400 prize he had just received from winning the 1931 William E. Harmon Foundation Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes Gold Medal in Literature, for which Locke had nominated Hughes prior to their schism.[1] Traveling allowed him to delay finding a new source of income and a guiding path for his work after his long dependence on Mason for both. This delay proved fortuitous, for, even as he finalized plans with Ingram for their April first departure from Cleveland, to the south in Alabama events were starting in the case that would trigger and define his new direction as an artist of the radical left: the trials in Scottsboro.

In many ways the significance of the Scottsboro case lies in its very typicality, as it lays bare the rigged and racialized legal system of the American South. It all began on an ordinary Wednesday, March 25, 1931, at 10:20 AM, when, slightly behind schedule, the Southern Railroad freight run left Chattanooga for Memphis.[2] While passengers were strictly forbidden, an unknown number of illicit travelers were scattered among the compartments, all part of the era's unofficial system of migratory workers. These included four black teenagers – eighteen year old Haywood Patterson, thirteen year old

[1] Rampersad, 197.
[2] James R. Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy*, (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 1.

Eugene Williams, nineteen year old Andy Wright and his twelve year old brother Roy Wright – traveling together on an oil car. Then a group of white youths entered the scene.

The unexpected encounter between the two groups of travelers rapidly devolved into a brawl. Patterson tells the story of the initiating encounter in his autobiography *Scottsboro Boy*:

> One of the white boys, he stepped on my hand and liked to have knocked me off the train. I didn't say anything then, but the same guy, he brushed by me again and liked to have pushed me off the car. I caught hold of the side of the tanker to keep from falling off.
>
> I made a complaint about it and the white boy talked back – mean, serious, white folks Southern talk.
>
> That is how the Scottsboro case began…with a white foot on my black hand.[3]

Rumors of the resulting fight, and its vicious racial dynamics, flew up and down the train. Men swarmed the oil car to join both factions; the fighters eventually totaled approximately a dozen black youths and half a dozen white ones. As the train passed into Alabama it first slowed for the long climb into the mountains and then stopped in town, allowing the white combatants to jump off and collect rocks to use as projectiles. In reaction, the black men forced all but one of the rock throwers from the freighter, which was then picking up speed as it left Stevenson, Alabama. The last white fighter on the train, Orville Gilley, was spared from the same treatment because the train had finally picked up enough speed that a fall would be extremely dangerous, and the black fighters, unlike their opponents, were unwilling to risk causing major harm.[4]

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[3] Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy* (Toronto: Collier Books, 1950), 13.
[4] Acker, 2.

The defeated men returned to Stevenson, where they complained of their eviction to the stationmaster and stated their intention to press charges. As legal scholar James R. Acker observes, "although they had been illegally on board the train themselves, they undoubtedly (and correctly) perceived that the authorities would consider their treatment at the hands of the black youths as the more serious affront to Alabama law and thus had no inhibitions about lodging their complaint."[5] In response the stationmaster sent word to Paint Rock to have any black men found on the train arrested for the assault and attempted murder of the complainants.[6]

All armed local white men were gathered and deputized on the order of Jackson County Sheriff M. L. Wann to help search the forty-two cars. Patterson, Williams, and the Wright brothers were still together on one. Eighteen year old Clarence Norris and nineteen year old Charles Weems, both from Georgia but strangers to each other and the Chattanooga faction, had gone to other cars after participating in the fight. The other six or seven combatants had either already left the train or managed to escape the cordon unnoticed. Three other black men, all from Georgia and all strangers to each other and the other six, were located on board; the searchers found seventeen year old Willie Roberson in an empty boxcar, sixteen year old Ozie Powell in a nearby gondola, and seventeen year old Olen Montgomery in a tank car near the caboose.[7]

The posse also searched the train for white men, to find witnesses or further accusers. In addition to Gilley they found three or four other men, unidentified in the records, and two white women, twenty-one year old Victoria Price and seventeen year old Ruby Bates, dressed in overalls to pass as men while hoboing. Once the arresting

[5] Acker, 2.
[6] Patterson and Conrad, 16.
[7] Acker, 2-3.

crowd discovered that white women had been in the vicinity of black men, the entire matter of the fight on the train was dropped in favor of accusations of rape. While the women participated in this action, their willingness to do so was irrelevant to the machinery of Southern "justice" and its dependence on the racist and sexist distributions of power sustained by lynching.

While the persecution of the Scottsboro Nine took place within the framework of the United States courts system, it was, as literary scholar James A. Miller argues, "a racial spectacle that conformed almost exactly to Grace Hale's clinical description of the spectacle of lynching."[8] According to Hale:

> Like all cultural forms, over time lynching spectacles evolved a well-known structure, a sequence and pace of events that southerners came to understand as standard. The well-choreographed spectacle opened with a chase or a jail attack, followed rapidly by the public identification of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or the victim's relatives, announcement of the upcoming event to draw the crowd, and selection and preparation of the site. The main event then began with a period of mutilation – often including emasculation – and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and the collected parts.[9]

[8] James A. Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 9.
[9] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 189-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 203-204.

This prototype for the perfect lynching serves as what Diana Taylor calls a "scenario." As she explains, "Scenarios exist as culturally specific imaginaries – sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution – activated with more or less theatricality. Unlike *trope*, which is a figure of speech, theatricality does not rely on language to transmit a set pattern of behavior or action."[10] Scottsboro needed to complete the scenario of interracial assault followed by interracial vengeance in order to maintain the narrative of justified segregation, and the city was prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that it happened.

At stake in the trials for all participating parties, including for commenting artists such as Langston Hughes, were the much contested meanings of race and gender in the New South. Post-Reconstruction, the formal institution of segregation, under what are commonly known as the Jim Crow laws, created a new system of racial power, placing all whites above all blacks, to replace the slave system overturned by the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. However, the system was fundamentally unstable, for, as Hale observes, "at the heart of the culture of segregation lay a profound ambiguity. Separation, after all, did not necessarily mean racial inferiority. It could also signify the creation of relatively autonomous black spaces, even autonomous black bodies."[11] Indeed, the vibrant Afro-American culture that Hughes so admired, and which so deeply informed his work, is proof that this feared autonomy existed even under the most oppressive circumstances. Therefore, the practice of lynching, both the archetypal extralegal form as well as the de facto form carried out by the racist courts,

[10] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.
[11] Hale, 201.

was a method of policing that border, of ensuring that "equal" was always removed from "separate but."

Scottsboro, by chance and design, became the legal battleground for activists to challenge the dominant narratives of Southern identity and the system of hierarchies of race and gender that defined it. As Miller notes:

> In the context of the racial terror endemic in the South during the 1930s the Scottsboro case was far from the worst atrocity visited upon black people. Yet the magnitude of the case, the sheer number of defendants, their relative youth and bewilderment, the atmosphere of carnival and menace that surrounded them from the very beginning, the rapidity of their trials, and swiftness and viciousness with which death sentences were imposed upon eight of them – all of these factors conspired to elevate Scottsboro to the status of modern morality play.[12]

As such, the stage was a natural site of the eventually widespread protest against the political theater of the trials. At first, however, broad resistance to the egregious injustice in Alabama seemed unlikely, as such miscarriages of law and ethics were tragically commonplace.

The first national organization to take note of the coming battle in Scottsboro was the Communist Party of the United States of America, which pursued an active program of lynching prevention. On March 31 several CPUSA observers from Chattanooga were in court to hear the reading of the bills of indictment; evidence had been presented in the matter the day before. These witnesses sent word to the International Labor Defense office in New York City, the de facto legal arm of the American Communist movement, and a notice of the persecution of the nine victims ran on the front page of the next day's

[12] Miller, 9.

edition of *Daily Worker*, the Party's New York local paper.[13] At this point it was simply one case among far too many examples of racial terrorism in the American South, but as time went on and the ILD, in association with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union, focused greater attention and resources on the trials, it became a test case for the limits of the oppressive legal and social systems of the day, and all of the factions involved knew it.

The cultural association of lynching with the "one crime" of the rape of white women by black men was created by a calculated program of propaganda. Only nineteen percent of black victims of lynching were accused of sexual violence during the period from 1889-1918, when this rationale was promoted most aggressively, and that percentage dropped precipitously during the later part of the period and afterwards.[14] Furthermore, that category includes victims whose "alleged attacks rest upon no stronger evidence than 'entering the room of a woman' or brushing against her."[15] By that standard, the presence of black men and white women on the same train, outside of the control of the white patriarchy, served as sufficient evidence against the Scottsboro Nine, even as the Scottsboro trials served as a public display ground for the reinscription of the "one crime" narrative.

Despite the obsessive focus on sex and sexual desire in period discussions of lynching, built upon the axiomatic beliefs that "white women of all classes highly prized their chastity and black men of all classes barely controlled their sexuality," the true form

[13] Acker, 6.
[14] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States 1889-1918* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 10.
[15] NAACP, 10.

of the vast majority of lynchings in no way resembled the entrenched scenario.[16] Instead of the archetypical daytime carnival, the crimes took place under the cover of night, and, contrary to the propaganda, motives were primarily financial: per Hale, "small groups of white men hunted down and shot or hanged their African American victims after an argument over the year-end sharecroppers' settle or to send a message to other timber or turpentine camp laborers not to demand better."[17] Lynching was about money and control of labor.

The system of Jim Crow policed two deeply contested boundaries of power in America: that of race and that of gender. The enfranchisement of Afro-American men during Reconstruction and the concurrent women's suffrage movement meant that white men no longer had singular control of politics, and the success of the Populist Republicans with poor white male voters further diluted the clout of elite white men. In the lead up to the 1898 election the Southern Democrats created an insidious bargain:

> If their men put race over class at the polling place, the Democrats promised, poor white women could be boosted up to the pedestal. At the same time, assuming white women's purity made it easy to draw clear lines in rape cases involving black men and white women. Henceforth, there could be no consensual interracial sex between white women and black men. White women would be incapable of it.[18]

White women were granted a matching offer. The "safety of the home" campaign gave white women a place in politics, but that space was limited exclusively to helping

[16] Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 83.
[17] Hale, 201.
[18] Gilmore, 72.

maintain the system of white supremacy. Though some women, as historian Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore phrases it, "tried to turn their objectification into empowerment," the campaign ultimately served only to justify the exclusion of women from the public sphere. The very asserted fragility that supposedly justified terrorism and murder as punishment to black men for simply being near white women served as evidence that those women were fundamentally unsuited for life outside of the carefully defined and limited, though rarified, control of white men.[19]

Independently neither oppressive mode functions: without the danger of black men, outside confinement of white women is unjustified, and without women in danger, oppression of black men is as well. Together the two interconnected and intertwined narratives of race and gender superiority ensured that political and social power returned exclusively to the hands of white men. Within this context the state apparatus not only saw the proximity of Victoria Price and Ruby Bates to Montgomery, Norris, Patterson, Powell, Roberson, Weems, Williams, and the brothers Wright as evidence of rape, it required rape to have occurred. If white women and black men could spend time near each other, outside of the direct control of white men, then the entire infrastructure of Jim Crow and the wealth and power it conferred to its beneficiaries would come crashing down.

The process of turning the two women from the train into icons of violated white womanhood was simplified by physical evidence of sexual activity, documented ninety minutes after the arrests by Drs. Lynch and Bridges. On the stand both men gave a measured testimony, confirming the presence of semen but also stating that it was non-motile, a fact that defense attorney Stephen R. Roddy neglected to use in his clients'

[19] Gilmore, 93.

favor, and adding that the lack of injuries was inconsistent with the prosecution's narrative of violently forced penetration by multiple assailants.[20] The inconsistency was ignored; what mattered was that sex had occurred. Good Southern white women did not have sex outside of marriage, and such public victims were retroactively defined as good, so the sex was automatically nonconsensual, and with nine black youths on hand as accused rapists, already defined as guilty until found guilty, the prosecution had all the evidence it needed.

Though unnecessary for the successful prosecution of the Scottsboro Nine, Victoria Price was an enthusiastic participant in the trial. She gave an elaborate, unprompted testimony of a swashbuckling struggle "with guns blazing, a pistol-whipping, and ending with the white boys leaving in an effort to save their own lives."[21] Her dramatic storytelling fed into every cultural expectation, even granting a heroic role to the white men who, by the rules of their society, should have fought to the death rather than leave white women in the hands of black men. Roddy challenged Price the only way possible, by trying to remove her from the category of unimpeachably innocent "goodness" by establishing that she did not follow the social expectations for the performance of white womanhood, particularly the rules of sexual behavior. Judge Alfred Hawkins shut down all such attempts.[22] By the circular logic of the lynching scenario the rape proved the goodness of the victims and their goodness proved the rape; once the scenario had begun the roles were set and intrusion of reality into the expected narrative was absolutely not allowed.

[20] Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 26.
[21] Carter, 29.
[22] Carter, 27.

ACLU volunteer observer Hollace Ransdall, a northern, liberal woman, provides a contemporary depiction of the trials in stark contrast to the official narrative of the courts and local papers. She extensively documented the case from the viewpoint of an outsider, and drew sharply different conclusions as to the nature of the drama unfolding in that small Alabama town. In the person of Victoria Price Ransdall accurately saw a shameless opportunist happy to use the attention for personal gain:

> The talk with Victoria Price, particularly, convinced me that she was the type who welcomes attention and publicity at any price. The price in this case meant little to her, as she has no notions of shame connected with sexual intercourse in any form and was quite unbothered in alleging that she went through such an experience as the charges against the nine Negro lads imply. Having been in direct contact from the cradle with the institution of prostitution as a side-line necessary to make the meager wages of a mill worker pay the rent and buy the groceries, she has no feeling of revulsion against promiscuous sexual intercourse such as women of easier lives might suffer. It is very much a matter of the ordinary routine of life to her, known in both Huntsville and Chattanooga as a prostitute herself.[23]

The Scottsboro trials changed Price's social position considerably. By selling herself to the courts she moved from the lowest type of white woman to the highest, as the logic of segregation determined that any woman allegedly raped by a black man had to be good and pure in order to be worth coveting and worth killing to protect.

Bates was a less enthusiastic participant in the first trials, and eventually testified for the defense during the appeals. She did not deny or speak against any of the

[23] Hollace Ransdall, "Report on the Scottsboro, Ala. Case," May 27, 1931, American Civil Liberties Union Records, The Roger Baldwin Years, Reel 92, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, 3.

accusations, however, until a January 5, 1932 letter to Earl Streetman.[24] Still, the prosecution was concerned from the beginning that her testimony did not fit into the necessary narrative. As Ransdall reports, even during the first trials Price "warned the prosecutor that he had better take Ruby off the stand as she was getting mixed up and would make identifications and answers that did not coincide with those she, herself, had made."[25] Still, Bates also gained considerably from her alleged victimization. She had also been at the very bottom of the social ladder, a mill worker who could not even find work at one of the nicer mills, who lived with her mother and several siblings in a shack in the wrong part of racially divided Huntsville, and who violated the social rules of sexual purity by having sex with boyfriends; then her supposed violation elevated her to the same pedestal as the daughters of wealth and power:

> As a symbol of the Untouchable White Woman the Whites held high – Ruby. The Ruby who lived among the Negroes, whose family mixed with them; a daughter of what respectable Whites call "the lowest of the low," that is a White whom economic scarcity had forced across the great color barrier.[26]

While her life changed little materially, Bates had been shifted from a shameful example of how far white women could fall to the emblem of delicate, endangered, White womanhood.

To Ransdall, who had nothing to lose from revealing the machinery of segregation, the racialized brutality of the alleged crime was obvious. As she summarized:

[24] Carter, 186-187.
[25] Ransdall, 5.
[26] Ransdall, 15.

> If the nine youths on the freight car had been white, there would have been no Scottsboro case. The issue at stake was that of the inviolable separation of black men from white women. No chance to remind Negroes in terrible fashion that white women are farther away from them than the stars must be allowed to slip past.[27]

The violation of the rules of segregation – white women near black men unsupervised by white men – required the reassertion of the underlying myth, "a Negro will always…rape a white woman if he gets the chance,"[28] followed by the closing of the social rupture through the murder, by the courts or by the lynch mob, of the men unlucky enough to be caught up in the defense of the white supremacist system.

The only hiccough in the rapid and essentially uncontested series of the initial trials, convictions, and death sentences was the mistrial declared in the case of twelve year old Roy Wright, who, according to Haywood Patterson's autobiographical account, "looked so small and pitiful on the stand that one juryman held out for life imprisonment."[29] The smooth unfolding of this legal lynching ended when International Labor Defense hired lawyer Samuel Leibowitz to handle the appeals and subsequent trials. His vociferous defense of the eight remaining accused men – the case against Roy Wright having been quietly dropped to prevent sympathy for the youngest child from potentially disrupting the persecution of the other teens – as well as his status as a Jewish, Romanian immigrant New Yorker, which metaphorically placed him in the hated category of "Carpetbagger," finalized the process of cementing the Scottsboro trials as the test case for limits of Southern (in)justice.

[27] Ransdall, 14.
[28] Ransdall, 19.
[29] Patterson and Conrad, 24.

Despite Leibowitz' best efforts and three Supreme Court appeals, the ultimate outcomes were grim for all nine of the accused. In 1931, however, with the NAACP, ACLU, and ILD working together to challenge lynching culture on its home ground and international attention turned to the Alabama town, a different, better future still seemed possible. It was during this heady, hopeful time that Langston Hughes, returned and refreshed from his time abroad, took up the cause. When he finally made it back to New York at the end of July, the ILD and the NAACP were already deep into negotiations with the defendants and each other, settling the *dramatis personae* for the first round of appeals. Furthermore, Hughes' experiences in Haiti left him primed for reconsidering his world through the lens of class rather than race:

> It was in Haiti that I first realized how class lines may cut across color lines within a race, and how dark people of the same nationality may scorn those below them. Certainly the upper-class Haitians I observed at a distance seemed a delightful and cultured group. No doubt many of the French slave owners were delightful and cultured, too – but the slaves could not enjoy their culture.[30]

This new way of thinking combined naturally with his enthusiasm over the Communist action in support of the victims of the Scottsboro trials. In addition to this genuine belief in the cause, Hughes' desperately needed new inspiration and new, paying audiences for his art. This potent combination of deep conviction and practical concern for self resulted in Hughes' hard turn to the left.

The relationship between Langston Hughes and the CPUSA was mutually beneficial; while Hughes gained the support structure he needed to replace Godmother

[30] Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1956), 28.

Mason, the Communists gained in Hughes a respected and vocal advocate in the black intelligentsia. As Hughes scholar Jonathan Scott explains:

> The successful recruitment of Langston Hughes into the ranks of the CPUSA's Scottsboro Defense Organization – arguably one of the party's greatest victories on the cultural front – was an originary moment in U.S. labor history. For the first time, revolutionary black nationalism and Euro-American socialism found a dynamic point of contact that produced neither black nationalist nor communist ideology.[31]

The party had been trying to recruit Afro-Americans, particularly in the South, since the late 1920s, accelerating the effort after the formation of the American Negro Labor Congress in October, 1925 and again after the Sixth Congress of the Comintern's call for the formation of a self-determining, independent republic in the "Black Belt" of former slave states in 1928, but with limited success.[32] The Party's participation in the Scottsboro defense, by way of the ILD, changed that. While black Americans constituted eleven percent of the United States population throughout the Great Depression, in 1930 they made up less than three percent of Party membership. By 1939 they numbered nine percent of the national organization, an increase from approximately two hundred members to seven thousand, with even higher membership percentages in some cities and states.[33] This effect was greatest in Alabama, the site of the town of Scottsboro, where

[31] Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 74.
[32] Walter T. Howard, introduction to *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro: A Documentary History*, edited by Walter T. Howard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 6-8.
[33] Howard, 9.

ninety-five percent of the approximately one thousand registered CPUSA members were Afro-American in 1934, earning it the pejorative appellation of the "Nigger Party."[34]

The recruitment potential of both the Scottsboro trials and the visible support of the artists and intellectuals, including Hughes, who joined the party as a result, were aggressively exploited by CPUSA organizers. This practice, combined with the fact that not one of the Scottsboro Nine was ever ruled not guilty in court, led some observers, including Zora Neale Hurston, to condemn the entirety of the defense efforts as self-interested exploitation of the unknowing victims and fraudulent manipulation of the newly recruited Afro-American members.[35] In addition to denying the agency of the recruits to judge and act in their own best interest, this view of Communist goals is over simplified and inaccurate. The Party's interest in recruitment tactics does not negate the genuine efforts it took on behalf of the Scottsboro victims and in other actions against white supremacy throughout the decade:

> Party members led campaigns against poor housing and eviction, for unemployment relief, against police terror and lynching. Indeed they organized mass struggles for the defense of victims of all kinds of unfair racial treatment. Communists even petitioned against the color line in baseball. In the social realm, they staged interracial meetings, socials, and dances as well as demonstrations and get-togethers in all regions of the nation.[36]

The Party was self-interested, as were the NAACP and the ACLU in their own efforts on behalf of the Scottsboro victims, but not insincere.

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[34] Robin D. G. Kelly, "'Comrades, Praise Gawd for Lenin and Them!': Ideology and Culture among Black Communists in Alabama, 1930-1935," *Science and Society* 52, no. 1 (1988), 60.
[35] Howard, 3.
[36] Howard, 9.

Hughes also balanced self-interest and sincere conviction in his work with Communist organizations. During his Caribbean sabbatical Hughes had made a key decision about the future shape of his career: he would work as a writer, and only as a writer, and not support himself using other means, such as teaching at university, to pay the bills.[37] However, he deeply feared that he would be unable to successfully enact this plan without Godmother Mason's money and connections. Without the dependable income of regular employment or the patronage of a wealthy individual – something he did not seek out again after the traumatic end of his last such arrangement – Hughes needed publishers and paying audiences eager for his work. He found both of these in the decade's active radical movements.

Hughes had personal and professional associations with the radicals long before the crisis in Scottsboro precipitated his dramatic shift left; he first published in *New Masses* during his sophomore year at Lincoln University in 1926 and did so periodically through the next few years.[38] This meant that he already had an audience familiar with his work and interested in his voice when he started publishing more revolutionary writings. Hughes also continued promoting his work in other venues. In 1931 he even founded a small publishing house, called Golden Stair Press, in conjunction with his friend Carl Van Vechten, a white photographer with close ties to many of the Harlem Renaissance artists, and Prentiss Taylor, a younger white artist relatively new to New York.[39] This effort, as biographer Susan Duffy postulates, served as a form of self protection, assuring that if all of his other efforts failed, there would still be somewhere to publish his work.[40]

[37] Rampersad, 221.
[38] Rampersad, 136.
[39] Rampersad, 220.
[40] Duffy, 29.

As it turned out, he did not need that failsafe. His career as a proletarian artist was not without its highs and lows, but it did ensure publishers, audiences, and the paychecks that came with them throughout the lean years of the Depression.

In later years, when artists and intellectuals associated with the Communists were targeted with aggressive government harassment and loss of jobs and audiences, Hughes, like many others, vastly downplayed the depth of his involvement with the radical left. He never formally joined the Communist Party as a dues paying member, and used that technicality as a key portion of his defense against Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations in 1953.[41] In addition Hughes intentionally obfuscated his radicalism in both of his autobiographies, rewriting his history to avoid Cold War anti-Soviet sentiment. It is impossible to prove though very likely that, as seminal biographer Arnold Rampersad speculates, Hughes even "expunged some evidence of leftist involvement from his private papers."[42]

Nevertheless, during this period Langston Hughes was a firm believer in the Communist cause and the goal of an American Soviet.[43] His primary connection to the Party was through the John Reed Club. He was an official member of that organization from at least the fall of 1931, and possibly from before his trip to the Caribbean.[44] He was elected to the Presidium of the First National Conference of the John Reed Clubs in 1932, and served as an observer on the Club's behalf in Carmel, California in 1934 – an effort that would result in his play *Harvest*, co-written with fellow John Reed Club Communist

[41] Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), 317-318.
[42] Rampersad, 215.
[43] Berry, 318.
[44] Rampersad, 215.

Ella Winter.[45] By 1934 he was also serving as president of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the organization that replaced the American Negro Labor Congress in 1930.[46]

The connection benefited him substantially. His move to the left had resulted in disinterest from his previous publishers and reviewers, compounded by his loss of Charlotte Mason's connections and influence.[47] The organization of publishers, reviewers, and audiences affiliated with the CPUSA offered a replacement, as Hughes often "found himself 'hobnobbing' with some of the most successful leftist writers of the period, who provided him entrée into prominent homes and publishing houses."[48] The New York City John Reed Club actually shared a building with *New Masses*, and not coincidentally the magazine became his primary outlet in late 1931.[49] Furthermore, Hughes actively engaged in recruitment on behalf of the CPUSA as a believer in the Communist cause, rather than as an obligation in return for the support they offered, and so both the party and the writer were satisfied with their alliance.

While he was happy to take advantage of the benefits of his new connections, the ILD's defense of the Scottsboro victims remained the driving force behind his commitment to the left. Further, his radicalization was also driven by what he saw as an insufficient response to the trials from the Afro-American elite. In an August, 1934 article for *The Crisis*, looking back on his 1932 speaking tour of black colleges and universities, Hughes condemned the complacency of the institutions in the face of the racial terrorism of the de facto legal lynching in progress:

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[45]Duffy, 6.
[46] Rampersad, 217.
[47] McLaren, 39.
[48] Duffy, 34.
[49] Rampersad, 215.

> I was amazed to find at many Negro schools and colleges a year after the arrest and conviction of the Scottsboro boys, that a great many teachers and students knew nothing of it, or if they did the official attitude would be, "Why bring that up?"…And with demonstrations in every capital in the civilized world for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys, so far as I know not one Alabama Negro school until now has held even a protest meeting.[50]

Likewise, in his December 1, 1931 *Contempo* essay "Southern Gentlemen, White Prostitutes, Mill-Owners, and Negroes" Hughes shares the blame for the injustice between the white mobs and those who would not resist them:

> If these twelve million Negro Americans don't raise such a howl that the doors of Kilby prison shake until the 9 youngsters come out (and I don't mean a polite howl, either), then let Dixie justice (blind and syphilitic as it may be) take its course, and let Alabama's Southern gentlemen amuse themselves burning 9 young black boys until they're dead in the State's electric chair.[51]

Compared to the institutional indifference from the Afro-American power structure, the Communist Party's dedication to fighting the convictions was all the more enticing.

His 1932 speaking tour also gave him the opportunity to reach out directly to eight of the nine young victims. On January 24 he visited Kilby Prison's death house in Montgomery, Alabama with Oscar E. Saffold, a local lay minister who had been visiting

[50] Langston Hughes, "Cowards from the Colleges," in *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writing of Social Protest by Langston Hughes*, edited by Faith Berry (Secaucus: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), 64.
[51] Langston Hughes, "Southern Gentlemen, White Prostitutes, Mill-Owners, and Negroes," in *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writing of Social Protest by Langston Hughes*, edited by Faith Berry (Secaucus: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), 58.

them routinely for some time.[52] Roy Wright had not been sentenced to death, so he was imprisoned in another institution in Birmingham.[53] At Saffold's suggestion he read a selection of his poetry. Years later he described the visit in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*:

> At Kilby Prison I went down the long corridor to the death house to read poetry to the Scottsboro boys. In their grilled cells in that square room with a steel door to the electric chair at one end, in their gray prison uniforms, the eight black boys sat or lay listlessly in their bunks and paid little attention to me or the minster as we stood in the corridor, separated from them by bars.[54]

Hughes was troubled by the experience. That night, drafting an essay in response to the meeting, he wrote:

> I could not see the dark faces of those condemned to die peering at me from the narrow cells on either side. But I felt their presence. And my poems seemed futile and stupid in the face of death. I spoke about the past of our race, and how I had tried to put its glories and sorrows into poetry – but with the feeling that what I was saying meant little to men doomed never to mingle with the living world again.[55]

He wanted to find and confront Ruby Bates as well, but Arna Bontemps, his host at Oakwood Junior College, talked him out of it. Bontemps was justly afraid such an action

[52] Langston Hughes, "Kilby Prison: Scottsboro Boys" drafts, Langston Hughes Papers, Series V: General Writings, Box 313, Folder 5098, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[53] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 61.
[54] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 61.
[55] Hughes, "Kilby Prison: Scottsboro Boys" drafts.

would not only result in the Hughes' murder, but would possibly provoke an attack on the school as well.[56] For the sake of students and faculty Hughes let the matter rest.

Inspired to materially help the young men trapped in those cells, Hughes threw himself into helping the defense efforts any way he could. He was heavily involved with efforts to raise funds for the ILD appeals: he donated money and pressured his friends to donate as well, he bought stamps imprinted with images of the Scottsboro boys, and he, along with Countee Cullen, Arthur Schomburg, and others, helped organize and run the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners auction of original art and manuscripts in 1933.[57] While visiting the town in January, 1932 he wrote Carl Van Vechten a simple verse summing up his feelings on the matter:

> Scottsboro's just a little place:
>
> No shame is writ across its face –
>
> Its court, too weak to stand against a mob
>
> Its people's heart, too small to hold a sob.[58]

Without the combined influence of the Scottsboro trials, the involvement of the CPUSA by way of the ILD, and the failure of Afro-American organizations to muster a sufficient response to fight the convictions, Hughes' embrace of radical ideology would not have been as enthusiastic or definitive.

While Hughes the activist raised funds to offset the substantial legal fees resulting from the multiple appeals and retrials of the imprisoned youths, Hughes the artist wrote

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[56] Berry, *Langston Hughes*, 146.

[57] National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, "Exhibition and Sale of Original Manuscripts of Novels, Poems, Plays, and Essays, Drawings, Paintings, Caricatures, Letters, Musical Scores, Books," Langston Hughes Papers, Series XIV: Personal Papers, Box 512, Folder 12721, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[58] Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, January 2, 1932, in *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*, edited by Emily Bernard (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 92.

multiple works to promote sympathy and support for them. In early 1932 he merged the efforts and released a small pamphlet of his writings on Scottsboro, illustrated by Prentiss Taylor, with all proceeds going toward the ongoing defense effort.[59] The pamphlet was available from Golden Stair Press for 50 cents a copy in order to reach the widest possible audience;[60] for collectors a second, limited edition of thirty copies, printed on fine paper and signed by Hughes and Taylor, was available for three dollars each.[61] The booklet contained four poems – "Justice," "Scottsboro," Christ in Alabama," and "The Town of Scottsboro" – and the political verse play *Scottsboro Limited*. All were reprinted from other sources, but together served as a complete statement of Hughes' creative response to the Scottsboro trials. *Scottsboro Limited* was the most significant departure from his previous work; it marked his first engagement with "the forms and function of radical theater, particularly agitprop" and served as a sharp break with his earlier poetry and plays.[62] In response to this script, Alain Locke, in his 1932 retrospective of Afro-American literature, named Hughes "a militant and indignant proletarian reformer."[63]

Hughes originally planned to write *Scottsboro Limited* with his friend and fellow Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman, but Thurman backed out of the project before they could begin. Traumatized by the *Mule Bone* debacle, Hughes required that

[59] Langston Hughes to Josephine DeWitt, June 20, 1932, Langston Hughes Papers, Series I: Josephine DeWitt Rhodehamel Gift, Box 1, Folder 1, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[60] Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* (New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932).
[61]Michael Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag: Langston Hughes on Scottsboro," *College Literature* 22, no. 3 (October 1995), 38.
[62] Leslie Catherine Sanders, introduction to *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders and Nancy Johnston (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 7.
[63] Alain Locke, "Black Truth and Beauty: A Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1932," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, edited by Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York: Garland, 1983), 218.

Thurman write a notice stating the plan for the play was Hughes' alone.[64] *Scottsboro Limited* was written swiftly in the early fall of 1931, and published in the October, 1931 edition of *New Masses*. The first performance was in Los Angeles on May 8, 1932, as the planned premiere in New York City in late 1931 was stopped by police censorship.[65] Within the year *Scottsboro Limited* was produced in Paris and Moscow and translated into Russian.[66] In addition to informing audiences about the trials and humanizing the victims, the play was meant to serve as a clear, undeniable statement that the new, Red Langston Hughes had arrived.

The radical bona fides of *Scottsboro Limited* were reiterated for the New Left in 1979 by the theatrical theorist and director Amiri Baraka in *The Black Scholar*. Baraka described the play as being part of the canon of "little known Langston – the revolutionary Langston Hughes,"[67] and contrasted it sharply with his later, more conventional plays.[68] However, despite the universal assessment of the play as a hard left turn in Hughes' oeuvre, *Scottsboro Limited* is deeply ambivalent about its own radicalism. In only a few hundred lines of poetry, not counting the stage directions, Hughes summarizes the major action of the trials, claims his new role as a writer of left wing political theater, and reveals his own conflicted emotions about subsuming his old identity as a race-conscious writer in order to appeal to the majority white audiences for radical writing. So despite the fact that *Scottsboro Limited* has always been considered

[64] Rampersad, 219.
[65] Leslie Catherine Sanders, introduction to *Scottsboro Limited*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders and Nancy Johnston (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 116.
[66] Sanders, introduction to *Scottsboro Limited*, 116.
[67] Amiri Baraka and Vèvè Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 10 (July-August, 1979), 63.
[68] Baraka, 65.

evidence of his "surging radicalism," in Rampersad's term,[69] it also reveals Hughes' initial discomfort with his new persona.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her seminal 1989 *Stanford Law Review* essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," developed the vocabulary of intersectionality to identify the manner in which black women are subject to oppression not adequately explained by either feminist or antiracist thought, but only fully explicated by considering both modes of oppression simultaneously. In the years since the publication of Crenshaw's study, the unique tensions and complexities of intersectional identities have been queried at length, by scholars working in multiple fields of study. Despite this, theorists writing about social identity still observe that,

> Somewhat paradoxically, the very complexity of individualized identity is often simplified by a limited range of sociocultural categories (So what are you? Gay or straight? Native or foreigner?), and people, to their personal chagrin, are frequently socially identified by single aspects of their self definition.[70]

This persistent social flattening of identity to a single element pushes cultural creators to embody and perform only one identification at a time, both in order to reach the widest possible audience and to provide a clear framework for audience interpretation of their work. With *Scottsboro Limited* Langston Hughes "replaces the 'black, like me' self-

[69] Rampersad, 220.
[70] Ruthellen Josselson and Michele Harway, "The Challenges of Multiple Identity," in *Navigating Multiple Identities: Race, Gender, Culture, Nationality, and Roles*, edited by Ruthellen Josselson and Michele Harway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

identification of his Harlem Renaissance period with a class-conscious sentiment that might be paraphrased as 'worker, like me.'"[71]

Ironically, while the legitimacy of his conversion to being a proletarian, rather than racial, writer has been queried at length, Hughes was highly aware of the fact that his identity as the definitive Negro poet was just as constructed. Indeed, he wrote in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, "you see, unfortunately, I am not black."[72] Race, as Hughes experienced firsthand, is culturally defined. While living with his father in Mexico he was just one more brown-skinned boy among many. Indeed, this anonymity and the protection it offered was the reason his father moved to Mexico in the first place.[73] To the Africans he met as a sailor, the light skinned man with the almost straight hair was white.[74] His mixed heritage and the geographically shifting perception of his race left him deeply insecure about his identity, something that came to the forefront during his first Caribbean escape the year prior. While in Cuba he demanded that the poet Nicolás Guillén, who was serving as his guide, find him the clubs that entertained the poorest and most "low" of the Afro-Cuban population, and, when satisfied by the authenticity of such a place, was quick to declare his racial and social allegiance to the crowds, much to the bemusement of Guillén, who saw Hughes placement within the multiple local categories of race as "mulatico."[75]

Also during that trip, Hughes revealed to Guillén the depth of his racial insecurity, saying (as translated from the Spanish by Chinitz), "I would like to be black. Really

[71] Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 96.
[72] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 11.
[73] Berry, 19.
[74] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 103.
[75] Chinitz, 29.

black. Authentically black!"[76] However, despite his sincere desire to capture the "true" black experience, "authenticity is not an organic quality intrinsic to certain artists and their works, but an effect synthesized by performers and creative artists in dialogue with their audiences. It was something that, in spite of all his striving, Hughes could perform but never possess."[77] Hughes was not moving from an uncontested and "real" identity into an affected one when he joined the Communists; his art was always a process of calling into being an identity that he wished to attain, and was always shaped by, among other forces, concerns with the market.

But Hughes' self-identification with the left, as important as it was to the trajectory of his Depression era writing, was not complete or without hesitation. Arnold Rampersad describes him during this period as "becoming at least three different writers – radical, as in *New Masses*; commercial, as in the Kaj Gent musical; and genteel, if also racial, as in the poems proposed to Prentiss Taylor," which would become *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*.[78] However, Rampersad's belief that in writing for the radical left Hughes was "placing enormous strain on his integrity as an artist" have led the biographer to downplay the depth and significance of Hughes' identification with the American radical movement. Over the course of the next decade Hughes would move from the ambivalent new recruit to a representative for orthodoxy, before fully fusing his radical beliefs with his own distinctive writing style in the Harlem Suitcase Theatre plays.

Considering the demands of this fundamental change of authorial perspective and persona, Hughes initial ambivalence is unsurprising. The first marker of his hesitancy to

[76] Chinitz, 29.
[77] Chinitz, 83.
[78] Rampersad, 221.

embrace the new, Communist, identity he created with *Scottsboro Limited* was his fear of republishing it in the Golden Stair Press *Scottsboro* collection. While the reaction to the first, *New Masses*, printing was a success with that already radical audience, Hughes hedged when reconsidering the script as a publisher, fearing the play was "too red" for the wider public, and only included it on the insistence of Prentiss Taylor.[79] Ironically, the collection also includes the poems "Scottsboro," which names the heroes of the downtrodden as including "Lenin with the flag blood red,"[80] and the highly controversial "Christ in Alabama," in which Christ is envisioned as the tragic mulatto:

> Most holy bastard
>
> Of the bleeding mouth.
>
> *Nigger Christ*
>
> *On the cross of the South*. [italics original][81]

Neither of which triggered Hughes' concerns about audience reaction.

Scottsboro Limited has little in common with either of Hughes' previous plays; *Mulatto* was a family drama in naturalistic prose, and *Mule Bone*, the failed collaboration with Zora Neale Hurston, was a comedic folktale based on a story collected by Hurston, and rendered in the vernacular of the people – Southern, rural, and black – who told it to her.[82] However, *Scottsboro Limited* is a continuation of the blues and jazz inspired poetry of *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), structurally fused with the characteristically radical agitprop of the workers' theater form.

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[79] Rampersad, 235.
[80] Langston Hughes, "Scottsboro," in *Scottsboro Limited* (New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932), 3.
[81] Langston Hughes, "Christ in Alabama," in *Scottsboro Limited* (New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932), 5.
[82] Rampersad, 184.

Hughes was a lifelong lover of blues and jazz, from his Kansas childhood to the end of his life in New York. He even wrote a children's book on the topic in 1955, *The First Book of Jazz*, in which he argues that "it was not until ragtime, the blues, and *particularly* jazz came along that Americans had a music they could call their *very own* to play and sing."[83] His love affair with blues and jazz dates back to his unhappy childhood cloistered with his solemn, deeply religious grandmother, when, thanks to music, "the world of black feeling and art opened before Langston."[84] During his time as a sailor he sought out jazz clubs abroad, listening to everything from the definitive "greats" to the street corner performers, eventually working as a dishwasher at the Grand Duc nightclub in Paris, where:

> When all the other clubs were closed, the best of the musicians and entertainers from various other smart places would often drop into the Grand Duc, and there'd be a jam session until seven or eight in the morning – only in 1924 they had no such name for it. They'd just get together and the music would be on. The cream of the Negro musicians then in France…would weave out music that would almost make your heart stand still.[85]

This intense familiarity with this music, despite the fact Hughes was not a musician and could not perform it himself, lent a level of authenticity to his blues and jazz poetry that few other writers in the style ever achieved.

Scottsboro Limited is, unlike most of his earlier poetry, in the mode of jazz rather than blues. Hughes makes that explicitly clear in his stage directions for the trial scene: "*It is the court room, and the black prisoners come forward before the judge. The trial is*

[83] Langston Hughes, *The First Book of Jazz* (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1995), 45.
[84] Rampersad, 16.
[85] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 161-162.

conducted in jazz tempo: the white voices staccato, high and shrill; the black voices deep as the rumble of drums."[86] While Hughes' description defines the jazz mode of the play, he also crafts the poetry into the rhythms and shapes of jazz music. However, the signature characteristics of jazz are an evolving and contested portion of the definition.

Jazz takes from blues its tonality and distinct scale, and while it is not a core characteristic of all jazz, it was a very common one during this period.[87] This is represented in *Scottsboro Limited* by the Mob, which creates those blues microtones with a melismatic "Aw-w-w-w-ooo-aw!" in horror at the 8th Boy's refusal to die.[88] This, along with the vocal performance guide in the trial stage directions, captures some of that tonal structure, and the gesture toward it would have been sufficient for performers and readers of the day to understand. Improvisation, a common characteristic of jazz unsuited to a play script, is allowed by the Mob as they call out threats, for example: "*Mob voices in audience*: (*Murmuring and muttering*) Damned niggers…white girls and niggers riding together…nerve of them niggers…had no business in there…etc."[89] This is a common theatrical practice when writing for undifferentiated crowds, but in this case it also serves as an example of Hughes' masterful translation of jazz from music to poetry and theater.

Jazz, in the most stark and essentialist terms, is defined by its rhythm;[90] the syncopation, repetition, and variance that makes the music swing. The sources of this characteristic rhythm are various, including European, African, and uniquely African-American sources, but "in the course of using the rhythmic materials it receives –

[86] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 12.
[87] Lee B. Brown, "The Theory of Jazz Music 'It Don't Mean a Thing…,'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 115.
[88] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 17.
[89] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 12.
[90] Brown, 115.

whatever the source – jazz music, *qua* jazz, transmogrifies them into something else."[91] While in performance the ultimate control of the delivery rhythms are in the hands of the actors, Hughes still grounds the language patterns of *Scottsboro Limited* tightly in the jazz mode. In order to create the greatest contrast when the rhythm takes the unexpected turns of the jazz drums, Hughes first sets a rigid structure from the beginning, as the Boys enter, walking "slowly down the center aisle from the back of the auditorium," and from their opening lines, for example as they explain why they have arrived in this space:

> So the people can see
>
> What it means to be
>
> A poor black workman
>
> In this land of the free.[92]

When the action of the play, tightly tracked to bring the convicted victims to the electric chair, is interrupted when the 8th Boy rebels, the strict meter starts to break apart:

> NO! For me not so!
>
> Let the meek and humble turn the other cheek –
>
> I am not humble!
>
> I am not meek!
>
> From the mouth of the death house
>
> Hear me speak!...[93]

The breakdown continues as his speech reaches a crescendo.

> No chair!
>
> Too long have my hands been idle!

[91] Brown, 117.
[92] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 9-10.
[93] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 16.

Too long have my brains been dumb!

Now out of the darkness

The new Red Negro will come:

That's me!

No death in the chair![94]

Then, as the white Communists join the boys onstage for the finale, the strict meter is reestablished, promising a new, better, stasis under the new order:

Black and white together

Will fight the great fight

To put greed and pain

And the color line's blight

Out of the world

Into time's old night.[95]

Significantly, minor variance is allowed under the new system that was not permitted under the oppressively precise poetry of the opening sections. The shifting schema of the boys' poetry is offset by the fact that the character of the Man, who plays all of the oppressive white roles, including sheriff, judge, and priest – all roles that Louis Althusser would identify as agents of either Ideological or Repressive State Apparatuses[96] – speaks only in prose, as does the mob. The only white characters included in the poetry are the Red Voices, who alternate lines as the Communist utopia is formed before the playing of the "Internationale" at the end.

[94] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 17
[95] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 18.
[96] Louis Althusser, from "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook*, edited by Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf (London: Routledge, 2001), 35.

Repetition and variance are also used to great effect, first during the trial, emphasizing the jazzy vocal sound called for in this scene by the stage directions, and then as the Red Voices join in after the 8th Boy's refusal to go to the electric chair. The trial scene contains two long passages patterned as the calls and responses of Afro-American musical tradition. The first repeated exactly as the Judge asks "You raped that girl" and each boy in turn answers "No."[97] In the second section the Judge's line does not change, but the answers do as the Boys give individual responses to the Judge's calls:

Judge: You had a gun.

1st Boy: No.

Judge: You had a gun.

2nd Boy: No, sir.

Judge: You had a gun.

3rd Boy: Not one.

Judge: You had a gun.

4th Boy: Not nary one.

Judge: You had a gun.

5th Boy: We didn't have none.

Judge: You had a gun.

6th Boy: No gun.

Judge: You had a gun.

7th Boy: No, sir, none.

Judge: You had a gun.

[97] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 12-13.

8th Boy: No gun.[98]

The repeated lines, both with and without variance, conjure the sound of spirituals in early jazz and emphasize the dehumanizing deindividuation of the courts and of Jim Crow racism, which turn unique lives, circumstances, and trauma into interchangeable and disposable products of the industrialized legal system.

The 8th Boy, as part of his development of a radical consciousness and rebellion against the "justice" system that sentenced him to die, uses repetition to contrast his experiences under the Capitalist and white supremacist American system and his hopes for the Communist future. The lines describing the past take the form of "Too long have we" followed by the actions "stood/for the whip and rope," "labored/Poor, without hope," and "suffered/Alone" while the Red Voices interject "Too long!"[99] This marks a sharp contrast with his visions and hopes for the future, which do not follow a set form. The use of linguistic and rhythmic repetition and rupture adds commentary on the lines as they are delivered, increasing the complexity of the very straightforward and even simplistic didactic mode of the script, in addition to tying it back into the musical influence that characterized Hughes' poetry in the years just prior to the publication of the play.

Furthermore, jazz was itself a radical form, and as a result, "many saw the jazz musician as a freedom fighter, a challenger of old forms and a transformer of old songs into new, expressive creations.[100] Not only was the jazz performer a revolutionary, but the clubs were spaces of radical and even, in the terms of Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival potential. As he explains, "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank,

[98] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 13.
[99] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 17.
[100] Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 246.

privileges, norms, and prohibitions." [101] Jazz clubs, particularly the jazz clubs of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, were principally black spaces, and most resisted the pressure from white voyeurs to submit to the outside law of segregation and separation. They served as both, in the terms of cultural anthropologists Victor Turner:

> A *liminal* space ("acculturation," "initiation" of Southern migrants into city culture, "socialization" of the young) *and a liminoid space* (suspension of the new, demanding routine of "work," of everyday rhythms, values, behavior; the counterfactual, imaginative dimension of communitas in social "reality").[102]

In these spaces, the head trickster of this carnival was the jazz musician. By claiming this role in the context of *Scottsboro Limited*, Hughes was arguing to his black, and to any culturally fluent white, audience that his supposedly sudden turn to proletarian politics was actually rooted in the traditions and practices of the community he served as "Negro Poet Laureate."

The source for the agitprop form Hughes adapts for the play is not immediately obvious, but there were multiple likely vectors. From the most general, the Soviet style agitprop had arrived in New *York* in 1929 with the German language workers' theater company Prolet Buehne, though the Industrial Workers of the World Paterson Silk Strike Pageant in 1913 and the formation of the Workers Drama League in 1926 had set the stage for its arrival.[103] Hughes could have encountered this form by chance during his years in New York, though there is no evidence to suggest this as the source of this

[101] Mikhail Bakhtin, from *Rabelais and His World*, in *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook*, edited by Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf (London: Routledge, 2001), 218.
[102] Günter H. Lenz, "The Riffs, Runs, Breaks, and Distortions of a Community in Transition: Redefining African American Modernism and the Jazz Aesthetic in Langston Hughes' 'Montage of a Dream Deferred' and 'Ask Your Mama,'" *The Massachusetts Review* 44, no. 1/2 (Spring – Summer 2003), 270.
[103] Stuart Cosgrove, "From Shock Troupe to Group Theatre," in *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and* America, by Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul plc, 1985), 265-266.

influence on his radical plays. It is more likely that he learned about the agitprop form and the workers' theater movement from his involvement with the John Reed Club after his return from the Caribbean. He would have been introduced to the various popular forms of radical literature and performance as part of his involvement with the organization, even if he was not paying attention to the rise of strike line theater in the years prior.

Whenever he first encountered ideas of agitprop, workers' theater, and proletarian culture more broadly, his knowledge of these topics is indirectly confirmed by the September, 1931 issue of *New Masses*, which announced that he, along with *Daily Worker* artist Jacob Burck, Communist playwright Paul Peters, who later would become best known for the agitprop play *Stevedore* (1934), and Whittaker Chambers, the new editor of the magazine, would be forming a mobile workers' theater unit called the New York Suitcase Theater.[104] This plan ended up coming to nothing at the time, though in 1938 Hughes and his friend and sometime secretary Louise Thompson (later Louise Thompson Patterson) adapted the idea, narrowing its focus to black audiences, as the Harlem Suitcase Theatre.[105] Even if Hughes had not learned about these performance styles prior to that autumn, developing this plan would have required Hughes, Burck, Peters, and Chambers to discuss their ideas regarding agitprop and workers' theatre, ensuring he was introduced to the structures and tropes of these forms before writing *Scottsboro Limited* in October.

Communist agitprop was developed through the combined efforts of many artists in the first few years of the Soviet Union. Troupes, such as the much studied Blue

[104] Rampersad, 215-216.
[105] Rampersad, 356.

Blouse, used their performances as a means of promoting Communism among the illiterate masses in much the same way the medieval cycle plays had once promoted Christianity. The minimalist staging and simplified, didactic performance style of the early Communist state spread to Capitalist Europe, where it was reinvented as the workers' theater during the second half of the 1920s. From there it spread to the United States along with immigrating artists and audiences, to be readapted for local needs in such forms as the strike play.[106] Across languages and cultures, agitprop was a theater for and by the left. It took many forms, but all focused on a few "clear political aims." As summarized by historian Lynn Mally, these plays:

> Were designed to educate audiences about important policies or events and perhaps even to inspire viewers to action. Actors usually represented stock character types, such as noble workers, corrupt capitalists, and evil wreckers, usually without extensive character development.[107]

Their simplicity was part of their efficacy, as deep political or historical knowledge was unnecessary for understanding plot and message, and the strident performance style encouraged emotional, rather than rational, reaction to the issues.

The agitprop influence on *Scottsboro Limited* is straightforward and direct, like the form itself. Founder of London's Hackney Labour Dramatic Group Herbert (Tom) Thomas defined this kind of performance as "a theatre without a stage, a theatre that which would use music and song and cabaret, which could improvise its own material instead of going in for full-length set pieces, a theatre in which audiences could take

[106] Lynn Mally, "Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer, 2003), 327.
[107] Mally "Exporting Soviet Culture," 325.

part,"[108] and "that by the addition of hats or other simple changes, the actors could transform themselves into easily recognizable types."[109] Hughes captured the agitprop mode in "devices like the spare set, the shifting scene, and the white man's multiple characters," as well as planting the Mob and Red Voices choir in the audience to create the appearance of audience participation.[110] These methods, simple as they are, guide the audience into line with Hughes' message. Furthermore, the Man, who in his multiple roles "comes to represent the entire white race in the United States," particularly pushes white audiences into alignment with the radicals, as his cruelty compels them "to disembarrass themselves and to show that he does not represent them as a group"; this need to show distance from the Man's vicious beliefs and actions "employs social psychology so aptly in the script that everyone, actors and audience, will be on their feet shouting, 'fight!' and singing the Communist anthem."[111]

The final structure of the play, in its inventive fusion of jazz poetry and agitprop minimalism, is far more radical in approach than the avowed Communist John Wexley's 1934 social realist treatment of the Scottsboro trials, *They Shall Not Die*, though the perspective of Wexley's play does not share the same ambivalence towards radicalism as *Scottsboro Limited*. As Michael Thurston argues, "the play's form, drawn from experimental proletarian theater, quite powerfully yokes the fate of the eight black defendants with that of other workers. In its form more effectively than its content, "Scottsboro Limited" unites black and white beneath the red flag."[112]

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[108] Tom Thomas, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class," in *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and* America, by Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul plc, 1985), 87.
[109] Thomas, 96.
[110] Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag," 42.
[111] Duffy, 28.
[112] Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag," 41.

The text of the play can be roughly divided into three topic categories, which do not always mesh comfortably: the bare facts of the case, the proletarian rhetoric Hughes had adapted, and finally an amorphous set of points that reveals his hesitancy to commit fully to that rhetoric. The first category, the facts of the case, is the simplest to identify and define. Indeed, his information was unusually good, as he had access to Hollace Ransdall's ACLU report while writing the play.[113] His depiction of events shortens and simplifies matters considerably. The fight on the train and the initial accusation of attempted murder is skipped as irrelevant to the main action, as is the person of Roy Wright, as he was never sentenced to death or sent to Kilby Prison. The onstage trial is overseen by the Man as the Judge, but the jury is not represented, keeping with the agitprop tradition of iconic, even cartoonish, depictions of the agents of Repressive State Apparatuses.

The only action expanded from the known facts is the arrest of the eight Boys and the discovery of the two white women on the train. In his notes on the Ransdall report, Hughes reiterates the key fact that the population of Scottsboro "can't conceive that two white women riding with a crowd of Negroes could possibly escape raping."[114] This observation demonstrates Hughes' sophisticated understanding of the rules governing race and gender in the South: that the physical proximity of white women and black men, particularly without white men also present, both was equivalent to and provided all the necessary evidence for rape. He then explains this illogical but definitive phenomenon for his radical white audience through the action of this scene:

[113] Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* Working Notes, Langston Hughes Papers, Series V: General Writings, Box 337, Folder 5505, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[114] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* Working Notes.

Sheriff: And these niggers on the train with you?

1st Girl: Ain't seen 'em before.

Sheriff: Ain't these black brutes been botherin' you?

Girls: No, they ain't been near.

Sheriff: Is that true? (*Sternly*) Ain't they had their hands on you?

Girls: (*Waveringly*) Well, they…er…

Sheriff: I knew it! Which one of these black apes touched you?

Girls: Why…er…

Sheriff: We'll have a trial and burn 'em up. And you'll get paid for testifying, and your pictures in the paper. Which ones?

1st Girl: That two there

Sheriff: Two? You sho it wasn't more?

2nd Girl: No, we ain't sure.

1st Girl: It might-a been all of 'em.[115]

This exchange, quite long in context of this very brief script, lays bare the machinery of the Jim Crow system – particularly the requirement that, away from the power and supervision of white men, the possibility of non-violent interaction between black men and white women must be literally unthinkable. Despite the importance of this point, Hughes does not use the didactic approach of Proletkult sloganeering here, as he justly feared that even the radical white audience he was courting would have rejected this truth if confronted with it directly. In this dialogue, subtle only by comparison to the script's agitprop form, Hughes reveals his uncertainty with both the ability and the willingness of

[115] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 12.

the white radical left to fully understand and commit to the cause of racial equality in America.

Despite this hesitancy, many of the lines of text enthusiastically promote Red rhetoric, justly earning the play its radical reputation. While inaccurate to the real defendants, of whom only Haywood Patterson ever developed an interest in the ideology of their Communist advocates, Hughes' version of the Scottsboro Boys even begin the play with a proto-class consciousness. As the train passes, they observe the "fields/Bustin' wid de crops they yields," prompting a brief discussion of intra-racial economic oppression:

6th Boy: Who gets it all?

3rd Boy: White folks

8th Boy: You means de rich white folks.

2nd Boy: Yes, 'cause de rich ones owns de land.

And they don't' care nothin' 'bout de po' white man.

3rd Boy: You's right. Crackers is just like me –

Poor whites and niggers, ain't neither one free.[116]

This is the beginning of Hughes establishment of the 8th Boy as the anti-Capitalist, pro-interracial organizing voice within the script, which is to say, the voice of the dramatist himself, as the function of agitprop playwriting is to communicate the artist's ideology by placing the slogans of the cause within the mouth of the hero. Later, the 8th Boy continues to serve as Hughes' mouthpiece when he confronts the Prison Keeper with his willingness to act as an oppressor to the impoverished members of his same race: "Paid

[116] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 11.

to kill people, that's what you do/Not just niggers – but your white brothers too."[117] This concern for the fates of the white working class is answered by the white Red Voices promising "We'll fight! The Communists will fight for you./Not just black – but black and white."[118] This mutual, trans-racial concern for each other's suffering establishes the fundamental axis of oppression as by the upper class against the lower, rather than by white against black, even before the unified, Communist-ex-machina ending.

After the electric chair is destroyed and the eight Boys and Red Voices unite, Hughes makes the further point that, in his workers' utopia, black and Red are one and the same, not two distinct groups forming an alliance against a mutual oppressor:

8th Boy: The voice of the red world

Is our voice, too.

Red voices: The voice of the red world *is* you!

8th Boy: The hands of the red world

Are our hands, too.

Red voices: The hands of the red world *are* you![119]

By emphasizing this point so strongly, and through the voice of his surrogate within the text, Hughes directly challenges the notion, supported by both racist Party members and anti-Communist Afro-Americans, that Communism is an inherently or even de facto white ideology. These lines also serve as a denial that he is abandoning either black culture or anti-racist activism in making his turn left. Indeed, just prior to the dropping of the red flag and the playing of the "Internationale," the 8th Boy/Hughes explicitly defines the fight against white supremacy as being a core part of the radical agenda:

[117] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[118] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[119] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 17.

Black and white together

Will fight the great fight

To put greed and pain

And the color line's blight

Out of the world

Into time's old night.[120]

Despite Hughes' utopian vision for a society unmarred by racism under the Communists and his practical need to convince his new, radical supporters that he was one of them, at this point he was still unwilling to commit fully to the Party platform. One of the planks Hughes carefully avoids in *Scottsboro Limited* is the matter of religion. The relatively high degree of religiosity in the Afro-American community, both in terms of percentage of the population that attended church and the degree of individual devotion, meant that he would severely damage his reputation within it should he condemn its churches.[121] Likewise, the radical supporters he courted would not have approved of promotion of religion in his new, proletarian, voice. As a result, he could not address the issue of black churches without losing one audience or the other.

However, the framework of *Scottsboro Limited*, which reaches its climax when the 8th Boy is sent to the electric chair, necessarily foregrounds the culture of the Death House, including the arrival of a member of the clergy to minister to the men's souls prior to their executions. Hughes resolves this ideological conflict by avoiding the question of *black* faith entirely, instead introducing and condemning *white* religion. As the Boys talk with the Red Voices, the Man appears as "a Preacher, sanctified, with a

[120] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 18.

[121] Frederick C. Harris, "Something Within: Religion as a Motivator of African-American Political Activism," *The Journal of Politics* 56, no. 1 (February 1994), 42.

Bible in his hand" to offer the Boys his guidance before their deaths.[122] The clergyman's alliance with white supremacist and Capitalist forces is demonstrated by the fact he is played by the Man, who serves as the personification of the oppressive status quo, but the connection is confirmed by the blessing he actually offers: "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust – If they law don't kill you then the lynchers must."[123]

The 3rd Boy replies to this by demanding, "A prayer to a white God in a white sky?/We don't want that kind of prayer to die."[124] However he does not offer, and no one asks, what kind of prayer he might want. Likewise, when the 6th Boy declares his desire for a prayer, even from this hostile source, the 8th Boy, acting as Hughes' demonstration of his own radically mandated anti-religious thought, interrupts with his own inverted blessing for the Man, "May they choke in your mouth,/Every praying white lie!"[125] and the matter is dropped. By structuring the scene this way Hughes offers a criticism of religion that can be read, depending on audience belief and desire, as either a Communist style condemnation of religion as a whole or as a denunciation limited only to white churches that support racism, lynching, and the corrupt Southern justice system, all while obfuscating Hughes' actual views on the topic of religion in Afro-American life. This delicate balancing act reveals that, for all its stridency in declaring itself Red, *Scottsboro Limited* was not certain of its intended audience or ideology.

This ambivalence is also revealed in Hughes' treatment of the matter of narrative control, both in the text and at the level of play as speech-act. While performed on non-consenting black bodies, the scenario of lynching, to return to Diana Taylor's

[122] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[123] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[124] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[125] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15-16.

terminology, is enacted by white men as declaration of control over the society and all witnessing parties; each lynching re-inscribed the agency of the lynchers and denied the agency of both victim and "victim," the woman whose "violation" supposedly justified the orgy of violence. Though the nine accused teens nominally had their day in court, the Scottsboro trials followed this scenario, and, as such, served as a statement of power and control along racial and gendered lines, reiterating the claim that black men and white women could not safely coexist without the control of white men and their rules of Jim Crow racism and "Judge Lynch." The Communist challenge to the easy convictions and death sentences did not and could not fundamentally change the power dynamics, as the *Daily Worker* articles and ILD appeals still consisted of white men speaking to white men about the accusations, rather than supporting the victims' agency and the agency of the black community to speak for itself.

In writing, publishing, and producing *Scottsboro Limited*, Hughes is both claiming the right to speak to white men on the topic of this case in particular and lynching in general, and enacting the action he has just claimed the agency to perform, which is to say, *Scottsboro Limited* in illocution provides a defense of his right to speak, while also perlocutionarily performing the action by speaking on the matter. This is a marked contrast with Wexley's writing of *They Shall Not Die*, which already fits into the cultural norm of white men speaking to white men on the subject of who does and who does not deserve to be lynched, positioning *Scottsboro Limited* as the more radical action, though *They Shall Not Die* is more radical in rhetoric. Then, having claimed a position in the dialogue, Hughes proves unwilling to surrender control back into the hands of white

Communists, no matter how sincere their desire to act on behalf of him, the Scottsboro defendants, or the Afro-American community broadly speaking.

This conflict of authority and agency at the level of the play-as-action also plays out within the lines of the script, as the Man, the Mob, the Red Voices, and the 1st through 8th Boys jockey for control of the narrative. In the stylized world of *Scottsboro Limited*, oppression and resistance are carried out through the act of speaking, and agency to speak and be heard is equated to agency in all parts of life. As a result, the Man tries to control the Boys' speech. As the Judge he silences their objections by ordering "Shut up. No talking back in this court,"[126] and as Prison Keeper he cuts off their negotiation with the Red Voices by ordering "Shut up in there, with your plots and plans."[127] Even during the opening action, before taking on a secondary role, the Man attempts to seize control of the form of their speech, ordering them to "Stop talking poetry and talk sense."[128] He also claims their illiteracy, which prevents free engagement with ideas and information that could encourage resistance, allows them to "work better," or, in other words, the ability to read and write would complicate their continued exploitation.[129] Later, during the 8th Boy's refusal to go through with his execution, the Mob joins the Man in his demands for quiet, yelling "shut up, you God-damn nigger!"[130] To maintain the system as it stands, the voices of the Boys must be silenced.

The 8th Boy names this problem explicitly, to ensure that the audience understands the connection between word and action, and between vocal and physical

[126] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 13.
[127] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[128] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 9.
[129] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 9.
[130] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 16.

freedom: "we will be dead," he warns, "If we stay quiet here."[131] His rebellion – against death in the electric chair but also against the entire white supremacist system – is not just in the form of a speech; these lines make it explicitly clear that it is his voice and his speech-act, and through his direct connection to the playwright Hughes', that sets him, and will set others, free:

> Let the meek and humble turn the other cheek –
>
> I am not humble!
>
> I am not meek!
>
> From the mouth of the death house
>
> Hear me speak!...
>
> All the world, listen!
>
> Beneath the wide sky
>
> In all the black lands
>
> Will echo this cry:
>
> *I will not die!*[132]

Indeed, he even identifies that the reason he is in this position, the one to be executed first, is "because I talk out loud."[133] It is this agency as the de facto leader of the young victims that has led to scholars commonly asserting, despite the lack of any hard evidence, that the 8th Boy is Haywood Patterson, as he was the only one of the youths arrested at Scottsboro to embrace radical politics. Though this identification sounds plausible, there is no evidence that Hughes was aware of Patterson's growing interest in the radical left. Furthermore, Hughes uses the 8th Boy as the voice of both his own

[131] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 10.
[132] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 16-17.
[133] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 16.

growing dedication to his new Red identity and his hesitancy to fully commit to that persona, clearly indicating that this character is best understood as a surrogate for the writer rather than a biographical representation of Patterson.

The characters of the Boys and the ideology of the playwright are supported by Communist Red Voices. The Red Voices promise the Boys that they will both "fight for you" and "talk for you," and the alternation between these promises establishes the two as equivalent actions.[134] Indeed, the assistance rendered is in the form of a lawyer to take over speaking duties, and the utopian vision of the future is one in which the voice of the Red world is also the voice of the black one. However, despite all of this, the 8th Boy, like Hughes, is not willing to fully trust the Red Voices. Even after their promises of help, he announces his own agency with the declaration "I've nobody to talk for me,/So I'll talk for myself, see."[135] Having claimed and enacted his right to speak, Hughes was not yet ready to hand over control of his voice to the Party or its agents.

While the signs of ideological ambivalence within *Scottsboro Limited* are outweighed by its Communist elements, they did provide space for Hughes to manipulate the play's apparent radicalism depending on audience needs. As Duffy observes, even as the strains of the "Internationale" rise with the red flag, "the fight to which the audience should commit itself seems purposely ambiguous. The group call for 'Fight!' in the closing moments would find some audience members crying to fight racism, while others would be convinced they were fighting capitalism."[136] This unwillingness to fully commit to the radical left as either a political philosophy or a revenue stream did not last long. Between the publication of the play in the fall of 1931 and its premiere performance in

[134] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 14-15.
[135] Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited*, 15.
[136] Duffy, 29.

California in the spring of 1932, Hughes' presentation of the play's perspective, "already vermillion in the pamphlet, deepens to sanguine."[137]

The Los Angeles chapter of the John Reed Club wanted to produce *Scottsboro Limited*, but had initially been stopped by police censorship.[138] With Hughes in town, they decided to risk it, staging the world premiere on May 8, 1932, at a mass rally for the Scottsboro Defendants.[139] To extend the evening, given the brief run length of the play, Hughes wrote another short performance piece to open the production, titled *A Mass Chant for Tom Mooney*.[140] The mass chant is a strictly Communist form, from which Hughes does not deviate, brought to the United States by *New Masses* editor Mike Gold after a visit to the Soviet Union.[141] Additionally, Mooney was considered a political prisoner and radical martyr for his imprisonment for allegedly participating in the 1916 bombing of San Francisco's Preparedness Day parade.[142] By explicitly connecting the two performances, Hughes "linked the racist railroading of the Scottsboro defendants with the broader systematic injustice practiced on political radicals."[143] This embrace of the proletarian position above his previous racial one presages his move to Communist orthodoxy in ideology and dramatic writing, best represented by his unpublished plays *Harvest* (1934) and *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1935).

[137] Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag," 42.
[138] Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag," 42.
[139] Duffy, 31.
[140] Duffy, 31.
[141] Cosgrove, 266.
[142] Rampersad, 236.
[143] Thurston, "Black Christ, Red Flag," 42.

CHAPTER 2:
PROLETARIAN PLAYS FOR A PROLETARIAN AUDIENCE

In his second, 1956, autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, Langston Hughes tells the following story, to explain why he never officially joined Communist Party:

> Arthur Koestler asked me one day why in Moscow I did not join the Communist Party. I told him that what I had heard concerning the Party indicated that it was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that I, as a writer, did not wish to accept. I did not believe political directives could be successfully applied to creative writing.[1]

Like most of his writing about his involvement with the radical left, particularly in the autobiographies he used to craft his public persona, this story intentionally distorts the truth of his activities during the Depression. He did follow significantly, though not entirely, the political and artistic directives of the Communists, despite never officially joining the Party. Furthermore, the year Hughes spent in the Soviet Union, from June of 1932 to June of 1933, strongly influenced both his political beliefs and the style of his writing, bringing both far closer to party dogma than this story suggests.

Hughes had initially traveled to Moscow with a group of aspiring actors, organized by his friend and sometime secretary Louise Thompson, who were to serve as the black cast in a Mezhrabpom (Workers' International Relief, from the Russian *Mezhdunarodnaia rabochaia pomeshch*) film on American racism. When the film, tentatively titled *Black and White*, fell through, Thompson's group was provided the opportunity to travel into Soviet East Asia as an apology for their inconvenience.[2]

[1] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 121-122.
[2] Jack El-Hai, "Reel Life," *California* (Spring, 2012), 20.

Hughes set off with the rest of the group, but soon after left their company to explore on his own. It was during his solitary exploration of Ashgabat, in what is now Turkmenistan, that Hughes met Koestler.[3] Hughes uses the story of his conversation with Koestler to create an image of himself as independent and unwilling to compromise his personal or creative freedom to Party doctrine, in contrast with the European "True Believer" who valued cause over artistic integrity. Ironically, however, it was Koestler who turned a critical eye to the reality of life under Stalin, while Hughes accepted the utopian fantasy without question.

The two men immersed themselves in local culture, observing as many elements of life in Ashgabat as they could. As part of this study they attended a political corruption trial held by the local Soviet. As with so many such trials conducted by the Soviet Union, the verdict had been decided before the case was even heard. Koestler was horrified by the revelation that the country was not operating the free, just, and utopian legal system he had imagined, and this realization would lead directly to his dramatic resignation from the Party in 1938 and his subsequent 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*, condemning Stalin and his use of the courts in his purges.[4]

Hughes, however, dismissed the injustice with a giggling declaration that the victim, a former city official named Atta Kurdov, "looks guilty to me, of what I don't know, but he just *looks* like a rogue."[5] This was almost exactly the thinking that had condemned the Scottsboro Nine, yet here Hughes was happy to engage in the same poisoned logic rather than risk sharing Koestler's horror and subsequent disenchantment

[3] Rampersad, 259.
[4] Kati Marten, *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2006), 100-101.
[5] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 117.

with the Communist cause. Despite biographer Arnold Rampersad's rationalization that Hughes' callousness was the result of emotional damage from his break with Charlotte Mason,[6] and Hughes' own claim that he only ignored the gross injustice he had just witnessed to annoy Koestler,[7] his later actions, including the continued promotion of Communism via his writing, suggest a different conclusion. The real motivation for his indifference was the very fact he denied to Koestler: that he was committed to the ideology of Communism during this time, and nothing so insignificant as the unjust conviction of a man he did not know – followed by orders to arrest another twenty-eight members of the man's family – was going to change that.[8]

Hughes' first two plays after his return from the Soviet Union, 1934's *Harvest* and 1935's *Angelo Herndon Jones*, reflect this dedication to Communist convention, in both form – *Harvest* is a living newspaper and *Angelo Herndon Jones* a Soviet Realist strike play – and content. In what was a disappointment at the time, neither play was accepted for production, and both plays went unpublished until the 2000 collection *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*.[9] These were also the first of Hughes' plays represented by his new literary agent, Maxim Lieber. Hughes was still in the Soviet Union when he switched his agent from Blanche Knopf to the radical Communist Lieber, "of whom Hughes had heard only fine reports from his American friends in Moscow."[10] However, after the Second World War, while Hughes edited his radical past to create a persona more palatable to the conservative audiences of the time, the fact that few people knew of these two plays made it easy for him to pretend that they did not exist. Indeed, as

[6] Rampersad, 260.
[7] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 117.
[8] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 117.
[9] Rampersad, 323.
[10] Rampersad, 270.

Susan Duffy observes, because the two scripts were unknown to all but a few people, "the public exposure of his political plays had not caused Hughes to become more closely identified with the Left in the mid-1930s."[11] Although they did not particularly affect his reputation at the time or later, these two plays track the process of Hughes' radicalization from his ambivalence to the Communist cause just a few years earlier.

Hughes spent the spring following his tour of Turkestan in Moscow, where he deepened his commitment to the radical cause by joining the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.[12] Early in June of 1933 he began the long journey back to the United States, taking the Trans-Siberian Railroad all the way to Vladivostok before continuing on to stop in Korea, Japan, and China, then across the Pacific to Hawaii, at the time an American territory, and finally on to San Francisco, disembarking on August 9.[13] Rather than continuing on to New York, Hughes settled in the nearby village of Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, in a beach home owned by his friend Noel Sullivan.[14] Sullivan, a banking heir and director of the San Francisco Art Association,[15] like Charlotte Mason, was white, wealthy, and willing to pay for Hughes to write. However, unlike Mason, Sullivan was not interested in controlling either Hughes' writing or personal life, and the opportunity to spend a year writing without worrying about how to cover his expenses was too tempting for Hughes to refuse.[16] Thus began a period of unbridled productivity, during which he "worked ten or twelve hours a day, and turned out at least one story or complete article every week, sometimes more."[17]

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[11] Duffy, 146.
[12] Rampersad, 270.
[13] Rampersad, 273-276.
[14] Rampersad, 278.
[15] Duffy, 50.
[16] Berry, 200.
[17] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 285.

While Hughes was settling into life in Carmel, the California agricultural industry was experiencing an unprecedented level of turmoil, as years of low wages drove the usually scattered and disorganized migrant labor force into mass action, organized by the Communist supported Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union. The CAWIU strikes disrupted the harvest of crop after crop in the nearby San Joaquin Valley. Cotton, the last to harvest and most valuable Valley agricultural product, sat waiting in the fields while the strike culminated in a violent confrontation between workers and growers that left three dead and others wounded.[18] Over the next spring and summer Hughes would use these events to form the basis of his first theatrical work after his time in the Soviet Union, a living newspaper called *Harvest*. While ultimately the work would not be finished, even uncompleted it shows the new Communist orthodoxy to Hughes' political ideology and dramatic style.

Harvest, sometimes also called by the working titles *Blood on the Fields* or *Blood on the Cotton*, was a collaborative effort. The principal writers were Hughes and Ella Winter, though the young director Ann Hawkins was added to the project in some capacity after the script was rejected by Theater Union.[19] The degree of involvement by Hawkins is unclear. Rampersad states that Winter and Hawkins communicated directly on revisions after Hughes left Carmel,[20] but biographer Faith Berry states that Winter did not even know until long after the event that Hughes had added Hawkins as a collaborator on the last version of the script.[21] Despite the fact that the play is only

[18] Ramon D. Chacon, "The 1933 San Joaquin Valley Cotton Strike: Strikebreaking Activities in California Agriculture," in *Work, Family, Sex Roles, Language: The National Association for Chicano Studies Selected Papers, 1979* (Berkeley: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1980), 33.
[19] Rampersad, 296.
[20] Rampersad, 296.
[21] Berry, 217.

copyrighted in the names of Hughes and Winter, and under the title *Blood on the Fields*, the academic convention is to use the new title and triple authorship credited on the final draft in Hughes personal papers, now held in the Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.[22] Whatever her actual involvement in the writing process, Ann Hawkins was present for at least some of the initial research process in the autumn of 1933, when the *Harvest* authors toured the contested fields and temporary migrant camps to support the cotton strike.[23]

Ella Winter was a friend and neighbor in Carmel, along with her husband, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens. Like Hughes, she was an active member of the local John Reed Club. Also like Hughes she had recently traveled to the Soviet Union; her book on the experience *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in New Russia* had just been released when Hughes met her for the first time.[24] In addition to working on *Harvest*, Winter also worked with Hughes, her husband, and many others nationally to organize the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners' fundraising auction for the nine men falsely accused of rape in Scottsboro.[25] In addition to their friendship and shared political viewpoints, despite difference of race and gender, and despite Hughes' previous bad experiences collaborating, Winter's experience as a reporter made her a natural coauthor for a living newspaper, as Hughes would not venture into journalism himself until the Spanish Civil War.

The research for *Harvest* began even as the events were still unfolding in the fall of 1933. Caroline Decker, militant Secretary of the CAIWU, was Winter's friend and a

[22] Berry, 349.
[23] Berry, 217.
[24] Rampersad, 279.
[25] National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.

frequent visitor to the Steffens house in Carmel, even speaking at the November meeting of the John Reed Club to discuss the events of the strike and the related violence.[26] Their first trip out to the migrant camps took place in August, 1933, prior to the beginning of the cotton strike and less than a month after Hughes' arrival at the Sullivan beach house. Ella Winter, in her autobiography *And Not to Yield,* describes the decision to make the visit:

> We could not stay in Carmel and merely read about it. Our little bunch gathered one early dawn and traveled to the valley in three automobiles, led by Noel Sullivan in his Cadillac…I don't know what I had expected. A smart office, the bustle of a political campaign? These straggling women and children did not represent my picture of a "big, organized strike."[27]

Hughes depiction of his camp visits, and indeed of his entire involvement with the San Joaquin Valley strikes, is far more limited, consisting only of a side note in *I Wonder as I Wander*, reading "we also raised money for the relief of the migratory workers about whom John Steinbeck, then living in nearby Pacific Grove, wrote in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Sometimes I visited the migratory camps, filled with depression victims from other parts of the country."[28] Despite this characteristic obfuscation of the true extent of his radical activism and proletarian writing, the research for *Harvest* actually took a considerable portion of his time during his year of Sullivan's patronage.

Over the following months Hughes and Winter conducted their primary research. They sorted through her extensive files of newspaper clippings on the strike, made

[26] Duffy, 54.
[27] Ella Winter, *And Not to Yield: An Autobiography*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1963), 193-194.
[28] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 283.

subsequent visits into the migrant camps to interview strike participants, and acquired the court transcripts of all cases associated with the unfolding events.[29] Over the spring and summer of 1934 the collaborators developed the script, simplifying the complex action by following the experiences of several fictional but representative families and lightly disguising the identities of faction leaders through the use of pseudonyms, but drawing dialogue directly from their assorted primary sources.[30] Furthermore, the events are compressed, so that fights that happened multiple times at multiple sites, for example, over the availability of water, appear as singular events rather than long running conflicts. The script was all but completed before the events depicted in the final scene, the July 20, 1934 raid on the CAWIU headquarters by grower supporters, even happened. In the last days of July the script was edited to depict these final events and was then sent to New York to Hughes literary agent, Maxim Lieber, on August 8.[31] Unfortunately, the collaborators intention of editing the script for Theater Union production fell apart when they became targets of the strikebreakers' violence.

Hughes, Winter, and the others of their circle called the violent pro-grower faction the "Vigilantes." The group consisted of strikebreakers paid by the wealthy owners of the disputed cotton fields, Ku Klux Klan members and supporters, officers in the police Red Squads, American Legionnaires and assorted others prepared to commit acts of terrorism in the name of a reactionary and undefined "Americanism." The Carmel John Reed Club's work on behalf of the CAWIU strikers drew the attention of the Vigilantes, and rumors of the *Harvest* script and its harsh condemnation of the attacks on strikers reached the mob, despite the play's not being published or produced. They responded in force,

[29] Duffy, 55-56.
[30] Duffy, 56.
[31] Berry, 211.

stalking and harassing Hughes and Winter in town, and openly threatening their lives and the lives of Winter's husband and their young son Peter. The intimidation culminated in a nighttime invasion of the Sullivan beach property at the end of July, during which they engaged in a protracted performance of Klan style psychological terrorism.[32]

Hughes, highly aware that this raid was the first scene in the prototypical lynching scenario, fled Carmel on July 24 for the comparative safety of Noel Sullivan's San Francisco home.[33] Horrified by the attack on his friend, Sullivan sold the Carmel beach house.[34] Despite the reasonable fear that kept him for returning to Carmel for more than a few days at a time through August and September, Hughes took the offensive against the men who had driven him from the village. A writer to the end, his counter attack took the form of an article intended for *New Masses* titled "The Vigilantes Knock at My Door." In it he condemns both the Vigilantes and the village leaders and police, reporting that they fanned the flames of violence:

> The Carmel Council ordered tear gas and began to drill citizens with riot guns on the polo grounds. Two or three hundred villagers got together to fight the John Reed Club. (We had twenty members.) Our hall was taken away from us, its owner, a leading Carmel citizen, was threatened with boycot [*sic*], destruction of his property, and possible personal violence.[35]

The magazine never ran this account, though it is unclear whether this was due to editorial decision or Hughes' withdrawing the story due to fear for his life.

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[32] Berry, 211.
[33] Berry, 212.
[34] Duffy, 58.
[35] Langston Hughes, "The Vigilantes Knock At My Door," Langston Hughes Papers, Series V: General Writings, Box 366, Folder 5902, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 9.

Ella Winter responded to the rising tide of hostility by abandoning the play. Her family tied her to Carmel, and her sixty-eight year old husband and ten year old child were unable to flee should the campaign of intimidation break into open violence. Hughes explained the situation to Maxim Lieber in the August 8 letter accompanying the script delivery:

> Ella Winter, when I last saw her ten days ago in Carmel, did not want her name used on the script – although it is copyrighted in our joint names. The Red Scare in Carmel and the vicious rumors put out concerning my associations with whites there and the fact the Steffens home was branded as a nest of Reds and a meeting place for Negroes and Whites, etc. etc. prompted this move on her part. After all she does have to live there and send her kid to a school headed by a Legionnaire and get her milk from a dairyman who declared he was just waiting for the day when he could get behind a machine gun and drag all the members of the JRC out in Ocean Avenue and shoot 'em.[36]

With Winter withdrawn from the project, Theater Union asking for rewrites, his year of patronage by Sullivan at an end, and California no longer safe for him, Hughes fled to Reno to recover, where he spent two months in near total seclusion.[37] He was still in Nevada when he received word that his long estranged father had died and that he needed to return to Mexico for the funeral.[38] That was the final blow to *Harvest*, and the project was finally, entirely abandoned.

[36] Langston Hughes to Maxim Lieber, August 8, 1934, in *Selected Letters of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015), 159.
[37] Berry, 217-218.
[38] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 285.

Hughes' interest in the 1933 San Joaquin Valley cotton strike was prescient, as the action marked a major turning point in the history of American migrant and agricultural labor organization and activism, providing a model of success for later actions, including the 1965 Delano grape strike that resulted in the founding of El Teatro Campesino. The San Joaquin cotton strike, the largest agricultural strike in United States history, officially started on October 4, 1933 and culminated a summer of labor action organized by the radical Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union.[39] Between twelve thousand and nineteen thousand workers participated, on farms across the region. The vast majority of the workers were Mexican, although black and white Americans and Filipino immigrants constituted visible minorities among the strikers; no other ethnic group was represented in significant numbers. The contested harvest put fifty million dollars worth of cotton at risk of rotting in the fields.[40]

During the year prior to the strike, workers earned forty cents for each hundred pounds of cotton picked, and the growers initially announced the same wage offering for 1933, for work that had earned $1.00 to $1.65 for the same amount picked a decade prior.[41] These wages were so low that starvation and its associated diseases were widespread. According to one survey of twenty-six children in the Bonita cotton pickers' camp, "four children suffered malnutrition and five others had rickets. Other children had tonsillitis, badly decayed teeth, and sundry health problems." Only three children were ruled "healthy."[42] While the documented confirmation of the desperate situation made Bonita notable, the situation was entirely typical of all of the camps. Public outcry in the

[39] Gilbert G. González, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 122.
[40] Chacon, 34.
[41] González, 131.
[42] González, 133.

face of this deprivation, as well as the threatening specter of successful CAWIU strikes during the harvests of other crops earlier in the summer and fall, forced the land owners to up their offered payment to sixty cents per hundredweight. The workers rejected the paltry raise; raw cotton was selling for ten dollars for every hundred pounds, and in addition the Department of Agriculture offered "six to twelve dollars an acre to retire land."[43] Furthermore, the price to grow the cotton, not counting the labor of the pickers, was only fifteen cents a pound.[44] The strikers demanded a return to living wages, declaring they would not accept less than $1.00 for one hundred pounds of cotton.

The risk that losing the cotton harvest represented to the economy of California, combined with the threat to the established white supremacist system represented by the rebellion of the dark skinned workers against the white property owners, brought the force of the state into the conflict on the side of the growers. Nominally called in to maintain peace during the demonstrations, the local police acted in concert with growers and their Vigilantes to crush the strike, exploiting:

> (a) violence and vigilantism, (b) "red-scare" hysteria and the Communist issue, (c) racial attacks and the threat of deportation, (d) the use of law enforcement officials as strikebreakers, (e) the denial of federal government relief for strikers, and (f) the threat to close down the strike camp because it violated health standards.[45]

The state's agents confirmed for any lingering doubters their indifference to the lives of the pickers on October 10. Two separate episodes of violence exploded that day:

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[43] Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Corridors of Migration: The Odyssey of Mexican Laborers, 1600-1933* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2007), 240.
[44] Acuña, 237.
[45] Chacon, 35.

> In the worst incident, a strike demonstration near Pixley, where women, men, and children had gathered for a mass meeting, ranchers carrying shotguns ambushed the crowd and fired directly into the unarmed workers and their families. Two men were shot and killed…In addition to the murdered men, almost a dozen people suffered gunshot wounds.[46]

A few hours later a striker in Arvin was also murdered, shot eleven times by strikebreakers. During both instances the police stood by and refused to intervene, watching as "the growers sped off in their automobiles, still pointing their weapons out the windows."[47] The only person to go to jail as a result of the murders was Pat Chambers, who was one of the primary strike organizers, on the charge of "criminal syndicalism."[48]

The murders of unarmed strikers attracted federal attention. This took the form of an extended fact-finding and arbitration commission consisting of Dr. Ira B. Cross, an economist and faculty member at the University of California as Chairman, Dr. Tully Knoles, President of the University of the Pacific, and Archbishop of San Francisco Edward J. Hannah.[49] The commission coerced the growers and strikers into accepting a wage compromise; henceforth the pickers would earn seventy-five cent per hundred pounds, enough to prevent starvation but insufficient for anything else. This signing of this agreement, on October 26, 1933, officially marked the end the strike.[50]

This compromise did not, however, end the threat represented by the Vigilantes, who remained a terrifying local presence through Hughes' flight the next summer. It also

[46] González, 142.
[47] González, 142.
[48] González, 143.
[49] Chacon, 39.
[50] González, 154.

did not end the efforts by growers and state interests to crush the radical CAWIU, ultimately achieved in 1935, a year after the Vigilantes' armed raid on the union offices, with the arrest of the Communist organizers, including Pat Chambers and Caroline Decker, for criminal syndicalism. For their final stroke, the growers and their supporters established the Associated Farmers, which lobbied for anti-union and anti-strike laws, spied on organizers, and directed Pinkerton detectives and local police into violent attacks against any anyone judged to be a risk to their absolute control of the San Joaquin Valley migrant labor force.[51] However, this abrupt dissolution of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union was still over a year in the future when Hughes and Winter sat down to write their living newspaper in early 1934, so, while the text reflects the continuing instability in Carmel, Hughes and Winter still saw a chance for strikers to ultimately succeed. Indeed, had they been able to finish the play and arrange for a production, *Harvest* would have explained the events in California to the potential radical supporters in the Theater Union audience, as the Federal Theater Project living newspaper *Triple-A Plowed Under* did for the broader agricultural crisis in 1936.

Even in draft form, *Harvest* provides an efficient summary of the context and major events of the strike, including the wage conflict, the unsafe work conditions, the attempts to close the camps, and the ultimate attack on the strike headquarters, all slightly fictionalized and simplified in order to increase clarity. The vigilante murders at Pixley and Arvin, however, are combined with the final assault rather than depicted separately. The raid on the headquarters was a violent act of terrorism, but did not result in any deaths. In the script, however, Jose's murder during the attack stands in for the earlier murders while offering narrative coherence by appearing in the dramatic climax. The

[51] Acuña, 281-282.

names of both individual leaders and unique locations are changed as part of this fictionalization, but are still easily recognizable. Instead of Pat Chambers of the CAWIU, Mack Saunders of the "Field Pickers' Union of the San Vincenze Valley" crashes the growers' meeting to give the strikers demands. The demand list he delivers, however, is real: "In view of the rise in the cost of living and the considerable unemployment of cotton pickers last year, our union has unanimously decided to demand a wage of one dollar a hundred for picking cotton this year, clean drinking water, and recognition of our union."[52]

Clean water was of particular concern to the strikers, and the script reflects that fear. The lack of plumbing, both in the play and in truth, forced desperate cotton pickers into "a-drinkin that gulley water."[53] The stagnant field runoff was also tainted by "holes in the ground for toilets all over this area," which inevitably led to "sickness all in these camps."[54] Starvation and disease killed multiple children,[55] but it wasn't until the migrant labor camps turned to strike camps that Dr. Giles Porter of the California State Department of Health, represented in the play as Health Inspector Meyers, intervened, declaring the real Corcoran camp and the script's Camp Culver "a dangerous health hazard" and threatening to shut it down.[56] This concern particularly resonated with the writers, and during a visit to Corcoran they discussed the issue with Caroline Decker:

"Where will four thousand people go, if the camp is closed?"

[52] Langston Hughes, Ella Winter, and Ann Hawkins, *Harvest*, in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, by Susan Duffy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 92.
[53] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 77.
[54] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 80.
[55] Acuña, 254.
[56] Acuña, 264.

> "On the road," she replied, "and they'll create the same health menace there. The police will probably chase them along to 'break up the crowd,' as they call it – and break up our solidarity, too…
>
> As we stood by our car, I saw Noel write something and hand it to Caroline. "For the pipes." He hesitated. "I hope that will be enough." It was a check, and it was enough.[57]

Sullivan's individual act of charity does not appear in the play, however, because it does not align with the radical position that only collective action can achieve change to the fundamentally corrupt Capitalist system.

The play's, and by extension Hughes', Communist bona fides are further established through the condemnation of the New Deal approach to solving the problems of the agricultural sector. When *Harvest* was written in 1934, the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act was in effect. This program made "direct payments to farmers who would sign acreage reduction contracts. This was the method which the administration had decided upon to bring production into closer line with consumption."[58] After the Supreme Court declared the Act unconstitutional, the Federal Theater Project produced *Triple-A Plowed Under* to drum up support for the Soil Conservation Act, an existing program that, as the play summarized, "covers all the ground the AAA did…authorized conservation, acquisition of land, compensation to farmers."[59] Hughes and Winter, by contrast, used their play to condemn the practice of creating false scarcity to drive up the prices of agricultural products in a time of mass hunger.

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[57] Winter, 197.
[58] Gilbert C. Fite, "Farmer Opinion and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1933," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48, no.4 (March, 1962), 659.
[59] Staff of the Living Newspaper, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, in Federal Theatre Plays, edited by Pierre de Rohan (New York: Random House, 1938), 49.

Martin Burtle, racist cotton grower and part of the violent conspiracy to crush the strike, glories in the idea of profit without work: "I just found out I could sign a contract not to raise any hogs this year, and I got ninety dollars for it. (*Laughs*) And I wasn't gonna raise hogs!"[60] The assignment of these lines to one of the central cohort of villains makes clear that Hughes and Winter are condemning his actions. Milt Little, a poor, and therefore sympathetic, farmer, rebukes Burtle, "I read in the papers that when in history they cut down on crops there's always a famine afterwards."[61] This exchange establishes that the writers will not support the reformation of Capitalism as enacted by the liberal Roosevelt administration, but are instead calling for radical, even revolutionary, changes to the fundamental structure of the United States' socioeconomic system.

As further condemnation of Capitalism, particularly American Capitalism, Hughes and Winter spend extensive time considering its exploitive, and even coercive, nature. Here Louis Althusser's insights on "Ideological" and "Repressive State Apparatus" provide a framework for understanding the manner in which the writers of *Harvest* interpreted real world events in the formation of the world of the play. For Althusser, an organization is a mechanism of the state if it serves to compel workers or potential workers into accepting the power of the Capitalist system, whether that organization is public, like the police and military, or private, such as churches and newspapers. He then divides these forces in two based on their primary method of social control: "what distinguishes the ISAs from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence',

[60] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 88.
[61] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 89.

whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *function 'by ideology'*.[62] *Harvest*, by simplifying the actual events in San Joaquin Valley, examines the relationships between the ideological and the repressive forces responsible for attacking the strikers.

While the police are depicted as supporting the growers, as they did in truth, the culminating violence of the play is committed by the Vigilantes. The scene takes place at the "Union Headquarters of Purtley,"[63] and is an amalgamation of the July, 1934 attack on the CAWIU headquarters in Sacramento and the murders at Pixley three quarters of a year prior. These fighters are only named in the stage directions of that final fight, "the vigilantes are crouched in the aisles,"[64] but the script carefully establishes their – factual – ties to the KKK and American Legion with an exchange in the growers' first scene:

> FLOORS: I hear we got a fine new order o' tear gas that oughta fix 'em up. You ought to see 'em run in Lodi.
>
> PETERSON: Yeah, I was there then. You'd have laughed yer head off if ye'd seen 'em coughing and spitting and running like scared hens.
>
> LOWE: (*To the bunch of prosperous farmers*) Why don't you boys get a Legion Post started?
>
> BURTLE: Bet a fiery cross'd work wonders.
>
> FLOORS: (*darkly*) Yes, they walked out on me once just when I had my hops ready to pick. After that, no more quarter for any striking bastards. I joined the Klan.[65]

[62] Althusser, 36.
[63] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 130.
[64] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 135.
[65] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 94.

The government support for the private violence of the growers was established historically when all eight of the growers eventually arrested for the Pixley murders were released on bail to continue the violence, and were cleared of all charges once the strike ended.[66] The play ends with the union hall attack, so Hughes and Winter establish the complicity of the state ahead of time, at the meeting to plan the assault. Character District Attorney Sprague supports the Vigilantes from the start. The unnamed sheriff resists at first, stating his intention to have the police handle the matter, before conceding to Peterson's argument that the law exists to protect the landowners' and their property: "you are all citizens and voters. Certainly, that's what I'm here for – to do what you want done."[67] Thus, the local government forces are subordinated to the growers' private army, and the Vigilantes take on the role of Repressive Apparatus.

Others active during the strike served as ideological agents of Capitalist power, a fact the playwrights emphasize by giving their theatrical representatives lines that deconstruct the motivations of nominally disinterested and apolitical actions. Health Inspector Meyers provides a particularly clear example in a line revealing the reasoning behind the closing of the strike camp by the historical Dr. Porter:

> SHERIFF: (*To Mack*) You-all have to leave here. (*Hands him paper*)
>
> MACK: (*Reading aloud slowly*) It says this camp is a menace to the health of the community and must be evacuated by nightfall tomorrow. Signed, Board of Supervisors, Culver County.
>
> JENNIE: The Health Officer has just pronounced the camp health….

[66] González, 143.
[67] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 130.

> MEYERS: I was merely expressing my private opinion. Sanitary arrangements are in a very bad condition. The sewage system is inadequate. Yes, it will be a public safeguard to have the camp evacuated.[68]

In the face of direction from the Sheriff and the local government, Meyers' previous opinion is completely reversed, a fact signaled in an aside during his initial approval, in which he warns that "at any moment matters may come to a head – that is conditions may alter."[69]

Likewise, the distribution of relief to starving strikers is subordinated to the growers' desire to break the strike. The relief agent Hughes and Winter met on their first trip out to the camps, which Winter described as "small, worried…glad to be able at last to speak to her own kind," is quoted by Winter as fretting "The pickers are suspicious of us, they won't give their car numbers or their nationality, but we have to have these, because most of them have no address and how otherwise can we check on who gets relief."[70] Her literary double, Miss Prather, is given almost the exact same line, but to strike leader Jennie Martin – Caroline Decker – rather than a wealthy visitor, and Jennie swiftly reveals the duplicity behind this insistence on documentation: "We know just how this information you get is used. The car numbers are a black-list. If the owners are Mexican you deport them."[71] Furthermore, accepting relief, including "this beautiful rich milk provided by the Government of the United States specially" for the strikers' hungry children, requires that those accepting "sign a paper to go back pending arbitration, if we

[68] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 120.
[69] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 118.
[70] Winter, 193.
[71] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 117.

are to have the milk."[72] The offer of relief is thus revealed to be extortion, a trick to force desperate people into breaking the strike and saving the valuable cotton from the danger of rotting in the fields.

The unnamed Mexican Consul, clearly Enrique Bravo, and Mr. King, a mediator sent from Washington and an amalgam of Drs. Cross and Knoles and Archbishop Hannah, also appear briefly to chivvy the strikers back to work, revealing their biased position despite the performance of objectivity, though their views and actions are not subject to the same extended deconstruction as other ideological agents of the Capitalist state. Even the nominally independent university system is condemned in *Harvest*. "The character of Professor Bankley in the script," as Susan Duffy summarizes in her introduction to the play, "is a composite of students from the University of California, Berkeley, who studied the strike at its location."[73] Despite the fact that some of those students had been sent into the field by Ella Winter's husband Lincoln Steffens,[74]

Professor Bankley is condemned in the script.

From his entrance into the action at the strike camp, the Professor is condescending, sexist, and unapologetically on the side of those in power. He lectures Jennie, who he refers to as "this fiery little lady,"[75] on the needs of the growers, insisting that they have "so many costs to meet, which are constantly going up," and that 1932 is not "a wise time to strike."[76] He does eventually concede, in the face of stolen food and mass arrests, that "the ranchers are adding gunpowder to the situation. And the police

[72] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 119.
[73] Duffy, 67.
[74] Winter, 190.
[75] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 114.
[76] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 115.

seem to encourage them."[77] Yet he refuses to take any action other than promising to "try" to convince his students that injustices are happening. When Jennie presses for meaningful action, such as protesting to the governor or raising bail, Professor Bankley offers a series of platitudes on the need for everyone to "work toward cooperation,"[78] despite egregious violations of the civil rights of the strikers. This extended scene serves as a sharp condemnation of the failure of the Academy to definitively act in favor of oppressed workers, and ties back to similar condemnations Hughes made of the Ivory Tower's indifference to the fate of the Scottsboro Nine. It also demonstrates Althusser's insight that even the most independent of organizations can act as an Apparatus of the Capitalist State when it promotes the ideologies of the powerful and fails to act against oppression resulting from those ideologies.

Furthermore, even in this most orthodox of Hughes' Communist work, he still continues his anti-racist work by revealing the overdetermination of the growers' actions, motivated as it was by both race and class hatred. For, as Marxist critic Carl Freedman writes:

> One might say that black Marxism has never forgotten – has never been *able* to forget – what Louis Althusser, in the 1960s, found necessary to restate with special force and philosophical rigor: that Marxism can never be an essentialism; that the social totality of *Capital* is decentered and nonidentical; and the concept designated by Freud as overdetermination is an indispensable tool for any properly Marxist analysis.[79]

[77] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 116.
[78] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 117.
[79] Carl Freedman, "Overdeterminations: On Black Marxism in Britain," *Social Text*, no. 8 (Winter, 1983-1984), 143.

However, Hughes continued attention to the racial dynamics of the topics of his first plays after returning from the Soviet Union, the strike in *Harvest* and the political imprisonment of the Afro-American CPUSA organizer Angelo Herndon in *Angelo Herndon Jones*, does not change the fact that his position in the plays is that of the proletarian author writing for proletarian audiences first and foremost. In the case of *Harvest*, Hughes audience of choice is the white left, as represented in his and Winter's decision to sell their script to Theatre Union.

The Theatre Union company lasted only four years from 1933 until 1937, but during that time it established a reputation as the Group Theatre's even more radical cousin. Founder George Sklar, playwright of the anti-imperialist *Peace on Earth* with Albert Maltz and of the strike play *Stevedore* with Paul Peters, was committed to the Communist cause and to the ideal of Workers Theater. Many of the tickets to Theatre Union productions, priced as low as possible to remain accessible to the desired proletarian audiences, were sold in blocks, "to such disparate groups as the Communist and Socialist parties, the Followers of Nature, the Jewelry Workers Union, the League of Women Voters, the Flatbush Cultural Club, etc."[80] The majority white audiences of Theatre Union were already radical, or at least sympathetic to the politics of the radical left, so Hughes and Winter would not have needed to convince watchers to sympathize with the strikers. On the other hand, the writers could not be assured that their audience would understand or care about the racial dynamics at play in San Joaquin Valley. Therefore, the depiction of racial oppression in *Harvest* is shaped to explain the way in

[80] Annette T. Rubinstein, "The Radical Theatre of the Thirties," *Science and Society* 50, no.3 (Fall, 1986), 311.

which racism overdetermines the growers' violent response to the strike, as well as the importance of racial integration in successful unionization efforts.

Within the ensemble of strikers there are three repeating sets of characters central to both story and to the play's depiction of race. They are the Mexican Rodriguez family, the white American Dobbs family of "Arkie" Dust Bowl refugees, and a young Afro-American couple, Ada and Buster Walker. Despite their significant involvement in the historical action, pickers from the Philippines go unacknowledged apart from an opening note that "if possible, one or two Filipinos might be included among the strikers, to add to the melting pot of races that is California's low-paid agricultural reserve."[81] While this oversight simplifies the action, it is at the cost of misrepresenting the complex dynamics of linguistic and cultural conflict among the strikers and erasing the significant biases against East and Southeast Asian immigrants in the American West by all ethnic groups. However, Hughes, the expert on racism within the writing team, was as much an outsider to these issues as he was an expert on the struggles of both black and Mexican populations within the United States, and he could not have depicted the Filipino strikers' experiences with the same authority and authenticity.

With the removal of the Filipino experience from this representation of the San Joaquin Valley strike, the play depicts, at least in passing, anti-black and anti-Mexican prejudice by both the white growers and white workers, and anti-Mexican prejudice and suspicion of whites by black workers. Missing from the depiction of these complex dynamics is any acknowledgement of racism by the Mexican characters. Even the Consul, despite his status as "class enemy," does not demonstrate any discriminatory positions during his brief appearance onstage; instead he accurately positions

[81] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 68.

"Mexicanness" as a question of citizenship, in contrast to Jennie's separation of workers into either "white" or "Mexican" categories.[82] This erases the complex markers of race and status in Mexican society, but it also reflects Hughes' and his father's positive experiences of Mexican race relations.

James Hughes was so determined to live in a place he was considered just another citizen that he abandoned his wife and son for life in Mexico City and Toluca.[83] Langston loved Mexico, despite his hatred of his father. He was fluent in Spanish and inspired by the anti-European movement in the arts he first encountered there and later across the Spanish-speaking Americas.[84] Furthermore, Hughes used the combination of his ambiguous and ethnically mixed heritage and Spanish fluency to "pass" at least twice in his youth, first buying a train ticket north from his first visit to his father's home in 1919,[85] and again to secure a dorm assignment at Columbia University in 1921. Despite, as a teenager, briefly considering following his father's example and staying in Mexico to escape Jim Crow oppression, Langston Hughes was determined to return to the United States and to the "pure" experience of blackness he pursued his entire life.[86] Still, his happy memories of escaping American white-supremacy are directly reflected in the *Harvest* depiction of its Mexican characters as uniquely without racial animus.

Anti-black prejudice by the white workers is depicted directly in four exchanges during the first act, each of which involves members of the Dobbs family. In the first and second the matriarch, Marty, positions black workers as competition, first complaining

[82] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 119-121.
[83] Rampersad, 11.
[84] Rampersad, 47.
[85] Rampersad, 35.
[86] Rampersad, 48.

that her family "can't get ahead o' the darkies,"[87] and subsequently claiming that Ada Walker's superior cotton picking skill means that "the Niggers'll be stealing the bread out uv our children's mouths."[88] Later this fear of the black Other briefly threatens to derail unionization efforts, as Adam Dobbs resists allowing black membership before being overruled by Mack. This promise of integrated membership is all the evidence Buster needs to declare it "a good union."[89] Finally, Adam and Marty's son Shorty, a radical sympathizer from his first entrance, intervenes in the attack on Ada by foreman and deputies during mass eviction from the Tilden farm. Marty objects to him "stopping to fight over niggers," but Shorty's declaration that the Walkers union membership is the only identifier of significance provides evidence for Ada – and any black audience members wary of organizing with majority white radical groups in case "all they want you in de union for is to strike and git yo' haid broke, and then they'll put you out"[90] – that "some white folks's alright."[91]

Historical anti-Mexican attitudes among black workers are demonstrated by Buster's desire to "leave dat fighting to dem greasers."[92] He is immediately condemned for the slur and his desire to take advantage of Mexican strikers, just as Ada fears white strikers will take advantage of them. This marks a sharp contrast with the Dobbs family, who all, including Shorty, insult and mock the Mexican workers. Despite this casual cruelty, at least Marty and Shorty were willing to give the Rodriguez family gasoline when they ran out on the side of the road in the first scene. This thin thread of kindness

[87] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 77.
[88] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 80.
[89] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 86.
[90] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 104.
[91] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 110.
[92] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 97.

develops into a shared sense of identity between Shorty and Jose, as both emerge as leaders among the striking pickers. This shared dynamic does not include Buster, however. The line between Mexican and white is rendered permeable, but the line between those two and black remains intact due to Buster's failure to develop as a "transformed worker." This failure is "a shift from Hughes's depiction of black male laborers in *Scottsboro Limited* and *Angelo Herndon Jones*," both of which explicitly concern the development of class consciousness by black working men.[93] While possibly a factor of the script's incomplete status, this fact marks, perhaps more than any other element, that *Harvest* is intended for white, radical audiences rather than black, politically mixed ones.

As a result, the impact of the growers' racism is primarily demonstrated through the dehumanization of the Mexican migrant workers. Most of the anti-black prejudice on the part of the Capitalists and their representatives is indirectly referenced through threats of lynching (prototypically, though not exclusively, an act of violence by white mobs against black victims), and membership in the KKK. Instead the growers focus their rage against Mexican workers, whom they accurately view as their principal labor force. To the land owners, the Mexicans are animals, able to live on beans and undeserving of running water. Indeed, the strikers' demand for clean water to curb disease is met with responses including "Who the hell told Mexicans about running water?" and "they want a privy and there's ten thousand acres of land!"[94] The summation of the racial dynamic of both the historical event and the fictionalized strike in the play is Bud Peterson's "fiery and demagogic speech":

[93] McLaren, 50.
[94] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 93.

> …and in all the years I lived in this state, men, I ain't never seen the time before when a dirty bunch of Mexicans would rare up on their hind legs and defy a white man…That's what they're doing today…four thousand strong, in league with alien agitators, plotting and planning to tear down our government and that flag up there…to ruin our crop, and reduce the good farmers and honest business men of this state to nothing! That's their game![95]

This loathing of "a gang of aliens who should never have come into this country"[96] provides justification for violent reprisal, independent of profit concerns, overdetermining the motivation of the white Capitalists and demonstrating to Theatre Union audiences that not all consideration of American racism could be subsumed into a framework of classist exploitation.

Even as Hughes defined space for a conversation on racial oppression within material principally devoted to the issue of workers' rights, the choice to use the living newspaper form kept *Harvest* firmly rooted within proletarian culture. The Communist history and meaning of the living newspaper in the United States has been distorted through the form's association with the Federal Theatre Project. Project Director Hallie Flanagan tried, in her autobiography *Arena,* to retroactively create a history of the living newspaper entirely disconnected from Moscow, boldly claiming that it borrowed "from Aristophanes, from the Commedia dell'Arte, from Shakespearean soliloquy, from the pantomime of Mei Lan Fang…it is as American as Walt Disney, the March of Time, and the *Congressional Record*, to all of which American institutions it is indebted."[97] However, even she could not entirely deny the radical history of the form, not even while

[95] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 124.
[96] Hughes, Winter, and Hawkins, 125.
[97] Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 70.

writing a book specifically intended to serve as her defense against Congressional red-baiting. As a result, Flanagan begrudgingly concedes "occasional reference to the Volksbühne and the Blue Blouses" in the development of the living newspaper, but that is all.[98]

In truth, as Flanagan well knew, the living newspaper was a definitively Soviet practice, having studied the form during her travels in the Soviet Union. Laura Browder, granddaughter of the Depression era CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder, summarizes the development of the form, from its humble beginnings to its final, fully realized nature:

> Literate members of Soviet workers' clubs would get on the stage and read newspaper articles to their illiterate comrades. It was not long, however, before these performances evolved into something much more elaborate: Readers would wear masks, change costumes, shout slogans into megaphones. Eventually, songs, acrobatics, film clips, and dance were incorporated into the Living Newspapers. In their most developed form, they incorporated mass spectacles – usually reenactments of recent historical events – literary montages of poetry, slogans, and documents; theatrical trials, staged statistics, and mass declamations.[99]

While the practice of enacting current and historical events was not invented by the Soviet performers, they did give the international Communist community this particular form, as well as a new term to describe what they were doing. The Russian *zhivaia gazeta*

[98] Flanagan, 70.
[99] Laura Browder, *Rousing the Nation: Radical Culture in Depression America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 119-120.

(literally "living newspaper") is the direct source for both the name and the practice that took hold in the United States.[100]

The Moscow School of Journalism formed a living newspaper company in the early 1920s, named the Blue Blouse (*Siniaia bluza*) after the shirts performers wore. Their performance style and company name quickly became the national standard, and Blue Blouse and living newspaper became synonyms.[101] Prior to the Federal Theatre Project's adopting and popularizing the living newspaper, the form entered the United States by two primary vectors. The first was via the John Reed clubs, which embraced living newspaper as a means of spreading their message to audiences across the United States. The second was under direct guidance of the Comintern (Communist International), via the opening of an American Mezhrabpom office, under the translated name of "Workers' International Relief," or WIR.[102] Finally, Americans who traveled to the Soviet Union and brought back word of the dynamic theatrical experiments ongoing there also helped spread enthusiasm for the living newspaper form.

Langston Hughes is unusual in having experience with all three modes of promotion of the American Blue Blouse. He was a John Reed Club member from 1931.[103] His trip to the Soviet Union was sponsored by Mezhrabpom, for a Mezhrabpom produced film, giving him direct contact with the Comintern's cultural wing, a connection that deepened after he joined the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.[104] He visited theaters across Moscow ranging in style from the Moscow Art

[100] Lynn Mally, "The Americanization of the Soviet Living Newspaper," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* no. 1903 (February 2008), 5.
[101] Mally, "The Americanization," 5.
[102] Mally, "The Americanization," 9-10.
[103] Rampersad, 215.
[104] Rampersad, 270.

Theater to the experimental Krasni Presnia under the direction of Nikolai Okhlopkov, as well as the Kamery, the Vakhtangov, and the Meyerhold companies. He witnessed the massive May Day parade "from a privileged position not more than a hundred yards from the reviewing stand and Stalin, Molotov, Kalinin, and Voroshilov."[105] Finally, he was able to see theater from across the Communist world when the Workers' Theaters International Olympiad brought hundreds of artists to Moscow in the spring of 1933.[106]

Hughes' decision to use the living newspaper format for *Harvest* was itself a statement, positioning him at the cutting edge of radical theater development in the United States and revealing his unusually extensive knowledge of and experience with Soviet theatrical forms. While the Federal Theatre Project would make the living newspaper a core part of its relief efforts, thoroughly Americanizing the form in the process, *Harvest* was completed nearly a year before Hallie Flanagan was even invited to Washington to "talk about the unemployed actors" in a May 16, 1935 phone call with Jacob Baker, one of the five assistants to Works Progress Administration head Harry Hopkins.[107]

If *Harvest* had been staged in 1934, as Lieber attempted to arrange on behalf of Hughes and Winter, it would have served as an important and likely influential step in the development of the living theater form in the United States. The tragic ending, with the death of Communist convert and Jennie's potential love interest Jose Rodriguez, presages the Federal Theatre living newspaper variation's single topic focus and "more dignified tone…used first to expose the outrages of American history and, later, as a consensus building tool," and moves away from the "wackiness" of the satirically comedic Soviet

[105] Rampersad, 270.
[106] Rampersad, 271.
[107] Flanagan, 7.

mode.[108] Indeed its innovative nature contributed to the rejection of the script by Theatre Union; apart from a failed attempt to introduce Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater to New York by staging *Mother* in 1935, the company stuck to the conventional melodrama form to address radical topics, rather than trying "to educate audiences in a new theatrical language."[109] Still, even unproduced and unpublished the script reveals that Hughes had abandoned his hesitancy over committing to the Communist cause and audiences, and had embraced orthodox form and topic in his radical drama. Even in his orthodoxy, however, he chose style and content that served his needs as both artist and activist.

Knowledge and memory are inextricably linked to narrative; without story to make facts meaningful, they are very difficult for the mind to access and use. Narrative is doubly useful for the activist, as it allows cause to be clarified into a call for action that will influence audiences as long as they remember. The need to impel emotional engagement through story is particularly strong when the audience is blinded to oppression by privilege or is actively hostile due to cultural bias. The confusing nature of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union-led San Joaquin Valley cotton pickers' strike, combined with an official narrative supporting the growers' position, made widespread sympathy with the strikers unlikely. Hughes and Winter used *Harvest* to create a competing narrative, one of heroic action by the impoverished, primarily minority strikers against the systematic abuses of the growers, and by doing so to raise support for the strikers' cause.

[108] Browder, 120.
[109] Colette A. Hyman "Politics Meet Popular Entertainment in the Workers' Theater of the 1930s," in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, edited by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1996), 211.

Also shaping this living newspaper was the consistent search for identity undergirding the art of Langston Hughes, a quest for an articulation of self that completed the ongoing process of self-definition. The shifts in his represented self, as presented in his writings, mark his changes of genre and form, message and ideology, and audiences he imagined for his work. Hughes was inspired by the theatre he had seen in his long tour of the Soviet Union, both for its political engagement and its dramatic destabilization of form. Once back in the United States he sought to use this model to create new work, and in doing so claim the status of artist as activist that he coveted in the moment. *Harvest* was only the beginning of that process. When the violence in Carmel led to the collapse of the project, Hughes immediately pivoted to another fact based play he had initially started researching during his year under the patronage of Noel Sullivan: *Angelo Herndon Jones*.

CHAPTER 3:
SPREADING THE GOOD WORD

Hughes' orthodox Communist plays, *Harvest* and *Angelo Herndon Jones*, function as a balanced set, each challenging the cultural biases and limitations of one of the two groups to which Hughes owed allegiance. *Harvest*, co-written with Ella Winter, a white woman and a fellow member of the John Reed Club, was intended for the very white and very radical audiences at Theatre Union, and, as such, sets out to challenge the latent racism tainting the left wing, despite the Communist Party's official call for full racial equality. *Angelo Herndon Jones* takes the reverse tack; it was written for politically mixed audiences of Afro-Americans, such as the one supporting Russell and Rowena Jelliffe's Gilpin Players at Cleveland, Ohio's Karamu House theater, and serves as an introduction to and argument for Communist philosophy and organizing, rather than a call to action for an already converted audience. Taken together, the two plays demonstrate how Hughes negotiated his continuing anti-racism work within the context of the radical movement, but they also demonstrate the depth of his commitment to placing his developing proletarian identity in the primary position within his public and playwriting personae.

The Angelo Herndon case is now all but forgotten, a footnote in the jurisprudence of civil rights law. In that context it is remembered for the 1937 United States Supreme Court decision for *Herndon v. Lowry*, in which the Court determined that the "clear and present danger" test, originally proposed by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in his opinion for the 1919 case *Schenck v. United States*, was the appropriate measure for laws

restricting freedom of speech, rather than the previous doctrine of "dangerous tendency."[1] However, at the time, the unjust persecution of Angelo Herndon was a *cause célèbre* for the radical left. Herndon was named with the Scottsboro Nine as a victim of racist Southern Justice and legal lynching, and with radical organizer Tom Mooney as a prisoner of conscious and a victim of the politicized criminal courts.

Langston Hughes was indirectly involved with the Herndon case from the beginning through his work with the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, but his interest did not end there.[2] In mid June, 1934, faced with spreading outcry over the case, the state of Georgia offered bail at the prohibitive amount of fifteen thousand dollars. In response left-wing and Afro-American newspapers nationwide participated in a mass drive to raise the necessary amount, finally resulting in Herndon's release on August 3.[3] The fundraising campaign resulted in an upwelling of interest in Angelo Herndon in both black and radical communities, and coincided with the violent ending of Hughes and Winter's work on *Harvest*. Sometime that summer, before he left for Reno and possibly even before Herndon was freed, Hughes started actively researching the case for an Angelo Herndon play.[4]

Before this effort could come to fruition, life intervened in the form of Hughes' father's death. Paying for the trip with money borrowed from Noel Sullivan, his former agent Blanche Knopf, and his paternal uncle John Hughes, Langston left for Mexico.[5] Any hopes he had of inheriting his way out of his persistent money troubles were soon

[1] *Herndon v. Lowry*, 301 U.S. 242 (1937).
[2] Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from 1930-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 57-58.
[3] Charles H. Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case and Southern Justice* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 115-116.
[4] Berry, 210.
[5] Rampersad, 300.

dashed, however; James Hughes left his entire estate – what was left of it after long years of expensive medical treatments for the effects of a severe stroke in 1922 – to his friends the Patiño sisters, Fela, Cuca, and Dolores.[6] Though the women offered to divide everything four ways so that James' son could have an inheritance, Langston Hughes refused to accept anything other than a portion of the cash in his father's bank account at the time of his death. Furthermore, unwilling to return to the United States until he had raised the money necessary to repay his loans, Hughes remained in Mexico until May, 1935.[7] From there he went to Los Angeles for a summer of writing children's stories – which would never be published – with Arna Bontemps.[8] Next he took a very slow trip east, stopping to visit friends and family along the way, and finally arriving in New York in late September, 1935.[9] Only then did he make the shocking discovery that his first play, *Mulatto*, was scheduled for an October opening on Broadway, necessitating a prolonged stay in the city.[10]

Angelo Herndon was also in New York City that autumn, out on bail and waiting for the United States Supreme Court to decide his fate. Hughes reports meeting Herndon for the first time during the period of Herndon's parole, but does not offer further detail on the circumstances.[11] Indeed, no account of the relationship between the two men exists in the surviving record, but small details in Hughes' autobiographical writing hint that they shared a deep friendship. Comparing the timelines of their lives, it is unlikely the two men met prior to autumn of 1935. Herndon spent much of that year on a multi-state

[6] Rampersad, 301.
[7] Berry, 227.
[8] Berry, 235.
[9] Berry, 238-240.
[10] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 310.
[11] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 373.

speaking tour with Ida Norris, the mother of Scottsboro defendant Clarence Norris, while Hughes was either out of the country or in self-imposed isolation. As a result, even if the men managed to cross paths during their travels, their friendship must have been forged during that shared October in New York City.

Their relationship continued at least into the early 1940s, when Hughes' work was published in the short lived, Harlem based *Negro Quarterly*, a joint project of Angelo Herndon and Ralph Ellison.[12] In 1944, however, Angelo Herndon, the radical hero nicknamed America's "Young Dimitroff," was expelled from the Communist Party for promotion of "black nationalism."[13] Herndon, already frustrated with racism in the CPUSA and, like many radicals including Hughes, disturbed by wartime and post-war revelations about the true nature of the Soviet Union, left the east coast and politics to live out the rest of his life in an undisclosed Midwestern city working as an insurance salesman and refusing to grant any interviews about his revolutionary youth.[14] While evidence of their entire friendship is fragmentary, nothing in the existing documents indicates whether Hughes and Herndon remained in contact after Herndon left the Party and disavowed his past. His friendship with Herndon, however long it lasted, had a strong impact on Hughes. It is even documented in Hughes' 1956 *I Wonder as I Wander*, despite his systematic efforts to erase any mention of his sympathies to Communism in his autobiography.

Hughes provides a brief description of the "attempting to incite insurrection" case against Herndon before shifting into a much longer account of his attempt to meet up

[12] John Hammond Moore, "The Angelo Herndon Case, 1932-1937," *Phylon* 32, no. 1 (First Quarter, 1971), 61.
[13] Rebecca N. Hill, *Men, Mobs, and the Law: Anti-Lynching and Labor Defense in U.S. Radical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 236.
[14] Moore, 61.

with Angelo's older brother Milton in 1937. Hughes was serving as a reporter covering the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American*. Milton Herndon was Sergeant and Section Leader for the majority Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, fighting on the side of the Republican Army. Unfortunately Milton had been killed in combat only a few days prior to Hughes' arrival, dying a hero in the act of rescuing a white soldier under his command. Still, Hughes stayed on the battlefield for long hours, until the witnesses to Milton's death could be found, believing "the least I could do when I got back home…would be to tell Angelo how his brother died."[15] Though he had witnessed other horrors during his travels through war torn Spain, the uniquely traumatic experience of reporting on the death of his friend's brother inspired Hughes to write what Arnold Rampersad describes as "perhaps his finest dispatch from Spain,"[16] and it resonated deeply enough to warrant an extended passage in a book written almost two decades later.

Hughes was fascinated by Angelo Herndon, the younger radical who had been forced by poverty to live the life of "authentic blackness" that Hughes feared he himself did not, and who had proved his Communist bona fides through his successful organization of an interracial workers' protest in Georgia. In short, Herndon had legitimate claim to the identity Hughes had been flirting with through his association with the California agricultural strikers. Furthermore, their strong similarities of temperament and echoing elements of biography meant that for Hughes, Angelo Herndon provided a vivid image of another possible path Hughes could have traveled, and could still choose to follow should he decide to continue on the route he started in Carmel. Thus, when he

[15] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 373.
[16] Rampersad, 353.

casts Herndon as the coming hero in *Angelo Herndon Jones*, Hughes is granting both his friend and himself with the power to change society.

This declaration of agency in the face of the oppressive reality of American racism, both in the Jim Crow South and the supposedly more liberal North, was in line with the messages of power and responsibility both young Langston and young Angelo learned from their families while growing up. On the first day of February, 1902, James Mercer Langston Hughes was born into an exceptional family, his legacy of resistance even built into his name. Langston was his mother Caroline's maiden name. Her father, Charles Langston, was a minor politician and his brother, John Mercer Langston, was a far more successful one: the first black American to win a popular election for public office.[17] Hughes was raised primarily by his grandmother, Mary Langston, widow of Harpers Ferry raider Lewis Leary. She would wrap Langston in the "blood-stained, bullet riddled shawl"[18] Leary had died wearing, and preach messages of resistance to her grandson; long years later Hughes would remember that "through my grandmother's stories always life moved, moved heroically towards an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying."[19]

Hughes' personal gifts further heightened the expectation that he would follow in the family's remarkable history of college education, political action, and community service. As Rampersad explains, Hughes was:

> Born into a relationship with his family's past, into a relationship with history, so intimate as to be almost sensual. Much was expected by his ancestors. They demanded, from the moment his elders recognized the boy's unusual intelligence

[17] Rampersad, 7.
[18] Rampersad, 6.
[19] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 17.

> and began to talk to him about Duty and The Race, that he had a messianic obligation to the Afro-American people, and through them to America.[20]

Between his personal sense of right and the expectations of his generations of heroic forbearers, Hughes' hatred of injustice was formed long before his politics turned to the left, and even before he left school. When his seventh grade teacher at the racially integrated Central School decided to segregate her classroom, Langston fought back. He printed cards reading "JIM CROW ROW" and "defiantly propped one on each black child's desk." The school initially responded by expelling him for making trouble, only to be forced into reversing that decision when the parents of the segregated students came to complain. As Rampersad summarizes, "Finally he was reinstated. But the idea of Jim Crow seating was dropped."[21]

Unlike Hughes, Herndon did not grow up surrounded by memories and relics of heroic freedom fighters. Eugene Angelo Braxton Herndon was born on May 6, 1913 in Wyoming, Ohio, the fifth of seven children and only three generations removed from slavery.[22] His family was extremely poor. In 1919 Hilliard and Leroy, Herndon's oldest two brothers, were sent away to live with relatives in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed.[23] Despite the hardship, Herndon's parents prioritized education for their children and did their best to keep each child in school for as long as possible.[24] Furthermore, despite the strictly religious household, the children were not taught to turn the other cheek in the face of oppression; oppressors were to be fought immediately with any tactic – including physical resistance – that worked.

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[20] Rampersad, 4.
[21] Rampersad, 17.
[22] Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 6.
[23] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 12.
[24] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 29.

While Mary Langston's lessons on resistance were passed along indirectly through stories of unrelenting heroes, Harriet Herndon took a far more direct tack. In his 1937 autobiography *Let Me Live*, Herndon recounts a vivid story of those childhood lessons in resisting subjugation. He had complained to his mother about a group of white boys who regularly threw rocks at him as he walked home from school, expecting her to respond with sympathy for his troubles. Instead, his "mother's concern gave way to grimness. Her eyes flashed fire."[25] She informed "Gelo" that he should not even bother returning home if he were to let another attack pass without fighting back, and even informed the other victims' parents of their sons' flight from their tormenters, so all could be punished for cowardice. Only after Angelo and his friends joined together and collectively delivered a brutal beating to their white bullies was his mother satisfied that he had acted correctly, though he was badly injured in the resulting fight.[26] This formative experience served as an influential lesson on the power of organization in the face of overwhelming odds, and on the value of resistance over submission to injustice.

In addition to sharing a family history of resistance, both Hughes and Herndon were shaped by their early experiences of religion, though in diametrically opposed ways. In 1922 Herndon's maternal uncle Jeremiah, following the traditional occupation for men in his mother's family, "was ordained as minister in the Baptist Church."[27] Within the poor, black, and rural society of his childhood, constrained as it was by law and custom, preachers were men of relative wealth and importance. The boy was taken by his mother to hear his uncle's first official sermon. An old school fire and brimstone performer, the Reverend Braxton soon had the crowd and the child in sway:

[25] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 17.
[26] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 17-18.
[27] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 20.

> At the close of the sermon the whole congregation broke out into cries and sobs. Everyone was swept away by religious fervor. Even I felt my excitement mounting. My heart beat violently. Women began to scream and to weep out loud…I too began to cry. I said to my mother: "I've got religion in me."[28]

The new pastor baptized his enraptured nephew, along with several other new converts, that afternoon, in a pool out in the churchyard.[29] In that moment nine year old Angelo thought he had found his path for life.

For the first few years following his rapturous conversion the boy dedicated himself both to living what he considered to be a Christian life and to practicing for his planned role as a future minister. Preaching was a logical choice of profession for Herndon, due to native skill as much as family tradition. Like Hughes, he was extremely intelligent and learned quickly. Even as a child he was both well read and a skilled speaker, trained in the recitation of verse and prose. This was due largely to the efforts of his first teacher, Mrs. Williams, who introduced him to great literature and taught him elocution.[30] While his older self condemned the child for desiring the prosperity and power that went with the position, it is clear that Herndon did not give up his dreams of creating a life of significance. It was just the markers he valued that changed.

For Hughes, unlike for Herndon, religion did not offer release from the troubles of his childhood, but rather increased the profound sense of isolation he struggled with his entire life. His grandmother was a woman of deep faith, but did not attend church during the years Langston lived with her. The integrated city of her youth had segregated, and, unwilling to attend a church that did not recognize her full humanity, Mary Langston

[28] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 21-22.
[29] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 23.
[30] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 13.

worshipped at home and kept young Langston at home with her.[31] Hughes' introduction to the communal experience of religion was chiefly at the hands of family friend "Auntie" Reed. Indeed, Hughes, in his first autobiography *The Big Sea*, describes the moment he was "saved from sin" as a definitive one in his life. After his grandmother, Mary Langston, died in March, 1915, Langston moved in with Mary and James W. Reed. James Reed was not a religious man, a fact Hughes credits for causing him "to like both Christians and sinners equally well."[32] Mary Reed, however, was determined to see the boy converted.

He had not been living with her long when Auntie Reed's church hosted a major revival. She made sure to coach him ahead of time, so he would know what to expect. "My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened inside!...She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul."[33] Initially he watched as the other youth present were baptized, waiting expectantly to experience the arrival of Jesus into his life. Then, as hours passed and the congregation prayed and begged for him to accept their faith and his beloved Aunt exhorted him to find religion, he desperately did the only thing he could think of, and lied:

> Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either…God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save

[31] Rampersad, 13.
[32] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 18.
[33] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 19.

further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.[34]

The experience was traumatic rather than enlightening. "That night, for the last time in my life but one…I cried," Hughes writes of the experience. His Aunt heard him, and credited the tears to the joy of his conversion. "But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied," he explained, "that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me."[35] While Hughes remained a reluctant atheist, afraid that his lack of religion was yet another way that he failed to achieve "true blackness," he never stopped admiring the beauty and ecstasy of Afro-American worship traditions or using those traditions to shape his works. This includes *Angelo Herndon Jones,* which features Herndon's offstage speech echoing the rhythms and tempos of a pastor preaching, just as Angelo had practiced as a child.

While Herndon did not denounce his earlier religion until his conversion to Communism, the accumulated tragedies of his life drove him away from his path to the pulpit. Unfortunately his period of innocence was extremely brief; just a few months after Angelo's baptism Paul Herndon, Angelo's father, "took ill with miner's pneumonia."[36] His prolonged illness left the family on the brink of starvation. Despite his father's deathbed command that he "Get education,"[37] Herndon dropped out of school at thirteen, moved to Lexington, Kentucky with his sixteen year old brother Leo, and started working

[34] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 20.
[35] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 21.
[36] Herndon, *Let Me Live,* 26.
[37] Herndon, *Let Me Live,* 29.

in the mines.[38] The work was physically excruciating and the conditions unsafe and inhumane. Young workers crippled or killed on the job were easily replaced, so the mine owners and managers had no interest in protecting the children in their care. This experience with the most brutal aspects of Capitalism set the young man on his path to becoming a symbol of Afro-American Communism throughout the United States as well as in Hughes' play *Angelo Herndon Jones*.

Herndon's *Let Me Live* is not an unbiased account; it was written explicitly to gain support for Herndon and the International Defense League prior to the Supreme Court decision on *Herndon v. Lowry*, and, as such, self-consciously serves as a rationale for Herndon's political activism. However, the propagandist intent of the book does not negate the fact that his experiences in Kentucky shocked and devastated him. Despite the exigencies of his family's situation, his parents had done all they could to protect their children from life's harshest realities. In the Lexington mines young Angelo finally encountered the unvarnished reality of life as a disempowered, impoverished black youth in 1920s Capitalist, white supremacist America. Those same harsh lessons were repeated with every new atrocity at every new job site, until his second conversion at seventeen.

Hughes' determination to finish his education and support himself through writing only narrowly protected him from similar experiences as an unskilled, unprotected worker:

> My mother, as a great many poor mothers do, seemed to have the fixed idea that a son is born for the sole purpose of taking care of his parents as soon as possible. Even while I was still in high school, whenever my amiable but unpredictable

[38] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 38-39.

> stepfather would wander away, my mother would suggest I quit school and get a job to help her.[39]

In Herndon's tragic background, revolutionary activism, and political persecution Hughes saw mirrored paths he might have taken had he agreed to drop out of school to support his mother, and paths he might yet take if he decided to risk returning to the direct involvement in radical politics he experimented with in California, including the one towards incarceration or lynching. As such, his decision to write *Angelo Herndon Jones* must be seen as more than an attempt to win the fifty dollar prize offered by *New Theatre* magazine for the best play about the Angelo Herndon trial.[40] Furthermore, the play contest was announced in July, 1935, and while Hughes' script was not finished until the end of that year, his research in Carmel establishes his interest in writing a piece on Herndon as starting the year before.

While Herndon is now a mostly unknown figure, in 1935 Hughes could safely assume his audience would be familiar with the basic details. Unlike the Scottsboro boys, Herndon was an avowed Communist when he was arrested. His passionate embrace of Christianity had died in the face of the brutality he experienced as a child laborer, and a black child laborer at that:

> I no longer could find explanation and consolation in the imitation of Christ, my Saviour. I turned from it with contempt and indignation, for I realized now that it was only designed as a trap and as a distraction from the true realities of our lives. I now made a solemn resolve with all the ardor of my youthful spirit that no

[39] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 308.
[40] McLaren, 40.

> longer would I peacefully submit to the persecution and the exploitation of my people.[41]

Instead, he embraced the new Truth he discovered "on a sultry evening in June, 1930."[42] Herndon and an unnamed friend were walking home from work when they found a handbill printed by the Communist Unemployed Council, calling for black and white workers in Birmingham to attend a meeting later that day. Speaking were Frank Williams, a white man and local Council organizer, and John Lindley, a black steel worker for Ensley Steel Mills under the auspices of Herndon's employer, the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.[43] As he sat – having been offered a chair by a white man for the first time in his life – he was emotionally transported.

The experience was ecstatic and irrational, for all that subsequent education and action hardened his resolve. Herndon recognizes this, comparing the experience to his baptism:

> The emotional motivation in both cases was identical, but what a difference in their nature and their aim! The change of my viewpoint was almost fabulous, emerging from the urge to escape the cruelties of life in religious abstractions into healthy, vigorous and realistic recognition that life on earth, which was so full of struggle and tears for the poor, could be changed by the intelligent and organized will of the workers.[44]

Unlike Hughes, whose engagement with the radical left, although sincere, was also shaped by self-interested need for paying audiences, Herndon rebuilt his life around Party

[41] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 70.
[42] Herndon *Let Me Live*, 73.
[43] Herndon *Let Me Live*, 75-77.
[44] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 78.

and cause. It was on orders of the Unemployed Council that he moved to Atlanta in September, 1931, to work as a local organizer. Initially he attracted little notice. Then, in mid-June, 1932, the state of Georgia closed its relief stations.[45] The action was one of desperation, as the interacting effects of the Great Depression left the government unable to pay its bills:

> As industrial products continued to decline, unemployment steadily rose. Prices of agricultural products remained depressed, and mounting bank failures struck at the very basis of the country's financial system…. While the shrinking economy reduced the tax base and income of most municipalities, growing numbers of unemployed workers demanded additional public assistance.[46]

Still, for the masses dependant on relief to survive – over twenty thousand people in the city of Atlanta alone – the situation was dire.

Adding insult to injury, on June 26 Commissioner Walter C. Hendrix of Fulton County, where Atlanta is located, informed the *Atlanta Constitution* that he did not believe there was any significant hunger in the city, and issued a general challenge for anyone claiming otherwise to produce evidence to that effect.[47] Angelo Herndon and the other few members of the Unemployed Council were happy to oblige. After four days of tireless work to organize the event, at ten o'clock in the morning of June 30 Herndon led a mixed race crowd of approximately one thousand people in a march on the county courthouse, demanding restoration of the cancelled benefits. Faced with a crowd too large to disperse, the Board of Commissioners selected a small delegation of white men to represent the gathered crowd and make their case for aid. The effort was successful;

[45] Moore, 60.
[46] Martin, 1.
[47] Martin, 4.

within twenty-four hours Hendrix and the other commissioners managed to find six thousand dollars available for immediate distribution.[48] To the hungry unemployed it seemed the crisis had been averted.

The local government, however, was deeply disturbed by the display of interracial, class-based organizing. The Unemployed Council march was "purportedly the biggest biracial demonstration in the South in several decades," and led by an avowed Communist at that.[49] Furthermore, in the spring of 1930 a previous Red Scare resulted in the arrest of two groups of radicals, collectively known as the Atlanta Six: in March M. H. Powers and Joe Carr, both white men, and in May a group of two black men, Herbert Newton and Henry Storey, and two white women, Mary Dalton and Ann Burlak.[50] In their panic over the possibility of growing support for leftwing activism, the commissioners utterly misunderstood what they had witnessed. The size of the crowd was not actually evidence of an extensive, highly active, and integrated Communist organization in the city. It was instead a sign of the intense desperation of the marchers, so extreme that they were willing to temporarily follow "the leadership of a Red, Yankee black boy."[51] Still, the fact that a radical organization had any success with interracial organizing in Atlanta was a terrifying threat to those in power, and the mistaken assumption that the thousand protestors were all at least potential Communist converts elevated the situation from threat to emergency. Someone had to be punished, if only to prevent such a thing from happening again.

[48] Martin, 5-6.
[49] Martin, 6.
[50] Maryan Soliman, "Inciting Free Speech and Racial Equality: The Communist Party and Georgia's Insurrection Statute in the 1930s" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2014), 4-5.
[51] Moore, 62.

The distributed fliers announcing the courthouse protest provided an address for anyone inspired to reach out to the Unemployed Council for further information. Aware of anti-Red sentiment, the local office had been cautious enough to use a post office box, number 339, for this purpose, but the police simply responded by placing a constant watch over it. On the evening of July 11 Herndon stopped by to pick up his mail, only to be intercepted by Detective John Chester and Detective Frank B. Watson "on suspicion." Despite the eventual charge of conspiracy to commit insurrection, the police ledger entry marking his arrest reveals what the arresting officers considered to be his real crime: "across from his name was scribbled one damning word – 'C-O-M-M-U-N-I-S-T.' The strange case of Angelo Herndon versus the state of Georgia had begun."[52]

For eleven days Herndon was held without charges or bail. Only after Fulton County Superior Court Judge Virlyn E. Moore finally demanded that he either be charged or released did prosecutors bother to invent justification for the flagrantly illegal imprisonment of the young radical. As membership in the Communist Party was not actually against the law, the Grand Jury indicted Herndon for "attempting to incite insurrection, a capital crime."[53] Significantly, the date of this alleged action was July 16, while he was in jail. No actual action of any kind was associated with this charge. The entirety of the case presented against him at his January, 1933 trial was that he owned a number of books and pamphlets – stolen from his room without a warrant – related to Communism.[54] Indeed, the documents presented as "proof" of his non-existent crime included such revolutionary tracts as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

[52] Martin, 7.
[53] Martin, 7.
[54] Moore, 62-63.

Even his copy of *Red Book Magazine* was entered into evidence, "thrown in for good measure because of the word 'Red' in it."[55]

To the Atlanta jury, however, this flimsy evidence of wrongdoing was enough. Or, if they had any doubts of Herndon's Communism, his own testimony changed that:

> I can say this quite clearly, if the State of Georgia and the City of Atlanta think that by locking up Angelo Herndon the question of unemployment will be solved, I say you are deadly wrong. If you really want to do anything about the case, you must go out and indict the social system. I am sure that if you would do this, Angelo Herndon would not be on trial here today, but those who are really guilty of insurrection would be here in my stead.[56]

The jury returned a verdict of guilty in less than two hours, despite the fact that the state had presented no evidence that Herndon had committed any crime, though they did recommend a "merciful" punishment of eighteen to twenty years on a chain gang instead of death.[57] It was the first conviction under the insurrection statute since 1868;[58] the Atlanta Six had already been charged with violating the law, but they had fled the state while on bail rather than risk the Georgia courts.[59]

The insurrection code in Georgia, like similar laws across the American South, was an artifact of slavery, passed in 1833 in response to the Nat Turner rebellion. "Insurrection" in its original legal meaning applied specifically to slave revolt, but the meaning was expanded in 1866 to ensure that it could be wielded as a weapon against the

[55] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 226.
[56] Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 345-346.
[57] Moore, 64.
[58] Martin, 21.
[59] Martin, 25.

newly freed population.[60] Then it was forgotten, until Assistant Solicitor John H. Hudson came across it while trying to find any law that could possibly be used to justify arresting Powers and Carr.[61] The Georgia courts' application of the insurrection laws to radical organizers became a model for other Southern states, and more arrests followed across the region. As he was the first radical convicted based on a former slave statute, Herndon became the national symbol of this form of political imprisonment, and his case the test for the Constitutionality of this application of the archaic law.

The decision on his first appeal to the United States Supreme Court, *Herndon v. Georgia* (1935), was a disappointment. It was denied by a vote of six to three, on grounds the Constitutional questions had not been raised at the correct time.[62] His lawyer appealed for a second chance to present the case, so Herndon was allowed to remain free on bail while the Court decided. In October, 1935, while Herndon was befriending Hughes in New York City, the Supreme Court decided not to allow a rehearing of *Herndon v. Georgia*, and ordered the Communist organizer returned to Fulton Tower Prison.[63] He surrendered to the custody of the state of Georgia on October 28, after spending his last free night at the home of Viola Montgomery, the mother of Scottsboro victim Olen Montgomery.[64]

Meanwhile, back in New York, Hughes was weathering harsh criticism over *Mulatto*, feuding with director Martin Jones, and working to finish his entry for the *New Theatre* Angelo Herndon play competition. The magazine had actually announced two contests in its July, 1935 issue, sponsored in part by the National Committee for the

[60] Martin, 20-21.
[61] Martin, 19.
[62] *Herndon v. State of Georgia*, 295 U.S. 441 (1935).
[63] Martin, 158.
[64] Martin, 160.

Defense of Political Prisoners. The first called for a play addressing any element of Afro-American life, while the second "called for submissions on the Angelo Herndon case and was to be judged by Herndon himself."[65] Both intended to promote accurate theatrical representation of Afro-American life, undistorted by the heavily stylized tropes of the minstrel show tradition. The winners were announced in the February, 1936 issue. White screenwriter Bernard Schoenfeld won the first competition for his play *Trouble with the Angels*, which depicted cast protests of race-based price fixing for tickets to see the Washington, DC production of Marc Connolly's 1930 play, *The Green Pastures*. It was adapted from a Hughes article on the demonstration also published in the July, 1935 issue of *New Theatre*.[66] Langston Hughes won the second with *Angelo Herndon Jones*.

While Hughes had the advantage of a personal relationship with his subject and judge, magazine editor Herbert Kline also identified *Angelo Herndon Jones* as the strongest entry. Kline was not, however, entirely satisfied with the play, comparing it unfavorably to Clifford Odets' recent work *Waiting for Lefty*, which he considered the ideal version of the "workers' hero" form. In his announcement Kline complained that other first rate Afro-American writers had not entered, and harshly rebuked the submissions of white playwrights for "unconsciously" drawing on the same racist depictions that competitors had been warned to avoid.[67] Other disappointments followed the unenthusiastic announcement of his play's award. The fifty dollar prize, money Hughes desperately needed in the lean years at the Depression's height, took so long to arrive that some biographers, including Arnold Rampersad, have concluded that Hughes

[65] McLaren, 40.
[66] McLaren, 41.
[67] McLaren, 41.

never received the award.[68] Others, including Susan Duffy, maintain the money did eventually arrive, serving as an unexpected windfall long after Hughes had given up any hope of seeing his prize.[69] Either way, the failure of the magazine to deliver the money in a timely fashion added injury to the insult of Kline's unenthusiastic recognition of his competition win.

One more disappointment was yet to come. During the spring of 1936, the Gilpin Players at Cleveland's Karamu House performed two of Hughes' plays at the request of founders Russell and Rowena Jelliffe. The productions of *Little Ham* and *When the Jack Hollers* (written with Arna Bontemps), both broad comedies, were financial flops, but they did establish the long running relationship between the Jelliffes' company and Langston Hughes.[70] *Angelo Herndon Jones,* however, was unequivocally rejected. Officially the Gilpin Players refused the script because the women in the troupe were unwilling to play prostitutes,[71] a complaint that echoed past criticisms of his blues and jazz poetry for its unapologetic depiction of the "low down" masses rather than the "respectable" middle class of W.E.B Du Bois' "Talented Tenth." This explanation is flawed, however, in its failure to recognize that the Depression-exhausted audiences attending Karamu shows "wanted to laugh at little Hamlet Jones, not agonize with *Angelo Herndon Jones*," and they definitely did not want to listen to Hughes' argument that Communism was the answer to their agony.[72]

Despite this, Hughes' choice to offer the play to the Jelliffes does not represent a misjudgment on his part; rather, the relatively conservative, Midwestern, majority black

[68] Rampersad, 320.
[69] Duffy, 139.
[70] Berry, 243-244.
[71] McLaren, 40.
[72] Rampersad, 323.

patrons at Karamu House were exactly the audience he intended for this piece. *Angelo Herndon Jones* is structured as an introduction to radical left, for both the characters onstage and for the observers in the seats. Specifically, it is an argument to Afro-American listeners that the Communist Party, embodied in the revolutionary figure of Angelo Herndon, has the answers to the poverty, oppression, and hopelessness that was the result of the Capitalist American system. This "parable for conversion to the cause of leftist labor"[73] marks Hughes' goal of convincing black audiences to support the Communists just as *Harvest* reveals his intention to remind white radicals of the specific concerns and needs of racial minorities within the movement. Together, these two plays reveal the way in which Hughes continued to balance his "Negro" identity with the demands of the "Proletarian" identity he had embraced in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the Jelliffes were not interested in spreading his message, and the Karamu audiences were not interested in hearing it.

The Gilpin Players rejection of the script was doubly disappointing. First, it marked the end of Hughes' efforts to have the play either published or staged; there are no known productions and it was first printed in Susan Duffy's 2000 anthology of Hughes' political drama.[74] Second and more significantly, it marked Hughes' failure to interest Afro-American audiences in his overtly radical, Soviet style drama, just as he had failed to engage the white radicals at Theatre Union in his depiction of the compounding effect of racism on minority workers with *Harvest*. After the dual failures of the two plays, and faced with monetary demands of his mother's cancer, diagnosed in early 1935

[73] Duffy, 146.
[74] Duffy, 139.

while he was still in Mexico,[75] Hughes gave up on attempting to write radical drama in Party-approved forms. His personal commitment to the left remained, and at the same time he set aside orthodox proletarian drama, he continued attending and speaking at Communist associated events nationally and internationally.[76] After the disappointment of the Gilpin Players' rejection of *Angelo Herndon Jones*, Hughes' plays started to "rely heavily on music, lyrics, or poetry to carry the production."[77] Despite this, *Harvest* and *Angelo Herndon Jones* serve as a testament to the Proletkult playwright Hughes tried to become upon his return from the Soviet Union.

Harvest and *Angelo Herndon Jones* differ in more than intended audience. *Harvest* serves to incorporate American racial minorities into the heroic masses, claiming a space within the group identity, with development of individual goals and motivations a secondary concern at most. *Angelo Herndon Jones*, however, takes the other approach available within Soviet-sanctioned literature, and narrows the focus to the singular figure of the "People's Hero." Angelo Herndon, of course, already had claim to that identity through his unwavering faith in the Party throughout his political martyrdom. He is not, however, the protagonist of the play, and only appears onstage as a face on a poster and as the disembodied Voice. With *Angelo Herndon Jones*, Hughes depicts the conversion of the central characters, particularly Buddy Jones, to the cause, providing an example for audiences to follow in doing the same. The title takes his surname to directly set up both Buddy and his coming child, as well as his girlfriend Viola, friend Lank, and others, along with potentially the entire audience, as new "Angelo Herndons," who will help

[75] Rampersad, 305.
[76] Duffy, 146.
[77] Duffy, 146.

create the new American Soviet that Hughes hopes will cure the twin ills of Capitalism and racism in the United States.

The depiction of the rise of the new working class hero, and the positioning of the audience as potential recruits to the become the same, are just part of the reason that *Angelo Herndon Jones* demands comparison with Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*. Both won awards from *New Theatre* magazine, with Odets' award coming almost a full year prior in March, 1935.[78] Both are based in part on real events. Herndon toured extensively, performing speeches similar to the one given by the Voice for audiences made up of out of work young people like Buddy and Lank. The events Odets depicts are loosely based on the 1934 New York City taxi strike, by way of writer Joseph North's article in *New Masses* on April 3, 1934.[79] Both plays are episodic, with individual scenes providing arguments why embracing the radical position is the correct action for the heroes and, by implication, the audience to take. Even the endings are similar; Buddy's embrace of his role as one of the "thousands of Angelo Herndons"[80] predicted by the Voice of Herndon mirrors Agate Keller's choice to take up the mantle of strike leader, replacing the titular Lefty of Odets' play after he is found "behind the car barns with a bullet in his head."[81]

Despite these many similarities, *Angelo Herndon Jones* is not just a reworking of Odets' earlier play. Despite the adulation Odets earned, including from Kline at *New Theatre*, for depicting "individualized and sympathetic characters" within a script "that

[78] Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 104-105.
[79] Richard J. Dozier, "Odets and 'Little Lefty,'" *American Literature* 48, no. 4 (January, 1977), 597.
[80] Langston Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, by Susan Duffy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 159.
[81] Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*, in *Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), 31.

blended the direct exhortation of agit-prop with realism,"[82] *Waiting for Lefty* spends only a few pivotal moments with each character before moving to the next scene of hardship. Each taxi driver serves as protagonist in his own scene before disappearing back into the ensemble, with no subsequent opportunity for development and no arc or change over the course of the action. In Hughes' play, however, the same characters feature throughout the script, allowing for individual character motivation to be explored at greater length. Furthermore, *Angelo Herndon Jones* introduces the central characters before they convert to the radical cause, and then demonstrates the causes of their individual decisions. This forward-facing structure is a sharp contrast with that of Odets' play, as while it ends with the decision to strike, the individual characters' turns leftward have already happened, and are only revealed in flashback. This use of linear time, along with Hughes' narrower focus, on just Buddy, his family, and his friends, makes for a very different play than the iconic *Waiting for Lefty*, even as both plays' use of the absent hero clearly connects the two.

The literary trope of characters waiting for the arrival of a coming, or in the case of Samuel Beckett's 1953 *Waiting for Godot,* not coming, savior has a long history in the Western canon, beginning notably with the book of Revelation. Both Lefty, whose death prevents his arrival, and Herndon, who appears as the Voice, serve as sacred figures who will provide direction for their waiting followers. In the Communist reformation of the Christ figure, however, no one holds exclusive claim to the role of savior, as the coming prophet of the Party does not actually save anyone but instead offers the message that the waiting masses can and should work together to save themselves. Still, *Angelo Herndon Jones* draws on the ecstatic religion that touched Hughes' youth and defined Herndon's,

[82] Levine, 105.

and peoples this fictional stop on Herndon's tour with a cast of sinners waiting for their savior. The action takes place along a hooker stroll, and the characters are fallen women and violent men. These poor souls are the products of a racist, violent culture which is ready and willing to exploit the lives and bodies of black people, and then rationalizes such abuse with the logic that such degraded people deserve or desire no better.

Into this bleak world a sign appears. The set directions call for a literal sign: a poster on the wall between Buddy's and Viola's apartments announcing the imminent arrival of Angelo Herndon.[83] It also serves as a sign from God – a savior is coming soon to rescue the lost and the hopeless of Harlem's underground. Prostitutes Sadie Mae and Lottie are the first to see the poster, by which Herndon is swiftly identified as an impressive man, noticeably different from the local population. Lottie, even before reading the poster, notes the difference: "Look at this hot papa's picture on the wall, Sadie Mae. I wish I had a nice young brown like that for a boy friend."[84] Indeed twenty-two year old Herndon was a strikingly handsome man; slim and light skinned, he may well have caught Hughes' eye when they met New York. Langston Hughes precise sexuality remains the subject of debate, and while biographer Arnold Rampersad maintains Hughes was basically asexual,[85] the queer possibilities of Hughes' sexuality have been considered since Alain Locke and Countee Cullen discussed the possibilities of seducing him in 1923.[86]

While the libidinal possibility of the author's voice sounds behind the character's lines, attention moves rapidly from Herndon's looks to his imminent arrival. Lottie reads

[83] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 148.
[84] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 148.
[85] Rampersad, 20.
[86] Rampersad, 66-67.

the poster to the illiterate Sadie Mae "It say: Mass Meeting Friday. Great Speaker on Negro Rights. Clark Hall."[87] While Herndon's identity and reason for traveling to Harlem are not yet revealed, Hughes could be confident that his audience knew Herndon's significance. Civil Rights activists knew the Angelo Herndon case from the joint protesting and fundraising with the Scottsboro Nine. The leftists, who also saw a cause in the Scottsboro arrests, also knew Herndon was named with Tom Mooney on the United States political prisoner list. Herndon united Hughes' primary two target audiences, making him the ideal "hero of the people" for this play.

As the two women consider Herndon – his looks, and his rally – a new character enters the scene, and with him a new theme. In the cast list he is "Negro Cop" but he identifies himself as "Sweet Papa Big Billy" in the text.[88] He is the first representative of state authority to appear, though he is later joined by a white police officer with multiple lines, other police, various deputies, and detectives. The various officers of the law are the only onstage figures who carry the power of the government, but they serve to represent the entire apparatus of oppression under law as well as the more limited power of the police. Both are corrupt. Billy the Negro Cop makes this immediately clear when he extorts Lottie for a quarter to buy cigarettes.

Sadie Mae is safe from this casual abuse because her boyfriend and pimp, Slug, has her "all fixed up with headquarters."[89] This reiterates that corruption is systemic rather than individual, while also positioning Slug as another exploitive Capitalist, willing and able to manipulate a corrupt system and the worker under his management. Slug profits from Sadie Mae's work without having to expose himself to risk or harm.

[87] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 148.
[88] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 149.
[89] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 149.

Despite her dependence on Slug within the system of sexual capital, Sadie Mae recognizes this dynamic for what it is. In response to Buddy asking if Slug has a job she replies "No, I'm his meal ticket."[90] In this he is like the landlord who appears later in the script to turn Ma Jenkins and her daughter Viola out of their apartment for non-payment of rent, as both landlord and pimp are exploiting the needs of others for easy money. The landlord, with the police, is the direct villain and agent of Capitalist oppression, but the unseen bosses, from the Works Progress Administration bureaucrats for the Workman "C.C.C.ing on S.E.R.A. time"[91] to Slug, are all part of the system and share the indictment.

The link between the work of the prostitutes and the work of the Civilian Conservation Core and State Emergency Relief Administration employees is made explicit by the Workman: when Sadie Mae promises "There ain't no sales-tax on what we got," rather than agreeing that their labor belongs to a separate category from "legitimate" work, the Workman responds "I'll have to tell Roosevelt. He must've overlooked you."[92] Labor, whether the stereotyped and celebrated physical work represented by the hammer and sickle or the sexual work of the streetwalkers, is linked as a common experience, with workers a single class opposed to the bosses, landlords, police, and government, all of which use their labor to grow rich while the workers starve.

Despite the play's primarily dividing characters between workers and bosses, Hughes continues to recognize the myriad ways white supremacy intersects with race to overdetermine the oppression of Afro-American workers, including those performing sexual labor. In order to make a living wage as prostitutes, Lottie and Sadie Mae are

[90] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 151.
[91] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 150.
[92] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 150.

forced to try to attract white Johns while refusing to serve black ones. The white men are able to pay more for their services because they are eligible to be hired for more and better paying jobs, unlike black workers who, like Angelo Herndon and Langston Hughes in their youths, are stuck with physically demanding, dangerous, and low paying jobs when work is available at all. By pointing to the inequality in the sexual marketplace – Lottie is excited when she and Sadie Mae are picked up by two white men as the experience promises to be profitable[93] – Hughes further incorporates the women into the category of "worker," a group from which sex workers have been systematically excluded despite the capitalist dynamics of that system.

Capitalist inequality's effect on the erotic marketplace is not limited to the actual sale and purchase of sex acts, but also impacts non-commercial sexuality. Buddy, the central figure of *Angelo Herndon Jones*, and Viola, his girlfriend, are expecting a child. The pregnancy is unexpected, and it has harsh ramifications for the young couple. After Lottie and Sadie Mae leave with their white Johns, Buddy informs his friend Lank that Viola is pregnant:

> LANK: She is? Why didn't you buy the stuff in time?
>
> BUDDY: I didn't have the dollar, Lank.
>
> LANK: Then why don't you get married?
>
> BUDDY: I ain't got no money for no license.
>
> LANK: Then why don't you live together?
>
> BUDDY: We ain't got no room.[94]

[93] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 151.
[94] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 152.

Financially unable to have prevented the pregnancy or to formalize their bond, Buddy and Viola are forced to negotiate a relationship unsanctioned by the system, thus most of the theoretical supports for families with children will remain beyond their reach. At this point in the text the child appears cursed to another generation of poverty.

Despite Buddy's joblessness and inability to solve the social and economic problem of Viola's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, he is depicted from his first entrance as part of the same category of men as the coming Angelo Herndon: attractive and desirable but not explicitly sexualized, intelligent and engaged in the world, and involved in the activism of the left. Buddy stops beside Sadie Mae and Lottie not to flirt but to read the poster. "So that guy's coming! I want to hear him," Buddy announces.[95] Sadie Mae, ever the professional, makes a half-hearted attempt to catch Buddy's attention, asking Buddy to "hear" her instead, but immediately drops that framework for their interaction once Buddy begins to explain Herndon's history.[96] While Buddy does not get the same excited reaction from either woman that Herndon's photo draws from Lottie, Sadie Mae's affectionate rather than explicit provocation and his relationship with Viola serve to demonstrate his desirability.

Buddy's political engagement is demonstrated when he summarizes the story of Angelo Herndon's legal persecution for Sadie Mae, ensuring any audience members who did not enter the theater knowing the information are still aware of the context:

> BUDDY: He done got white folks and colored folks together right in the middle of the South, Lottie, and that ain't no lie….

[95] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 150.
[96] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 150.

BUDDY: I mean lots of 'em, white and colored, for a good purpose—to get themselves something to eat….

BUDDY: Yes, organized people what was starvin', black and white, and got 'em together….

BUDDY: Went to the City Hall to demand something to eat.[97]

Buddy's storytelling ensures that even those members of the community who do not attend the rally understand that "that boy on the poster was somebody."[98] His depoliticized depiction also positions Herndon as an example to all hungry and impoverished people, not only those sympathetic to the radical left.

While Hughes sets up Buddy, and through him his hero Herndon, as desirable and capable, Ma Jenkins, the voice of the conservative and religious parts of the community, is not so sanguine. Ma Jenkins is openly distressed about the impending birth, which she learns about from the crying Viola: "You and starvation's gonna have a baby, you better say. Buddy Jones ain't a-bearin' nothin'. And he ain't likely to be a-feedin' nothin' neither, a young rascal! So that's why you cryin'? I told you-all to be careful! And you ain't married, neither."[99] By the standards of the Capitalist system, which guide this community even as they destroy it, Buddy is a failure for not beating the rigged job market. Ma Jenkins' other frame of reference, Christianity, also declares Buddy has failed to meet its standards due to his sexual relationship with Viola.

However, the validity of Ma Jenkins' value systems is immediately challenged by Viola, voicing the practical concerns her Christian worldview does not address. "(*Bitterly*) That's all you ever tell anybody – is to be careful. Why can't you tell us how

[97] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 150-151.
[98] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 151.
[99] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 154.

we can get married, how we can get jobs, how we can live, or something useful?"[100] Ma Jenkins' answer, that God will provide, is rejected out of hand. Communism's answer, rebellion against the exploitive system followed by seizure of the means of production, is never explicitly offered. However, following the example of Angelo Herndon, the characters engage in a mass action against the agents of power, demonstrating that at least some of the tactics of class warfare are vital to ensure social justice. Merely waiting for God to provide would create a situation like in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* a wait without end.

Despite Hughes' atheism and the anti-religious aspect of the radical philosophy promoted by the play, the centrality of Christian faith for the Afro-American community that serves as the intended audience required the playwright to avoid direct condemnation of the conservative viewpoint represented by Ma Jenkins. While Buddy and Viola embrace the radical left, Ma Jenkins maintains her faith and ideology to the end, despite the fact that the workers rather than God save her apartment. However, because Hughes does not explicitly state that her religious understanding is incorrect – after all, a sufficiently serpentine divine plan could involve a Communist inspiring a community of laborers to improvise a mass action against the police and landlord – he does not alienate viewers who are not fellow atheists. This allows his message to be read as either radical or community focused depending on the needs of a given audience, avoiding one trap for leftists hoping to influence more conservative individuals.

Despite the sympathetic treatment of Ma Jenkins and those who share her ideology, she is implicitly condemned for her acceptance of the respectability politics of the Capitalist value system and her resulting sense of class superiority above the other

[100] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 154.

workers. Ma Jenkins, before she loses her apartment, is relatively well off compared to those around her. Buddy's friend Lank, after complaining about the price of cigarettes on the Jenkins' block, complains that Bubby "*would* have a gal what lives in a hincty neighborhood."[101] While, as Buddy quickly counters, "There ain't no hincty slums,"[102] Ma Jenkins' apartment is in a slightly nicer area and, as such, the costs, and associated status, are slightly higher. Her false sense of difference is further underlined by her conviction that she, unlike the younger generation, is gainfully employed.

However, Ma Jenkins' status as washerwoman is mostly hypothetical, as she "ain't had but one washin' in two weeks," and the resulting income of seventy-five cents is far less than her cost of living.[103] Meanwhile, Buddy and Lank wake up at five in the morning to walk six miles to the foundry in an attempt to find work, despite knowing "they ain't gonna hire no jigs around here nohow. They just gonna let us starve to death to get rid of us."[104] Viola, after unsuccessfully trying all summer to find work, is desperate enough to consider joining Sadie Mae in Slug's stable of prostitutes, to her mother's horror.[105] All are victims of an unjust system, yet Ma Jenkins' focus on the microscopic distinctions of class and "respectability" between herself and her neighbors blinds her to the possibilities of collective action, even as it saves her home.

The Landlord, who is not given a name or otherwise individualized, is an example of the classical agitprop Capitalist villain, motivated by greed and spite. Interestingly, his race is undefined by the script. His dialect, like that of the detectives, contains non-standard words such as "ain't" and "gonna," unlike the lines of the characters specifically

[101] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 152.
[102] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 152.
[103] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 153.
[104] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 152-153.
[105] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 155.

listed as white, but to a lesser degree than the characters identified as black. As the play was never performed, there is no available cast list to consult for the indirect evidence that contemporary casting would have provided. His use of the descriptor "you black wench" as an insult suggests that he is white, but this is not conclusive as black characters also use race as an indicator of social rank.[106] Still, no matter his race, the Landlord is an agent of the Capitalist system, in a position of economic power backed by the Repressive State Apparatus of the New York Police Department, and thus an antagonist by definition within the philosophy espoused by Hughes in this play.

As further evidence of the Landlord's – and, by implication, all Capitalists' – cruelty, his actions are not motivated by any hardship on his part. He is wealthy enough not to need the rent from Ma Jenkins' apartment, which is fortunate for him, as there is no replacement tenant available:

> SADIE MAE: Somebody else done took your room?
>
> MA JENKINS: No, it's empty.
>
> SADIE MAE: Empty?
>
> MA JENKINS: Yes, empty
>
> LOTTIE: Well, you ought to move back in then. That landlord's got more money than you. He can [wait] with his rent.[107] [brackets in original]

The Landlord is so set on punishing Ma Jenkins for late rent that he actually refuses partial payment; when he learns that Ma Jenkins is washing for Miss Pettiford that day he replies "Well, you gonna get paid for that, ain't you? Take the money and get another flat," indifferent both to the payment and the fact that Ma Jenkins cannot do the washing

[106] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 157.
[107] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 157.

without access to a stove.[108] The use of this form of stock character ties *Angelo Herndon Jones* back to the agitprop and workers' theater movements, even as the complex depictions of the individually named characters pushes the play further towards psychological realism than even Odets achieved with *Waiting for Lefty*.

The eviction of Ma Jenkins, followed by the White Cop and the Negro Cop harassing her for having her belongings on the sidewalk, provides the impetus for the characters to follow Herndon's model and organize. As Lottie argues to the older woman, "well, if black and white can team up to keep *us down*—looks like we poor folks could team up, too, against them. If Herndon can bring black and white together down South, it sure can be done up North here, too, where we're just as hungry."[109] To underline the moral of the play, given to a previously apolitical character for further impact, Lottie's naïve explanation of the lesson of Herndon's activism triggers the introduction of Angelo Herndon, in the form of the offstage Voice:

> . . . I tell you, they can do what they will with Angelo Herndon. They can indict me. They can put me in jail. But there will come thousands of Angelo Herndons. They may succeed in killing one, two, even a score of working-class organizers. But you cannot kill the working class. We are the Working Class. (*applause*) Black and white unite to fight.[110]

This speech calls for comparison to iconic Agate's call to action at the end of *Waiting for Lefty*, in which he exhorts his audience of fellow taxi-drivers, the audience of theater patrons, and the implied audience "coast to coast" to join the fight against classist oppression:

[108] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 156.
[109] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 159.
[110] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 159.

> HELLO AMERICA! HELLO. WE'RE THE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING-CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD…OUR BONES AND BLOOD! And when we die they'll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces. We'll die for what is right! put [*sic*] fruit trees where our ashes are![111]

However, the Voice's speech in *Angelo Herndon Jones* is a minor variation on the testimony Herndon gave at his first trial before the Fulton County, Georgia Petit Jury on January 17, 1933, as retold first as a speech during his speaking tour, and then published in the 1937 pamphlet *You Cannot Kill the Working Class*:

> I said: "You my do what you will with Angelo Herndon. You may indict him. You may put him in jail. But there will come thousands of Angelo Herndons. If you really want to do anything about the case, you go out and indict the social system. But this you will not do, for your role is to defend the system under which the toiling masses are robbed and oppressed.
>
> "You may succeed in kiliing [*sic*] one, two, even a score of working-class organizers. But you cannot kill the working class."[112]

These lines, so accurately reproduced as to suggest Hughes either heard Herndon's speech multiple times or had access to a written copy two years before it was published, serve as a direct call to action. As the strident notes of the "Internationale" rise, Buddy successfully calls on his comrades, black and white, to return Ma Jenkins

[111] Odets, 31.
[112] Angelo Herndon, *You Cannot Kill the Working Class* (New York: International Labor Defense and League of Struggle for Negro Rights, 1937), Reel 124, Microfilm Collection, American Civil Liberties Union Records: 1864-2011 (mostly 1917-1995), Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, 26-27.

belongings to her home.[113] Through this action, Buddy steps into the role of (Communist) labor organizer, becoming one of the thousands of future Angelo Herndons and fulfilling the promise of *You Cannot Kill the Working Class*. He is not the only character to take up this role. Lottie, through her promotion of interracial organization within the working class, also joins the ranks of Angelo Herndons. Viola does as well, when she responds to Buddy's announcement that he is "gonna join up with them kind o' people" with a simple declaration of "me, too, honey."[114] Even Buddy's roommate Lank joins the cause. This leaves Sadie Mae, who reacts to Ma Jenkins' eviction not by joining the mass action but by stating her intention to "get Slug to fix her up at headquarters,"[115] – a generous but fundamentally Capitalist and corrupt offer – as the only young adult and the only named character other than Ma Jenkins promoting the status quo.

Once Buddy has assumed the role of the next Angelo Herndon, the police make one final attempt at oppression; however, here the powerful monsters of earlier in the play appear as buffoons, unable to stop the Communist cause. The detectives search Buddy and Lank's apartment, looking for both Buddy and any "incendiary literature." Their search under the bed and in the drawers is unsuccessful, as is the attempt to intimidate Lank. Once they leave, going off to search "some more nigger houses," Lank reveals their incompetence: (*Laughing to himself*) They sure don't know how to look for nothing. (*He pulls down the window shade and out tumble several copies of various magazines, and a pamphlet life of Herndon*) I got my life of Herndon right here!"[116] This action, in addition to establishing Lank as yet another rising Angelo Herndon, promises

[113] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 160.
[114] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 161.
[115] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 159.
[116] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 160-161.

that for all of the power of the elite, the state, and its agents, they can be rendered impotent through united action by the working class.

The missing Buddy is at Ma Jenkins house with Viola, planning for a future of activism in hopes that "maybe by the time our baby grows up, this country won't be like it is today—folks hungry, folks Jim-crowed, folks put out o' their houses."[117] These hopes are an explicit list of the vision Hughes had for the Marxist utopia he hoped would erase the trauma of the discrimination he faced as a youth himself. Speaking for the author, the young couple assures each other that they will be able to create a better, more Communist world in the future, as partners united by "love and struggle…and a baby coming!"[118] Finally, just before they part for the night and the play ends, Viola reveals that she has picked a name for their baby, whom she assumes will be a boy; her child will be called Angelo Herndon Jones, making him literally one of the future Angelo Herndons who will carry the workers' cause into the next generation.

Ultimately, the radical change in American government and culture promoted by Angelo Herndon, and by Langston Hughes in *Angelo Herndon Jones* and *Harvest*, never occurred. The New Deal expansion of the social safety net, while imperfect and unequally applied, bled off the worst of the desperation that drove both underpaid workers and those without work towards the radical left, until the industrial buildup for World War II stabilized the floundering economy. Both Herndon and Hughes would themselves abandon the Party, one by choice and the other not, and would move on to other lives and other identities. However, these two plays present a snapshot of Hughes' ideology and advocacy during his time of greatest adherence to Communist orthodoxy, in

[117] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 161.
[118] Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 162.

the years immediately following his return from the Soviet Union and during the worst of the Depression.

As neither play was produced or even published at the time, their collective impact on proletarian, Afro-American, or the white dominated popular cultures, was minimal. Still, they represent a multi-layered approach to social change, and a dedication to using dramatic literature as a means to evangelize for the political left. At the base level, both the living newspaper *Harvest* and the strike/martyr play *Angelo Herndon Jones* fit within the expected confines of the Proletarian Culture movement, and thus serve as part of the self-conscious challenge to Capitalist cultural hegemony, to use the vocabulary of Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. While ultimately he would tactically disavow much of his Depression-era work during the early years of the Cold War, the proletarian Hughes of the mid-thirties was a true believer in the philosophy – spread through the workers theaters of the decade – that art was and should be a weapon in the class war.

CHAPTER 4:
AGAINST THE FASCISTS

The political theater can only effect social change when audiences engage with its message, and for that reason *Harvest* and *Angelo Herndon Jones* both failed as works of Proletarian Culture. The two plays followed the Soviet model for drama in both form and messaging, but with no production or publication to spread the ideas depicted, the artistic weapon remained unused in the battle for the cultural hegemony of the United States. In response to these dual disappointments in his radical drama, and in conjunction with the success of his folk and urban comedies at Karamu, Langston Hughes unexpectedly and utterly divided his theatrical work from his political activism, reversing the trend he had started with *Scottsboro Limited*. However, after spending six months in Spain reporting on the Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American* and witnessing for himself the extreme brutality of the European Fascists, Hughes returned to the United States newly convinced that the Communists' anti-Fascist efforts were vital, and he determined to lend his pen to the cause, a plan he would enact in Harlem with the establishment of the Suitcase Theater and the writing of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* and the six *Limitations of Life* skits.

Over the year and a half, approximately, between Hughes' writing *Angelo Herndon Jones* and his departure for Spain, the divide between his artistic and political outputs was so deep that biographer Faith Berry claims that anyone aware of both "must have considered him schizophrenic at best."[1] While clearly hyperbolic, in 1936 and 1937 Hughes maintained two entirely separate public personae. The first was the political essayist and lecturer. In this mode he attended events such as Third United Congress

[1] Berry, 243.

against War and Fascism in Cleveland and meetings of the Friends of the Soviet Union in Chicago, where he lectured on topics such as "The Negro Faces Fascism" and "Asiatic Peoples under the Soviets," thus continuing and expanding his involvement with the radical left.[2] The other was that of the apolitical, commercial artist, who premiered four works at the Jelliffes' theater in 1936 and 1937, three comedies: *Little Ham*, written in the last weeks of 1935, *When the Jack Hollers*, co-written with Arna Bontemps in 1936, and *Joy to My Soul* in 1937, and the "singing play" on the Haitian Revolution, *Emperor of Haiti* in 1936, which would be revised into the opera *Troubled Island* in 1949.[3]

Hughes didn't just change the politics of his drama, he also changed form. Susan Duffy identifies *Angelo Herndon Jones* as "Hughes' last attempt to write a script that did not rely heavily on music, lyrics, or poetry to carry the production."[4] This is inaccurate, as neither the unproduced short play *Soul Gone Home* (1936) nor *Front Porch* (1938) contain poetry, singing, or significant musical cues, but these exceptions are insufficient to counter the broader spirit of Duffy's observation. After *Angelo Herndon Jones* Hughes' plays usually included music or poetry as a central element of dramatic structure and plot development. According to the seminal biographer Arnold Rampersad, with this mode, developed in the Karamu comedies, Hughes "was in fact refashioning the conventional dramatic form to suit both his peculiar gift and its ideal, if not actual, audience – the black masses."[5]

[2] Berry, 243.
[3] Leslie Catherine Sanders, introduction to *Emperor of Haiti (Troubled Island)* in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders and Nancy Johnston (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 279.
[4] Duffy, 146.
[5] Rampersad, 327.

In his turn to poetry and farce and away from the agitprop didacticism of the previous years, Rampersad reads Hughes as "realigning himself racially," and argues "his Karamu playwriting, from one angle a venture in commercialism, was perhaps also part of his renewal of racial bonding."[6] Certainly, at thirty-four, Hughes was aging out of the ragged bohemian lifestyle. His father's death had removed the appeal of rebellion, and his mother's cancer desperately increased his needs for funds, all points Rampersad marshals in his argument that "Hughes was drifting away from the far left."[7] This argument might stand if playwriting were Hughes' only artistic output. While writing farces for the Gilpin Players, Hughes was also working on a new poetry collection, titled *A New Song* after one of the poems. The 1936 collection was published by the Communist affiliated International Workers Order (IWO) and included an introduction by *New Masses* founder Mike Gold.[8]

That slim volume "includes two chants, two ballads, three songs, and a number of other free verse poems," drawing comparison to "the Wobblies' *Little Red Song Book*."[9] The artist responsible for *A New Song* was not on the verge of disavowing the entire revolutionary project, nor was he, as he once claimed to his friend Noel Sullivan, whose anti-Communist views had hardened as Hughes' radicalism deepened, "using his influence with the left only to ease his own way through the Depression."[10] However, Arnold Rampersad's personal conviction that "the 'communist aesthetic' is to blame for Hughes's loss of 'essential identity'" may explain his readiness to declare Hughes done with the left the moment his playwriting changed direction, demonstrating, in the words

[6] Rampersad, 323.
[7] Rampersad, 323.
[8] Rampersad, 335.
[9] Dawahare, 107.
[10] Rampersad, 323.

of Anthony Dawahare, "just how powerful ideologies of race, nation, and anticommunism continue to be within academia."[11] However, while Hughes was not on the verge of abandoning his radical beliefs, that ideology is markedly absent from his scripts following the Gilpin Players' rejection of *Angelo Herndon Jones*. Then Hughes went to Spain.

Hughes had planned to travel during the summer of 1937, as he routinely did during periods of uncertainty, but not to Spain. Early that year he accepted an offer to lead an eight week, multi-country tour, titled "National Minorities in Europe and the Soviet Union," for the Inter-Racial Study Group division of Edutravel, Inc.[12] The trip would have allowed him to return to sites of previous inspiration, while the payment would have supported his mother's continuing medical care. However, the dates of the tour, from July 3 through August 31, required he turn down an invitation to attend the Second International Writers' Congress, planned for the end of June.[13] Still, Hughes was looking forward to the opportunity to return to the Soviet Union in July, only to have his careful plans fall apart in May: Edutravel cancelled the tour, due to "developments in the Spanish Civil War."[14]

Then in June, while visiting his mother in Cleveland, Hughes received two messages, a telegram from Writers' Congress organizers André Malraux and Louis Aragon, announcing a delay and requesting Hughes reconsider his refusal,[15] and a letter from the *Baltimore Afro-American*, offering a job as a correspondent covering "the

[11] Dawahare, 108-109.
[12] Rampersad, 335.
[13] Rampersad, 337.
[14] Berry, 254.
[15] Rampersad, 339.

activities of the Negroes in the International Brigades."[16] Guaranteed "four to six months abroad at what seemed to me a good rate of pay,"[17] and promised the chance to make extra money writing periodic reports for the *Cleveland Call and Post* and *Globe* magazine, Hughes accepted the invitation to the delayed Congress and swiftly set about organizing his affairs for the potentially fatal trip to Spain. Finally, on June 30, 1937, Hughes set sail for Europe once more.[18]

While Hughes' primary employer during his time in Spain, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, sent him to report on the aspect of the war most of interest to their readers – the experiences of black volunteers fighting with the Republican army – his interests in the conflict were manifold. The Spanish Civil War swiftly took on multiple, contested meanings to various groups worldwide. Most of those meanings, both symbolic and practical, were organized along the axes of race and class. As a result, the conflict spoke deeply to both of Hughes' two primary identities, as Negro and Proletarian. Furthermore, both Afro-American and radical observers considered the fighting in Spain to be an extension of Italy's conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 and 1936, and correctly guessed that it was a forerunner to a coming conflict that would bring the world to war again. For Hughes, his time in Spain would allow him to bring both of these critical viewpoints into synthesis, creating the balanced voice of his Harlem Suitcase Theatre plays, even as the fighting he witnessed convinced him of the vital need to speak, both as a playwright and activist, against the rising tide of Fascism.

To both anti-Fascists leftists and Afro-Americans of all political alignments, the road to Spain started in Ethiopia, with Benito Mussolini's bid for empire. His justification

[16] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 315.
[17] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 315.
[18] Berry, 254.

for invasion consisted of three major points. First, if Fascist Italy was to become a "Great Power," as Mussolini planned, it would need more, wealthier colonies, and Ethiopia's status as the last independent nation in Africa made it the clear target. Second, Italy could not remain at peace, for, as historian Piers Brendon explains, "aggression was the fulfillment of Fascism, in Mussolini's view, the proof that it had not become as decadent as the democracies," and so it needed to embrace the "the poetry of hatred and the beneficent hygiene of war."[19] Third and finally, the invasion would be an act of national revenge for the 1896 defeat Italy suffered during the previous colonial attempt, which had been "the most devastating rebuff even suffered by a European power in Africa."[20] Through successful conquest of the nation that had defied his own, Mussolini believed he would lead his "humiliated" country to glory and victory, offering what he saw as incontrovertible proof of his self-declared status as the modern Augustus, standing at the head of the reborn Roman Empire.[21]

Even as Mussolini planned his invasion, Ethiopian Emperor Ras Tafari Makonnen, also known as Haile Selassie, was struggling for recognition from the white supremacist governments in Europe and in the League of Nations, with little success. His was a feudal, slaveholding country, "a nation of 12 million people divided by countless tribal loyalties, 70 different languages and an archipelago of bare table-mountains slashed by deep jungle-choked valleys."[22] Despite lack of exterior support or interior infrastructure, Selassie was making slow but steady progress modernizing his country, establishing the beginnings of a mail service, a cross-country railway, a structured

[19] Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London, Jonathan Cape, 2000), 262.
[20] Brendon, 262.
[21] Brendon, 262.
[22] Brendon 267.

military, even an air force. Mussolini could not long depend on European racism to guarantee support for his own imperial project, especially as Selassie sold development rights to Ethiopia's resources to international investors.

Il Duce needed an excuse for invasion, a fig-leaf with which to cover his grab for power and territory. He took as his *casus belli* an attack by Ethiopian forces on an Italian fortification near the Wal Wal oasis on December 5, 1934. However, even Italian maps and records clearly indicated that the precious water was the uncontested property of Ethiopia, and a full sixty miles from the disputed border with Italian Somaliland.[23] In the hands of Fascist propagandists the Ethiopians' legal defense of their sovereign territory was turned into an unprovoked attack, and on October 2, 1935 Italy declared war. The fighting lasted just seven months, until May 5, 1936, and was characterized by its extreme cruelty. International response was strongly divided; the Age of Empire was nearing its end, and Italy's claims of spreading "civilization" failed to find sympathy despite echoing the accepted narratives of colonialism from only a few decades before.

The Afro-American response to the invasion of the last independent nation in Africa was swift, profound, and cut across all political boundaries. Further strengthening the outcry was the complex symbolic meaning of Ethiopia itself:

> This particular section of the Horn of Africa held considerable historical, religious, and cultural significance for black communities around the world…Ethiopia had become known as the cradle of civilization; it was among the first countries to adopt Christianity. In the black Christian world, Ethiopia

[23] Brendon 269.

> remained a principle icon and is in some ways perceived as an African Jerusalem.[24]

Support groups formed quickly to raise money for medical aid and relief for victims of the fighting. Recruiters found and trained men to join Selassie's army. The Pan-African Reconstruction Association, led by Samuel Daniels, self-reported 17,500 men mobilized, and the Black Legion, associated with the Garveyite movement, claimed 3,000.[25] While these numbers are probably exaggerated, they do reflect a sincere belief among Afro-Americans that the fight in Ethiopia was also their fight. Indeed the announcement of the Italian victory was greeted with riots in cities across the US.[26]

The American left wing also embraced the cause of a free Ethiopia, for as writer C. K. Doreski observes, "not only did the plight of the beleaguered African nation appeal to racial sensibilities, it struck to the very heart of white liberal and radical sympathies regarding victims of Fascist aggression."[27] The public reaction by the CPUSA was both sincere and calculated, as the "the cause of Ethiopia in its struggle with Mussolini's Italy was a major and highly successful lever in the ongoing effort to win Afro-American support."[28] This lever took the form of the "Hands off Ethiopia" campaign, organized by the American League against War and Fascism and the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, a joint project of the Harlem branch of the Communist Party and "a

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[24] Robin D. G. Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do," in *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do,"* edited by Danny Duncan Collum (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1992), 16.
[25] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 16-17.
[26] Michael Thurston, "'Bombed in Spain': Langston Hughes, the Black Press, and the Spanish Civil War," in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, edited by Todd Vogel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 147.
[27] C. K. Doreski, *Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 65.
[28] Rampersad, 322.

few friendly Garveyites."[29] Hughes, like many other writers, condemned the invasion, but in the face of the competing understandings of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict as principally about race or about class, "seemed sometimes to endorse the communist view, sometimes the more racial perspective," as neither one individually could fully speak to both of his competing identities.[30]

Despite the deep symbolic meaning of the Ethiopian conflict and the strong emotions it raised, ultimately only two Americans, both black, ended up fighting for Selassie. Only Chicago pilot John C. Robinson and Harlem resident Hubert F. Julian, of the thousands initially organized, were prepared to counter the express command of the US government – and risk the threatened three-year prison sentence, $2000 fine, and loss of citizenship for doing so.[31] As a result, when Spain's International Brigades were formed, the Afro-American men who had dreamed of joining the war against Italy saw the conflict as a chance to re-fight the war in Ethiopia. To the Communists and the other radicals of the emerging Cultural Front, the fighting in Spain was also a continuation of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, as both were part of broader Great War against Fascism.

As a strictly internal matter, the Spanish Civil War was a reactionary uprising by the formerly unchallenged dominant cultural and political powers against the combined forces of modernism. As literature scholar Michael Thurston explains:

> The Spanish Civil War began as a rebellion against the government elected in 1936. That government, a coalition of socialists, communists, anarchists, and

[29] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 17.
[30] Rampersad, 322.
[31] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 17.

liberals, undertook a series of reforms that threatened the entrenched power of landowners, the Catholic Church, and the army.[32]

Despite the fact that the Communists had a minimal role in this incarnation of the Spanish Republic, Fascist *Unión Militar Española* and the Catholic extremist *Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas* (Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right) "insisted that Spain had succumbed to a Communist-controlled government and set out to rid the country of the Red menace, restore law and order, and save the Catholic church from ruin."[33] With the invented Communist threat to justify their actions, the two factions, united under the leadership of General Francisco Franco, attempted a *coup d'état* on July 17, 1936.

When Franco's Nationalists did not achieve a quick victory, he called on the other European Fascist powers for help. Portuguese dictator since 1926, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, provided ships to transfer the Spanish colonial armies from Morocco, as well as eighteen thousand men and the newest communications equipment. Hitler sent "some of the most up-to-date antiaircraft guns, aircraft, and tanks" and ten thousand "military specialists," mostly members of the newly formed *Luftwaffe*.[34] Mussolini responded particularly generously; he "dispatched 50,000 troops to Spain before February 1937" and "also provided the Nationalists with more than 700 aircraft, 6 submarines, 2 destroyers, at least 10,000 automatic weapons, and 950 tanks."[35] This international effort served as a dress rehearsal for the Second World War, as, "anticipating a larger European

[32] Michael Thurston, "Montage of a Dream Destroyed: Langston Hughes in Spain," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, edited by John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007) 196.
[33] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 23.
[34] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 23.
[35] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 23.

conflict, both Hitler and Mussolini used the Spanish Civil War as a testing ground for their modern weapons."[36]

The Republicans, on the other hand, lacked the kind of multinational alliance Franco exploited so successfully. The major democratic powers, Britain, France, and the United States, all supported an official policy of "non-intervention" on the matter, and a further twenty-five European nations followed their lead. Instead, the Republicans were reinforced by the International Brigades, a diverse group of volunteers called up by the Communist International (Comintern); these forces were made up of "an estimated 35,000 people from over 50 countries and colonies," who went to Spain to participate in "the grand international struggle against the rise of fascism in Europe."[37] Volunteers were explicitly recruited to serve as soldiers in the fight against Fascism worldwide, and so understood themselves to be fighting for their home countries as much as for Spain. This was true even for the American volunteers, both white and black. Although American Fascism was never as unified as its European counterparts, it had influential leaders: Louisiana Governor Huey Long, radio host and priest Father Charles Coughlin, minister and founder of the America First Party Gerald L. K. Smith, economist Lawrence Dennis, and poet Ezra Pound.

American Fascism, as promoted by all of these men, was both part of the broader international movement and an indigenous philosophy, the "culmination of an ideological development stemming from such generally revered movements as Populism and 'agrarian democracy.'"[38] This variant was primarily a middle class phenomenon; its

[36] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 23.
[37] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 24.
[38] Victor C. Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *The Western Political Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (June 1957), 350.

proponents were opposed to both the power and demands of big business and finance and to the rebellion of the increasingly radical working class. It was obsessed with financial reform, and wrote its own history in which "the causal factor is the machinations of international financiers" – both a literal concern and a euphemism for the movement's characteristic anti-Semitism.[39] Popular Fascism in the US was also characterized by a fear of liberal institutions – including academia and the press – on grounds that such associations were puppets of the hated plutocracy. Finally, like the Fascist movement in Europe, the American one was highly nationalistic, but unlike the versions practiced in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, the American form was isolationist rather than imperial.[40]

This middle-class, Populist version was not the only variation on Fascism active in the inter-war United States. Far less visible was the hyper-Capitalist Fascism of the upper class. Generally this manifested publicly in indirect and individual ways, such as in Ford's anti-Semitic writings. Even the best documented effort of the elite's Fascism – the Business Plot – was disregarded at the time. The plot, in summary, called for U.S. Marine Major General Smedley D. Butler to lead a Fascist putsch at the behest of a number of major leaders of industry, installing a new government that served the corporations.[41] Butler, a staunch anti-Fascist, reported the plot immediately, eventually testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee on the matter, though no arrests were ever made in the case due to the status of the "alleged plotters, who included Tammany Hall

[39] Ferkiss, 351.
[40] Ferkiss, 351-352.
[41] James E. Sargent, "Review: *The Plot to Seize the White House* by Jules Archer," *The History Teacher* 8, no. 1 (Nov. 1974), 151.

politician Alfred E. Smith, Financier J. P. Morgan, and the anti-Roosevelt American Liberty League.[42]

The final form of American Fascism, the Ku Klux Klan, had a longer history than anything the Continent had to offer. While the Klan had taken other forms in years past, in the 1920s it changed to fit the era. The list of enemies expanded to include "Catholics, Jews, aliens, and assorted moral 'deviants.'"[43] The rate of lynchings and other acts of violence increased, and with it did the membership, peaking at five million during the middle of the decade, and while the enrollment numbers decreased slightly during the 1930s, the violence did not. It is important to note that the KKK was understood to be Fascist at the time, and not only in retrospect. Indeed, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes argued that the Fascist Axis were "Nations in Nightshirts" and used anti-Klan rhetoric to argue for American intervention in the war with Hitler.[44]

Like the American volunteer soldiers he met in Spain, Hughes understood the war in Spain as dual fight against the spread of Fascism in Europe and Klan-style Fascism in the United States. This is revealed in his discussion of Spain in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, though he makes his most explicit statement to this effect in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, saying "give Franco a hood and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan."[45] In July, 1937 he made the same connection in his address at the Second International Writers Congress in Paris, France. The address was reprinted in the *Volunteer for Liberty*, the English language journal of the International Brigades in Spain: "We are the people who have long known in actual practice the meaning of the

[42] Sargent, 151.
[43] Brendon 55.
[44] Brendon, 444.
[45] Richard Jackson, "The Shared Vision of Langston Hughes and Black Hispanic Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1981), 90.

word fascism – for the American attitude toward us has always been one of economic and social discrimination," Hughes declaims. "Its theories of Nordic supremacy and economic suppression have long been realities to us."[46]

Only after explaining the Black experience of Fascism at home did Hughes continue on to enumerate the horrors of "fascism on a world scale":

> Hitler in Germany with the abolition of labor unions, his tyranny over the Jews, and the sterilizations of the Negro children of Cologne; Mussolini in Italy with his banning of Negroes on the theatrical stages, and his expeditions of slaughter in Ethiopia; the Military Party of Japan with their little maps of how they'll conquer the whole world, and their savage treatment of the Koreans and Chinese; Batista and Vincent, the little American-made tyrants of Cuba and Haiti; and now Spain, and Franco with his absurd cry of "Viva España" in the hand of Italians, Moors, and Germans invited to help him achieve "Spanish Unity." [47]

Taking a position antithetical to his race conscious rhetoric in such works as "The Negro Poet on the Racial Mountain," Hughes argued that the key to ending Fascist violence was to eliminate the concept of race entirely, for "the fascists know that when there is no more race, there will be no more capitalism, and no more war, and no more money for the munitions makers – because the workers of the world will have triumphed," bringing together in one vision the promises of peace, equality, and the Communist dream.[48]

The particular situation and context of this speech explains Hughes' sudden reversion to orthodox Communist rhetoric. The International Writers' Congress was explicitly Communist, and Internationalist at that, and the speech was shaped for that

[46] Langston Hughes, "Too Much of Race," *Volunteer for Liberty* 1, no. 11 (August 23, 1937): 3.
[47] Hughes, "Too Much of Race," 3.
[48] Hughes, "Too Much of Race," 4.

audience. However, this is not to say it was insincere. In the United States Hughes had been slowly drifting away from the left, but in July of 1937, in Paris for the first time in over a decade, Hughes reconnected with the community of artists who had inspired him over his career, and met more whom he had admired from afar. And all of them believed in the radical cause. In the city that had helped shape him into the artist and man he was, after jumping ship as a young sailor in February, 1924 and wandering in broke and without a job or even a friend in the country, Hughes was ready to be inspired once more.[49] In that space, surrounded by the creative energy and utopian belief of the collected artists of the Congress, and preparing to travel to Spain to see the depths of Fascist depravity, it was natural for his passionate belief in International Communism to be reignited.

The event was transformational, to the point that, despite his need to downplay his radical years while writing *I Wonder as I Wander*, he still records this part of his trip in the autobiography:

> At the International Writers' Congress in Paris that summer I met Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden from London, also John Strachey and the beautiful Rosamond Lehman, Pablo Neruda from Chile, José Bergamin from Spain, Michael Koltsov and Ilya Ehrenburg from Russia, and a great many French writers, including Tristan Tzara and André Malraux.[50]

Although he does not mention it, he also met up with old friends Nicolás Guillén, who in Cuba had teased him for his radical views but was now "the most revolutionary writer in the Caribbean," and Jacques Roumain, another convert to the Party, both of whom had

[49] Rampersad, 83.
[50] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 320.

been recently released from political prisons in their home countries.[51] Also excluded from Hughes' published list was Bertolt Brecht, whose reputation was built on a far more successful fusion of theater and Communist thought than Hughes had achieved, surrealist poet Louis Aragon, who had worked with Malraux to organize the Congress and to convince Hughes to attend, and others whose radical reputations would have proved problematic for Hughes to publish in 1956.[52]

Inspired by the event in Paris, both as artist and activist, Hughes left for the front. He had received special permission from the U.S. government to travel as a reporter, so Hughes did not have to sneak over the mountains like the International Brigade volunteers he followed, whose passports, like those of all US citizens, had been marked "Not Valid for Travel in Spain." The volunteers had to make the dangerous Pyrenees crossing on foot, carrying all of their own equipment as the embattled Republicans had none to spare.[53] Instead Hughes – and Guillén, who was similarly serving as a war correspondent and was traveling with him – journeyed by train, comfortably ensconced with "an enormous basket of edibles."[54] They arrived in Barcelona just after a night of heavy shelling had killed about two hundred people. From there Hughes went on to Valencia, the seat of the Republican government, before heading to the front in Madrid, where he lived and wrote, both as a reporter and a poet, for most of his five months in Spain.[55]

Madrid was a city full of writers committed to the cause of a free Spain, and most, like Hughes, were quick to affiliate themselves with the left wing Alianza de Intelectuales

[51] Rampersad, 343.
[52] Rampersad, 344.
[53] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 25.
[54] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 321.
[55] Berry, 260.

Antifascistas (the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals), each contributing in his own way.[56] Hughes, like Ernest Hemingway, made the round of the hospitals, raising morale among the Republican wounded. He suffered from the cold until Bernard "Bunny" Rucker, a Lincoln Brigade truck driver from Columbus, Ohio, gave him the gift of a winter coat.[57] In *I Wonder as I Wander* he writes evocatively about going hungry in the besieged city. He also received his only war injury in Madrid – a flesh wound from a Nationalist bullet.[58] In December he retraced his journey, traveling back to Valencia, then Barcelona, reaching Paris just in time for Christmas.[59] On January 17, 1938 he arrived back in New York.[60]

While Langston Hughes supported the cause of the native Spaniards, he was particularly interested in the experience of the Afro-American volunteers in the war. As Faith Berry explains in her biography *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*, "Hughes took up the banner of the International Brigades, especially the XVth Brigade, with its American, British, Irish, Canadian, Cuban, and Puerto Rican volunteers…He praised them for their valor and for being integrated long before the American military services."[61] He also wanted to understand what drove the Moors to fight for Franco. Reporting on a war depicted as being between Communism and Fascism, Hughes wanted to talk about race. Indeed, in *I Wonder as I Wander* Hughes says "To write about them [the black men on both sides] I had come to Spain."[62]

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[56] Rampersad, 347.
[57] Berry 266.
[58] James Presley, "Langston Hughes, War Correspondent," *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 3 (Sept. 1976), 489.
[59] Berry 271.
[60] Berry 273.
[61] Berry 262.
[62] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 327

The Afro-Americans Hughes met in Spain were mainly highly educated, strongly anti-Fascist if not actually Communist, and highly politically aware. Some were offended by the ungrammatical dialect he used for his *Letters from Spain*, believing he was propagating the stereotypical minstrel image. Hughes justifies himself in his autobiography, explaining:

> Like the colonial Moors on Franco's side, who had had meager, if any opportunities for education, Negroes from states like Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi had attended very poor schools at best, and in some communities they had none. Anyway, one of the things I was trying to show in my poems was that even the least privileged of Americans, the Southern Negroes, were represented in the International Brigades, fighting on the side of the Spanish peasants and workers.[63]

While Hughes was perfectly willing to tailor the precise narrative of the Lincoln Brigade to his propagandist needs, he was genuinely dedicated to telling the men's stories, sending nearly two dozen stories back to the United States. If he ever wrote about the Moors for the *Afro-American*, the story wasn't printed.[64] However, he was able to write about them for the *Volunteer for Liberty*.

In his September 13, 1937 article "Negroes in Spain," Hughes pronounces "in Madrid, Spain's besieged capital, I've met wide-awake Negroes from various parts of the world" all of them dedicated to stopping the spread of Fascism, for should Fascism conquer there would be "no decent place for any Negroes – because fascism preaches the

[63] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 378.
[64] Presley, 489.

creed of Nordic supremacy and a world for whites alone."[65] While these words are inspiring, his conclusion in the same article, that "in Spain, there is no color prejudice" is flawed.[66] The volunteers in the International Brigades were very well treated; Republican Spain depended on their willingness to fight on its behalf. Likewise Hughes, a sympathetic American writer, suffered only the deprivations to which all of Madrid was subject. However, the Spanish were not so willing to see the humanity of the Moors.

Hughes saw the Moroccan soldiers, whom he describes as "deluded and driven," as fellow victims of Capitalist and racial oppression.[67] In "Negroes in Spain" he argues they are "an oppressed colonial people of color being used by fascism to make a colony of Spain. And they are being used without pity." It is an army, he is careful to emphasize, made up of "young boys, men from the desert, old men, and even women…brought by the reactionaries from Africa to Europe in their attempt to crush the Spanish people."[68] The Spaniards, however, had been trained since childhood to hate the Africans who had occupied their country for seven centuries, and black faces weren't trusted. African-American volunteers even faced friendly fire by Republicans who assumed they were Franco's Moors.[69] While Hughes' position was idealistic, it was shared by many in the International Brigades. One young Black soldier he met turned out to be neither American nor Moroccan – he was from Guinea and had joined the Republican cause hoping the liberal, United Front government would relax the colonial laws in his native country once they had defeated Franco.[70]

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[65] Langston Hughes, "Negroes in Spain," in *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do,"* edited by Danny Duncan Collum (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1992), 103.
[66] Hughes, "Negroes in Spain," 103.
[67] Hughes, "Negroes in Spain," 104.
[68] Hughes, "Negroes in Spain," 104.
[69] Kelly, "This Ain't Ethiopia," 32.
[70] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander,* 329.

Hughes had journeyed to Spain to write about black American and Moorish soldiers in the Civil War. However, the articles he sent back to America, as Rampersad describes, "viewed the war from a perspective that merged the narrowly racial *Afro-American* with Hughes's proletarianism and anti-fascism. The result was excellent propaganda for the left, aimed directly at the black American world."[71] Less cynically, it was Hughes first successful merging of the two perspectives that had defined his public and artistic personae in turns, and each spoke to a core piece of his identity. In his earlier writing about the conflict in Ethiopia, which remained an abstract problem as he never actually traveled to that nation, Hughes had switched between the black and Red understandings of the conflict, unwilling to settle for one or the other yet unable to bridge the divide between the two. However, in the face of the complex realities of actual warfare and in conversations with the fighters representing both ideologies, Hughes the reporter and even Hughes the war poet was able to combine the ideologies through their shared imperative to fight Fascism wherever it was found, and so create a harmonious balance that both appealed to audiences and satisfied his need to shape an integrated whole from the competing fragments of his self image. Back in Harlem after the war, the playwright would finally manage to achieve the same.

Langston Hughes arrived in New York on January 17, 1938.[72] He had left Spain in mid-December and had spent one last month in Paris – until his funds ran out – before sailing for home on the *Berengaria*.[73] The money he had earned as a war correspondent was effectively gone, some spent to fulfill his daily needs and the rest during his month of leisure in Paris. Furthermore, his mother had wasted the money he had carefully

[71] Rampersad, 351.
[72] Berry, 273.
[73] Rampersad, 355.

arranged for her care, then manipulated his friends, including Noel Sullivan, into giving her more, and, when that wasn't enough, she "had sold a precious Aztec statuette given to him by [artist Miguel] Covarrubias in Mexico."[74] In order to finance his immediate needs, Hughes returned to giving public lectures, both through the IWO and the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Beyond ensuring the necessities of food, shelter, and continued care for his mother – despite her abuse of his trust and wallet – he had no intention of continuing as he had before this last trip abroad. As Arnold Rampersad explains:

> After Madrid, however, money seemed far less important to Langston than a continuation of some form of radical activity. With his next major move, he boldly contradicted the commercial spirit of the plays he had written for the Karamu Theatre in Cleveland. Still in love with the stage, but recharged as a radical following his months at the Alianza, Hughes harkened back to the late summer of 1931, when…he had joined Whittaker Chambers, Paul Peters, and Jacob Burck in announcing the birth of a revolutionary Suitcase Theatre.[75]

While nothing had come of the plan before, this time Hughes was determined to see it though.

Only a few days after he returned from Spain, Hughes went over to visit with his old friend and former secretary Louise Thompson and announced his intention to form his own company, so that he would no longer be subject to theater owners refusing to produce his work on political grounds, or directors changing his scripts without permission. She was a natural ally for the project. Since she had worked with Hughes and

[74] Rampersad, 355.
[75] Rampersad, 355-356.

Zora Neale Hurston on *Mule Bone*, Thompson had become an organizer for the International Workers Order and a committed Communist. The IWO was a powerful organization, "which then boasted almost 145,000 members, sponsored its own schools, music and drama societies, a national cultural commission, and a magazine."[76] Her connections allowed Hughes to found his theatre.

Officially, the Harlem Suitcase Theatre had no political alignment; membership was open to all who met "the cultural and artistic standards of the group."[77] According to its constitution "the purpose of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre is to fill a long-felt need in this community for a permanent repertory group presenting plays dealing with the lives, problems, and hopes of the Negro people in their relation to the American scene."[78] However, Hughes founded the theater to have a space to produce the kind of militantly radical plays he wrote following his trip to the Soviet Union, which had been rejected by other companies. Furthermore, all of the founding members of the company were also members of the Order, and the constitution even states that "the Harlem Suitcase Theatre is one of the cultural activities of Branch 691 of the I.W.O. and as such receives the full cooperation of the Branch toward its work."[79] The company's Communist bona fides are uncontestable.

Hughes' first, best known, and only full length play for his new company was *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, subtitled descriptively:

A Poetry Play

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[76] Rampersad 356.
[77] The Harlem Suitcase Theatre, "Constitution," Langston Hughes Papers, Series XIV: Personal Papers, Box 512, Folder 12718, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[78] The Harlem Suitcase Theatre.
[79] The Harlem Suitcase Theatre.

From Slavery

Through the Blues

To Now – and then some!

With Singing, Music, and Dancing[80]

The script is a fusion of many disparate forms. Much of the text is in the form of poetry, some drawn from his Harlem Renaissance collections *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, some from his recent, proudly radical, collection *A New Song*, and some that would not be published until 1942 in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. A few additional verses were either published but never in a collection or were never published except within the script. Connecting the poetry are sections of dialogue of varying lengths. Finally, excerpts of songs, from traditional spirituals to snatches of blues written by identifiable artists, round out the script.

To biographer Arnold Rampersad, this innovative fusion of form, distinct from the fusions of story and song characteristic of opera or American musical theater, proved that *Don't You Want to Be Free?* was strictly a product of the racially conscious Hughes, no matter his political goals in creating the Harlem Suitcase Theatre: "for a true black theater, music and dance must be integral; the music must be blues and spirituals, and not, as in most musicals involving Negroes, sentimental or risqué travesties of black style."[81] This is supported by Joseph McLaren's observation that the play "shows aspects of traditional African drama in which there is an interrelationship of dramatic elements. Music, song, dance, speech, and poetry provide a complex 'interdependent' structure,

[80] Langston Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free? A Poetry Play from Slavery through the Blues to Now – and then some! With Singing, Music, and Dancing*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders and Nancy Johnston (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 538.
[81] Rampersad, 357.

unlike 'conventional' Western drama, which emphasizes speech."[82] However, this assessment willfully ignores the direct influence of the workers theater movement on both theater and play.

The Harlem Suitcase Theatre was a much delayed completion of the 1931 plan to create a New York Suitcase Theater, which was conceived as a mobile agitprop company in the style of Shock Troupe and Prolet Buehne.[83] While the Harlem Suitcase Theatre was static, and indeed was founded after the end of the workers theater era, those influences are still visible. Like the Russian Blue Blouse Troupes, and the companies worldwide created in their image, Hughes' theater was designed to operate without the need for a traditional theatrical space; indeed, as the name suggests, their "limited paraphernalia could have fit into a suitcase."[84] The staging was influenced by the constructivist worlds of Vsevold Meyerhold and Nikolai Okholpkov, artists he admired from his Russian travels.[85] Hughes wrote *Don't You Want to Be Free?* explicitly for this type of performance, something Rampersad acknowledges, despite failing to identify the source of the style:

> There would be minimal lighting, virtually no properties or sets, and no curtain; dedicated to the idea of theater-in-the-round, he saw his audiences of 150 drawn intimately into the action of the stage, which would be two moveable half circles…In [the play's] central role, that of a young black man who would act,

[82] McLaren, 120.
[83] Rampersad, 215-216
[84] Berry, 274.
[85] McLaren, 120.

sing, and also serve as a kind of chorus, he cast the promising novice Robert Earl Jones.[86]

In short, it was clearly inspired by the radical workers theater of the early 1930s.

Hughes took these diverse forms and influences – Russian and African, Harlem Renaissance and Communist, poetry and music and dance and drama – and created a synthesis that fused together all elements of his disparate identities, at both textual and metatextual levels. The resulting audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The play opened at the IWO on April 24, 1938 in a space that seated only 150, prompting a move to the Nora Bayes Theatre on June 10 of the same year.[87] In 1938 it was given a total of 135 times, making it the "longest running play in Harlem during Hughes's lifetime."[88] By bringing his proletarian and racial approaches together, Hughes finally achieved both the theatrical success he had been pursuing and the political activism he felt was his duty.

Despite Hughes' triumphant fusion of his carefully constructed, performative public personae with his political ideals and his theatrical ambitions, the interpretation of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* remains a point of contention among Hughes scholars. Susan Duffy does not even include the play in her treatment of his radical theater, declaring that "while it touches on issues of labor and leftist politics, it is more a poetic history of social abuses directed towards blacks."[89] In this she accepts the view of Arnold Rampersad, who argues that the Marxist message was "only tacked on to an essentially

[86] Rampersad, 357.
[87] McLaren, 121.
[88] Berry, 275.
[89] Duffy, 144.

racial drama, instead of forming an integral part of the action."[90] Joseph McLaren, however, has a far more nuanced, and far more accurate, perspective; he positions the script within the context of both agitprop and Brechtian epic theater, arguing "Like Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, *Don't You Want to Be Free?* suggests political 'solutions based on the black and white working class.' In its espousal of class consciousness, it is similar to George Sklar's *Life and Death of an American* (1936)."[91] Ironically, this disagreement is best explained by Hughes' success in integrating his racial and proletarian viewpoints, as neither ideology succeeds in dominating the script to the exclusion of the other.

Don't You Want to Be Free? is fundamentally a history of both black and white activists' resistance to and rebellion against financially motivated racist oppression, and places the unification of black and white workers under the red flag as simply the next such action. Revolutionary Communism is not awkwardly tacked on at the ending – it provides the framework for understanding all previous, failed attempts at change, and it promises success when finally implemented in the future, sometime after the cast and audience unites and the play ends. Like historian Georges Lefebvre's Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, Hughes recasts the anti-slavery fights of the Nat Turner rebellion and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry as radicalized proto-Communist actions. In doing so he completely merges his two competing perspectives into a complex and intersectional whole, showing Hughes' intellectual and artistic growth over the course of his radical years. Despite the radical message and agitprop- influenced

[90] Rampersad, 359.
[91] McLaren, 122.

staging, the approach is subversive rather than didactic, as with Hughes' prior radical plays, demonstrating the lessons he drew from the failure of his orthodox work.

Approximately 3500 people saw *Don't You Want to Be Free?* during its first season, and of those, approximately three quarters were black residents of Harlem.[92] By approaching his Communist message obliquely, he could avoid the outright rejection of script and ideology he experienced with *Angelo Herndon Jones*. Furthermore, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, unlike *Angelo Herndon Jones* and *Harvest*, is a product of the Popular Front – an organizing strategy used during late 1930s, "when the Communist Party softened its revolutionary rhetoric to work with liberal groups."[93] Hughes had seen the promise of Popular Front organizing in Spain, where the Republican Army embraced Communist, Socialists, Anarchists, liberals, and anyone else willing to fight against the Fascists. Freed from the limits of rigid orthodoxy, Hughes was able to approach Harlem with a revolutionary message wrapped in non-threatening racial history, yet still bring audiences to their feet to shout "fight, fight, fight," exactly as they did at the end of *Scottsboro Limited* back in 1932.

Balancing the radical intention with the need to reach relatively conservative audiences was a challenge. Hughes' working draft, preserved in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at Yale University, more directly shows its Communist influence, and most of the changes to the final script serve to downplay its radicalism. For example, the White Worker's line, "labor with a white skin'll never be free as long as labor with a black skin's enslaved," stands alone after revision,[94] but in the working draft

[92] Rampersad, 359.
[93] Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 3.
[94] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 565.

the line, which is given by the Young Man, begins "what did old Carl [*sic*] Marx write over fifty years ago?" and ends "that's what Marx said."[95] While radical audience members would have recognized this famous line from *Das Kapital*, and so recognized Hughes' own beliefs, removing the attribution reduced the risk of alienating Harlem audiences.

Likewise, the final draft keeps the Young Man's declaration that "tomorrow belongs to the workers, and I'm a worker!"[96] However, it removes the first half of that statement, which in the draft reads, "yesterday [illegible] belonged to the overseers and the slave-drivers, the bosses and the Jim Crowites ---[*sic*] but tomorrow belongs to the workers."[97] Finally the draft explicitly states that the best form of organization is unionization. To the Young Man's call for organization, the Laundry Worker argues "and not just any old jackleg organization, folks. Unions is what we need,"[98] thus placing hope for the future entirely in the hands of the interracial working class. As these changes illustrate, *Don't You Want to Be Free?* was always militant in its radicalism, and that Hughes intentionally softened his rhetoric to ensure that his desired audience, the general population of Harlem, would engage with his ideas rather than rejecting the play as Communist propaganda. Also, despite these changes, other unambiguously Proletarian statements are maintained, such as the Young Man's declaration that, of all the wrongs in the world, including racist oppression, "the wrongest of all is poverty. Being poor."[99]

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[95] Langston Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free? A Poetry Play*, working draft, Langston Hughes Papers, Series V: General Writings, Box 292, Folder 4780, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 50.
[96] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 568.
[97] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, working draft, 51.
[98] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, working draft, 49.
[99] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 551.

The Afro-American experience, according to *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, is one of financially motivated oppression within a context of Capitalist racism. However, it is also one featuring heroes, both black and white, constantly resisting oppression via revolutionary action, which only succeeds when organized rather than individual. This experience, the Young Man explains in his opening monologue, belongs to both the cast and the audience: "so we're going to put on a show. Maybe you'll like it because it's about you, and about us. This show is for you. And you can act in it too, if you want to. This is your show, as well as ours."[100] From this opening statement of audience inclusion, Hughes is setting up those watching to become participants in the upcoming workers' rebellion, which he promises will be the successful last act of resistance that will finally bring freedom.

The action begins in a generalized, ahistorical Africa. Hughes knew from his own experiences in Africa that this "somewhat romanticized, resembling European depictions of the mysterious, 'dark' continent,'"[101] image was inaccurate, but its utopian vision reflected both Pan-Africanist ideas of Africa prior to European contact and Marxist notions of "primitive communism" in tribal contexts. As the Young Man watches the Boy and Girl flirt, the devastating force of Capitalist White Supremacy arrives, in the person of the Overseer. As with the white Man in *Scottsboro Limited*, the Overseer takes on multiple roles, all of violent oppressors, pushing any white audience members to reject this version of whiteness and the positions associated with it in favor of identifying with the heroic White Worker and his support of Afro-American civil rights. Furthermore, in *Don't You Want to Be Free?* the use of a single performer to play all of the oppressors

[100] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 540.
[101] McLaren, 123.

connects the slave dealer of the past directly to the boss of the present, positioning each of these roles as merely the changing face of the same old villain.

The Overseer's entrance opens the next episode, the iconic slave auction. On one hand this is explicitly racial violence, and efficiently depicts the total dehumanization of the victims though the Overseer's lines, which divide the Girl into her body parts, as Laura Mulvey describes the camera doing in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema":

> Look at them legs, wiry and strong. *(Feels her legs.)* Look t them hands. Long fingers, just right for pickin' cotton. *(To the GIRL.)* Open your mouth, gal! *(Punches her with the whipstock.)* Open your mouth. *(GIRL opens her mouth.)* See! Healthy! Nice white teeth! *(With a leer.)* This girl's all right for most anything.[102]

The Overseer's gendered and racialized violence, however, is not happening for its own sake. Once the bidding starts he exhorts the potential buyers to raising the price from one hundred to three hundred dollars, demonstrating that the cruelty of the chattel slave system is directly related to its Capitalist framework. Hughes commitment to Marxist understanding of slavery is further demonstrated when the Overseer, still acting as auctioneer, describes the Old Man as "something of a preacher, too. Helps keep the other slaves out o' mischief o' Sundays."[103] No matter how devout the Old Man is in his belief, the anesthetizing property of the faith he is promoting has significant monetary value because of its potential to prevent the kind of revolutionary action called for by *Don't You Want to Be Free?*

[102] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 542-543.
[103] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 543.

The auction ends with the first, failed attempt at resistance. The Young Man refuses to mount the block to "make some dough" for the Overseer, announcing "Before I'll be sold again/I'll go down to my grave."[104] Initially the Young Man, acting alone, is easily knocked aside, but as other cast members join in, singing "Go Down Moses" to mark their rebellion, the Overseer is briefly overwhelmed:

> *(A great wave of revolt rises disguised as song. The OVERSEER is powerless against it. He calls for troops, for arms. He pulls a gun.)*
>
> OVERSEER: Send soldiers! Get out the militia! Shoot these dogs!
>
> *(Shots are heard. The OLD MAN falls prone. The GIRL falls. An OLD WOMAN enters Right and kneels over the dead.)*[105]

Here, built into the action of the play, lies the message: individual action against oppression can be suppressed easily, and even small organizations will fail. Only through mass organization is revolutionary action possible.

Hughes honors those who continued to resist, nevertheless; the Young Man lists those who "carries on our fight and kept alive the seeds of revolt," namely Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth, and the Voices of the chorus add Frederick Douglass, as well as white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hughes' family's hero John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and all of the unnamed white and black Civil War soldiers fighting against slavery.[106] The Civil War, as a mass revolutionary action at the

[104] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 544.
[105] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 545.
[106] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 545-546.

national level, ends with emancipation, but the forces of Capitalism strike back with the sharecropping system, leaving the newly freed people "free, to work and get no pay."[107]

The Man and Woman, discussing the exploitive nature of sharecropping, identify the denial of payment as central to post-Reconstruction racial oppression: "the white folks won't pay us nothing, that's the trouble. Besides the Jim Crow schools, and the lynchings – when you work, they don't pay you nothing."[108] Indeed, the link between lynching and Capitalism is depicted directly through the enactment of their son's murder, thus revealing the secret that propaganda linking lynching to sexual violence was explicitly meant to hide. The Young Man approaches the Overseer for his payment after the cotton has been sold, only to be denied payment:

> Your contract? Hell! What about my bills? What about the commissary store? What about that sow belly and corn meal I been advancing you all the year for you and your lazy old women, and them kids of yours that you thinks too good to work in the cotton fields. Trying to send pickaninnies to school! Huh! You're an uppity black boy, anyhow. Talkin' about what I owe you! Why even after the nine bales was sold, you owed me more'n a hundred dollars. Why, you ungrateful scoundrel. Get back there in that field and start plowin' for next year's crop.[109]

The Young Man persists, demanding to see the Overseer's records, and the encounter turns violent: "*The OVERSEER walks up to the YOUNG MAN and hits him in the mouth. The YOUNG MAN stands as if in a daze, then he suddenly deals the OVERSEER a blow*

[107] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 547.
[108] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 548.
[109] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 548.

that sends him reeling unconscious to the floor. There is a clash of cymbals. Whistles. The far-off cry of a mob."[110]

Despite the facts that the Overseer was attempting to rob the Young Man and that he initiated the violence, the Young Man is killed. Furthermore, the actual cause – the Overseer's desire to extort work without pay from the Young Man, and the Young Man's just resistance – is erased in favor of the standard myth of lynching: "NEWSBOYS: Negro lynched in Alabama! Big Lynching Near Selma! Read all about it! Read about the lynching. Negro accused of rape! Big lynching!"[111] In presenting the practice of lynching this way, Hughes confirms that it is, in the terms of Louis Althusser, a violently Repressive Apparatus for maintaining the racialized practice of Capitalism in America, and the use of accusations of sexual violence to cover this fact is active propagandizing. Furthermore, it once again reveals the incredible vulnerability of a single individual acting against the oppressive system, and the ease with which their resistance can be crushed, driving home yet again the need for mass organization to drive successful resistance.

On the transition out of the lynching scene, the Young Man's act of resistance, despite his death, is linked into a chain of resistance too powerful for death to crush:

> YOUNG MAN: The killed Christ, didn't they, when he tried to change the world?
>
> WOMAN: But did he die?
>
> EVERYONE: *No!*
>
> YOUNG MAN: The killed John Brown, didn't they, when he tried to free the slaves?

[110] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 549.
[111] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 549.

WOMAN: But did he die?

VOICES: No!

YOUNG MAN: What did Angelo Herndon say when they had him in prison for trying to help the poor? What did Herndon say?

VOICE: Let them kill Herndon, if they will, but a million more will rise to take my place.

YOUNG MAN: You can't kill the working class, he said. And when we rise…[112]

The choice of these three martyrs – Christ, John Brown, and Angelo Herndon – pinpoints Hughes' personal and ideological position at the time of writing.

John Brown was the hero of his childhood, as central to his grandmother's stories of resistance as her first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, who rode with Brown during the attack on Harpers Ferry, VA.[113] Brown was also widely revered by the Harlem audiences Hughes was trying to reach. Angelo Herndon was Hughes' friend, as well as his model for the ideal black Communist activist. Despite the influence of his deeply religious grandmother, Hughes, unwilling atheist that he was, did not feel a profound, personal relationship with Jesus, but he recognized the centrality of the church in Afro-American life and political organization. Including the figure of Christ provides a stable tradition of cultural rebellion that makes the inclusion of the controversial figure of Angelo Herndon more palatable to his audiences. Finally, by tying the Young Man – and by implication, all black people lynched in America – to these martyrs, Hughes recasts him as a heroic fighter for freedom, rather than a victim, thus emphasizing the agency so often denied to Afro-Americans.

[112] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 550-551.
[113] Rampersad, 6.

After an extended discussion of the history and meaning of the blues – best summarized by the Young Man's observation that "colored folks made the blues! Now everybody sings 'em"[114] – Hughes returns to the primary arc of the text, documenting the history of racialized Capitalist oppression and Afro-American resistance. Indeed, the blues segment, which is all but unconnected to the rest of the play, is the only portion that is not fundamentally shaped by Hughes' Communism. The action picks up in the urban North; despite the hopes of the millions of people leaving the South as part of the Great Migration, the work available remains both exploitive and racialized. The Young Man reflects on this injustice as he polishes the titular brass spittoon:

> I didn't even have [a chance to go to high school]. Had to start work as soon as I was big enough…There ain't many decent jobs a colored boy can get nohow. Here I am polishing spittoons in a hotel…And most towns, there just ain't nothing' much for a colored boy to do. Lots of factories won't even hire colored men. Lots of places I can't join unions…Have *I* always got to do the cleaning? Always the dirty work? Me! Always?[115]

Then after the 1929 crash and the start of the Great Depression, even that work disappeared.

Once the Young Man finishes reciting "Brass Spittoons," the Overseer calls him over – by the wrong name. "Well, whatever your name is, listen," the Overseer demands. "I'm the boss and I got to cut down expenses. You know the bank crash – folks ain't spending money. I'm gonna let the bell-boys do the house man's work from now on. You

[114] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 557.
[115] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 557-558.

can get your check and go."[116] The systematic bias towards keeping white men employed, at the expense of all other workers, meant the effects of the Depression hit Afro-American communities even harder than those of other ethnic groups. This devastating impact, combined with practices by white landlords and business owners to wrench what little money remained away from Harlem residents, lay the groundwork for the March 19, 1935 riot – the last act of resistance depicted in the play, prior to the future workers' uprising predicted by the closing moments.

The riot was triggered by events at the W. H. Kress store on 125th Street. The store was already hated and mistrusted, as it depended on black Harlem residents to provide its income, yet would only hire white workers. When a teenager, Lino Rivera, was caught shoplifting there, and was improperly detained by police in the store basement, rumors that he was assaulted or even murdered flew through the community. In this case the allegations of police brutality were groundless – Rivera had been released unharmed – but the story was believed because the extra-judicial torture and murder of black people, both by police and by lynchers tacitly supported by the police, was all too common. Crowds took to the streets to protest, where they were met by "excessive police response," which in turn triggered a "full-blown riot…from 120th to 138th street [*sic*] between Fifth and St. Nicolas avenues."[117]

In *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, Hughes depicts the riot as being solely the result of economic exploitation. A series of vignettes depict how, as McLaren summarizes, "Harlem has been used as a source of capital, which has not been reinvested in the

[116] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 559.
[117] McLaren, 125.

community."[118] These brief exchanges include the Overseer price gouging Harlem residents on rent and insurance, refusing to hire black workers for good jobs and underpaying those working the unpleasant and dangerous ones, and refusing to provide service in local restaurants. It is this grinding, daily abuse, Hughes implicitly argues, not the detention of Rivera, that is to blame for the 1935 uprising. Indeed, if not for the severity of the conditions and the anger in the face of Capitalist as well as racialized oppression, the response to the events at the Kress store would probably have been less violent.

No matter the cause, however, Hughes directly states, through the Young Man's voice, that "riots won't solve anything."[119] The Harlem riot only hurt Harlem; the destruction was limited to the borough, and the insured white business owners lost little. Furthermore, the chaos of the riot served as a Bakhtinian carnival and burned off the impulse to rebellion. Instead, the solution, the Young Man explains for the playwright, is interracial, class based organization and group resistance. Hughes admits the challenge of working with prejudiced white workers, a problem he sought to counter with *Harvest* and its depiction of how race complicates narratives of class, but he does not grant his audience permission to wait until that problem has been solved before acting. Instead, the Young Man warns his audience that "we must teach them. But when they do learn, and black and white really get together, what power in the world can stop us from getting what we want?"[120] Furthermore, Hughes also asks his audiences to move beyond any anti-Communist prejudice and embrace class based organizing, in the pledge offered by the Young Man in his final line:

[118] McLaren, 125.
[119] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 567.
[120] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 568.

> I, a Negro, offer you my hand, I offer you my strength and power. Together, we can make America a land where all of us are free from poverty and oppression and where no man or woman need ever be hungry, cold, or kept down again. White worker, here is my hand. Today we're man to man.[121]

In deference to Harlem audiences, the play does not actually end with the singing of the "Internationale." Instead the entire cast sings a song written for *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, though it would have fit in well with his poetry collection *A New Song*:

> *(As they sing the audience joins with them, and various members of the audience, workers, doctors, nurses, professional men, teachers, white and black, come forward to link hands with the characters in the play until the players and the audience are one.)*
>
> Oh, who wants to come and join hands with me?
>
> Who wants to make one great unity?
>
> Who wants to say, no more black or white?
>
> Then let's get together, folks,
>
> And fight, fight, fight!
>
> THE END[122]

This relatively subtle approach worked, and audience after audience joined the call for organized resistance to American racism, Capitalism, and oppression.

In light of the success of the first season of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre and *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, Hughes set about ending his wandering years and establishing a settled home in New York. Not only did he have his personal belongings

[121] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 569.
[122] Hughes, *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, in *The Plays to 1942*, 569-570).

shipped from Cleveland, he even brought larger items out from long-term storage, "from the attic at 512 Downer St in Westfield, New Jersey, where he had left them following his break with Mrs. Mason."[123] Interrupting this period of peace and creativity were two deaths, first of his mother on June 3 and then, just a few weeks later, that of his mentor and friend, the poet and activist James Weldon Johnson.[124] Once more looking abroad for inspiration in a time of personal crisis, Hughes returned to Paris for the summer of 1938 to attend two radical events, a conference of the International Association of Writers and the anti-Fascist Congress for Peace Action and Against Bombing of Open Cities.[125]

However, the attitude of both events was one of abject hopelessness in the face of "increasing persecution of the Jews in Germany and Austria and the defeat of Loyalist strongholds in Spain"; furthermore:

> Authors from China brooded over the fall of key Chinese provinces to Japan and Hitler's recognition of the puppet Manchukuo state. All delegates seemed worried about the military maneuvers of the Nazis, who were goosestepping steadily toward Czechoslovakia after seizing Austria in March and declaring it a part of the Third Reich.[126]

If he had had more time before the second Harlem Suitcase Theatre season, perhaps Hughes would have responded with another play like *Don't You Want to Be Free?* on the clearly upcoming war, but he had only a few weeks between his return from France and his deadline for providing a script. Furthermore, he was depressed and angry about the reports of Fascist cruelty, and even more so by the Left's growing resignation to Fascist

[123] Rampersad, 360.
[124] Rampersad, 360-361.
[125] Rampersad, 361.
[126] Berry, 279.

victory and resulting unwillingness to continue resisting. In response, Hughes lashed out with a series of six short but sharply satirical skits on the subjects of Fascism and of racism more broadly, clearly expressing his determination to continue the fight while agitating and propagandizing for his audience to do the same. These brief works, along with a revival of *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, would make up the program for the Harlem Suitcase Theatre's second season.[127]

On a given night, three of the six new pieces would be performed, followed by the longer play. Four of these six micro-dramas – *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, *Em-Fuehrer Jones*, *Limitations of Life*, and *Scarlet Sister Barry* – are burlesques of "sacrosanct cultural icons," while the other two, *Hurrah, America!* and *Young as We Is* are entirely original.[128] All use comedy as a tool to deconstruct bias and oppression, offering viewers a chance to laugh despite the terrible news from around the world while simultaneously exhorting them not to give in to nihilism in the face of Axis expansion. In short, they "signify," in the terms of groundbreaking literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on white supremacy, class inequality, and Fascism in 1938 America. As a group, these seemingly feather light works expand and develop the themes Langston Hughes explored in *Don't You Want to Be Free?*

In *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, Hughes satirizes both the venerable classic of American literature and the performance tradition built around adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. The Stowe novel, though effective in its abolitionist purpose, is rife with "sentimental and often racist commentaries on black intellect and morality," weaknesses

[127] Berry, 280.
[128] Leslie Catherine Sanders, introduction to "Six Satires," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 574.

that are deepened by the minstrel show style of stage and film adaptations.[129] The character of Uncle Tom, in particular, is so inhumanly meek that his name has become a pejorative, as "the antithesis of black heroic icons and radical organizers."[130] In the face of this cultural weight, Hughes gives his Tom a chance of "reclaiming his dignity" through unapologetic resistance to oppression.[131]

This brief text wastes no time condemning the cartoonishly evil Simon Legree, but instead takes aim at the "good master" – and by implication the myth of the benevolent dictator in any form. According to the opening note, Mars Sinclair, Hughes' version of Augustine St. Claire, is ambiguously described as "fair and upright," words that can describe both physical appearance and moral characteristics.[132] This subtle bit of wordplay signifies the tendency of American culture to link "goodness" with "whiteness." Sinclair then reveals that he considers himself the "perfect master" to Tom's "perfect slave."[133] Nevertheless, throughout the play Sinclair takes advantage of his ownership of Tom to engage in acts of pointless cruelty – repeatedly kicking him – while sermonizing to Eva on proper Christian behavior. While this can be read as mere hypocrisy, it reveals the violence inherent in chattel slavery: to be the perfect master is to be abusive.

The perfect Eva of Stowe's 1852 novel is played by "an overgrown adult in child's clothes, frills and ribbon. Also, alas, she is colored, with blond curls. She is

[129] McLaren, 129.
[130] McLaren, 129.
[131] McLaren, 131.
[132] Langston Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 574.
[133] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, 575.

petulant and naughty."[134] This characterization draws heavily on the Topsy performance tradition: singing, dancing, and talking back. In a particularly revealing exchange Tom asks "Why, Miss Eva, don't you be a nice little girl, (*Pause*) like Topsy?" to why she replies "I don't have to. I'm white."[135] In addition to the physical comedy of the black actor announcing the character's whiteness, this exchange reveals the power of white supremacy, which protects Eva from the consequences of her actions, while in the source material it is through her similar actions that Topsy is "portrayed as an amoral character" and has "her identity obliterated by enslavement."[136]

Despite her golden curls, however, Eva was never an angel; even in Stowe's telling, she was a child of privilege who treated Tom as a pet. As a result, demystifying her character is necessary for granting Tom full humanity:

> TOM: And now, folks, I'm gonna do something else I been wantin' to do ever since the Civil War – (*Calls EVA*) Come here, honey! and that is slap Little Eva smack down.
>
> (*He slaps LITTLE EVA down. SINCLAIR cries aloud, palm to his cheek. Exit Tom wiping his hands.*)
>
> SINCLAIR: Tom! (*Calling after TOM*) You've broken Little Eva's wings. Look at them on the grass.
>
> EVA: (*Bawling loudly*) Waw—aaa—aa—a!
>
> CURTAIN[137]

[134] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, 574-575.
[135] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, 575.
[136] McLaren, 129.
[137] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, 576-577.

Through this minor act of violence Tom reclaims power from Sinclair and Eva and turns her from the icon of perfection into the far more prosaic reality of a screaming child. The long delay in this action – since the Civil War – reveals "the cumulative anger and frustration of African Americans in the segregation era," much as the depiction of the Harlem riot does *Don't You Want to Be Free?*[138]

This grand gesture is Tom's final act of rebellion, but it is precipitated by Sinclair's assumption that his ownership of Tom's body also gives him control of Tom's political self. The two men's differing opinions of the nature of slavery are revealed by Sinclair's casual declaration, "Tom, damn you! I own you, body and soul," – a line given by the villainous Legree in Stowe's novel – and Tom's response, "My body may belong to you, Mars Sinclair! *(Switching)* But, oh! My soul."[139] However, despite his private resistance, Tom remains outwardly submissive, allowing Sinclair's abuse and providing entertainment for Little Eva. However, the veneer of obedience cracks when Sinclair assumes that Tom votes "his" (undefined) way. "No! No!" Tom answers. "I may chop your cotton and cut your cane, but when I votes, (*to the audience*) I votes for Roosevelt."[140] Once he has proclaimed his political independence, neither Sinclair's "hurt" nor Eva's accusations of "Red" can prevent his next bombshell: "While I'm struttin' ma stuff, Mr. Sinclair, I might as well tell you – Uncle Tom is Mister Thomas now!"[141] This proclamation of identity is all the impetus he needs to put into action his long cherished desire to smack down Little Eva.

[138] McLaren, 131.
[139] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin*, 575.
[140] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin,* 576.
[141] Hughes, *Colonel Tom's Cabin,* 576.

"Mister Thomas," however, does not claim another honorific. The military rank of "Colonel" appears only in the title and is not otherwise explained; the resulting instability of the referent creates multiple, simultaneous layers of meaning. First, there is the simple metaphorical meaning: Tom is a soldier in the battle against the vestiges of the old South and all other forms of white supremacy in the United States. Second, it harkens back to the black Civil War soldiers who fought to end slavery. Similarly, it invokes the spirit of the Afro-American veterans of the First World War, who made an unsuccessful bid for better treatment by the nation they had served. Finally, it ties to the soldiers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, particularly Oliver Law, who was "the first African American ever to command an integrated American fighting force."[142] Together, these complex associations remove Hughes' Tom from the subservient position of Stowe's character and place him in the same continuum of revolutionary fighters celebrated in *Don't You Want to Be Free?*

Hughes casts a similarly critical eye on another famous white author's dehumanizing depiction of blackness with *Em-Fuehrer Jones*. As Rampersad notes, "this skit gives Hughes a chance at last to express some of his distinct reservations about Eugene O'Neill's primitivistic vision of black psychology" as expressed in O'Neill's highly influential 1920 one-act, *Emperor Jones*.[143] Hughes knew many of Harlem's residents were no more impressed with the play than he was. He had seen Jules Bledsoe perform the title role of *The Emperor Jones* at the Lincoln Theater, an experience he later recalls in *The Big Sea*:

[142] Danny Duncan Collum, ed., *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do,"* (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1992), 83.
[143] Rampersad, 364.

> The audience didn't know what to make of *The Emperor Jones* on a stage where "Shake That Thing" was formerly the rage. And when the Emperor Jones started running naked through the forest, hearing the Little Frightened Fears, naturally, they howled with laughter.
>
> "Them ain't no ghosts, fool!" the spectators cried from the orchestra. "Why don't you come out o' that jungle – back to Harlem where you belong.[144]

Hughes successfully tapped into the widespread resentment of O'Neill's depiction of the unclothed Emperor and his imaginary ghosts, giving this parody unexpected staying power; author John A. Williams would revive the skit "a generation after *The Em-Fuehrer Jones* was performed at the Harlem Suitcase Theater."[145]

This satire deploys comedy against the rising power of German Fascism. The playlet begins in darkness. A "will-o'-the-wisp light" comes up to illuminate a man alone onstage:

> *The EM-FUEHRER has a little mustache and a bang of hair over his forehead. He is Aryan (so he says). He wears a uniform, a few medals, and officer's cap, and high boots. He goosesteps. He heils! He doesn't want the world or himself to know that he is afraid, but to tell the truth, he is lost in a great black forest.*[146]

In this, his personal, expressionistic, nightmare world, Hitler is forced to confront the irrationality of his belief that Aryan means superior. First he hears tom-toms, at which he orders Mussolini to "Cut out that Ethiopian racket!"[147] The Fuehrer doesn't like the "non-

[144] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 258.
[145] Matthew Calihman, "Black Power beyond Black Nationalism: John A. Williams, Cultural Pluralism, and the Popular Front," MELUS 34, no. 1 (Spring, 2009), 147.
[146] Langston Hughes, *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 577.
[147] Hughes, *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, 577.

Aryan" drumming, but it isn't yet a danger to his worldview. This reinforces the connection between fighting Fascism and Pan-African and anti-colonial causes.

Soon after, though, the beat of the drums is joined by the sound of running feet, as Jesse Owens chases the Em-Fuehrer across the forest. "Jesse, vat you doing running after me?" he pleads, in a German accent stylized to suggest O'Neill's dialect. "You got your laurel wreath, so stop it I say!"[148] This reminder of Afro-American power is immediately followed up by a pun about Hitler's feet "Schmelling." This pun sets up the upcoming arrival of Joe Louis, the unnamed "Boxer" of the script.

The German boxer Max Schmeling had won the World Heavyweight Championship against the previously undefeated Afro-American Joe Louis on June 19, 1936, in Harlem. Hughes, like many residents, had been devastated. He recounts the experience in *I Wonder as I Wander*:

> After the fight, which I had attended, I walked down Seventh Avenue and saw grown men weeping like children, and women sitting on curbs with their heads in their hands. All across the country that night when the news came that Joe was knocked out, people cried.[149]

When, in 1937, Louis won the title of heavyweight champion of the world, the celebration was equally passionate. He had become "a kind of symbol of all that Negroes had always dreamed of in American life," As Hughes argued in his 1956 autobiography, "I do not believe Negro America has ever before or since had a national hero like Joe Louis."[150] However, the 1937 title fight was against boxer James Braddock. Joe Louis, and with him fans worldwide, had to wait until June 22, 1938 for the rematch with

[148] Hughes, *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, 578.
[149] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 315.
[150] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 314.

Schmeling, which Louis won in a first round knockout.[151] By the "schmell" of his feet, Hitler knows that Joe Louis is stalking him.

Before the arrival of the boxing hero, Hitler finds himself in the (Jewish) Bronx, is terrorized by the red sun and the ascendance of the "Bolsheviki," hides from voices singing "Ave Maria," avoids the "Non-aryan" stars (he credits their invention to Einstein), prays to Wotan, and begs for help from Chamberlain, Daladier, Goering, and Goebbels.[152] Despite his efforts, he cannot prevent the arrival of Louis:

> *An enormous Negro youth in boxing togs with a Joe Louis ribbon across his chest comes down the aisle, picks the EM-FUEHRER up by the seat of his pants, and drags him back across the stage in full light. At the wings, the colored boy stops and speaks triumphantly into the microphone.*
>
> BOXER: "Ah guess it was dat punch to de ribs dat got him!" [153]

The line is a reference to the blow that knocked out Schmeling, explicitly linking the June boxing match with the fight against Fascist racial policy and military aggression.

While the skit is very funny, with a strong emphasis on both word games and physical humor, it is also unambiguous in its politics. Hitler is absolutely condemned, and his vision of Aryan superiority mocked and dismissed. Afro-American cultural heroes are positioned as leaders in the fight against Fascism, thus emphasizing their often denied agency and personal power. The Bolsheviks are presented as offering the promise of a better future, literally the rising sun burning away Hitler's darkness. Most importantly,

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[151] Lewis A. Erenberg, "More than a Prizefight: Joe Louis, Max Schmeling, and the Transnational Politics of Boxing," in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 315.
[152] Hughes, *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, 578-579.
[153] Hughes, *The Em-Fuehrer Jones*, 579.

the distant politics of Europe are solidly connected to life on American soil, offering a direct challenge to the country's tendency toward isolationism.

With *Scarlet Sister Barry* Hughes shifts back from the broad threat of Fascism to once more comment on the racism built into even the most well intentioned white authors' depictions of Afro-American people and cultures, as well as on the narrower, but still culturally significant, topic of blackface performance. The title puns on both the work parodied – *Scarlet Sister Mary*, the 1928 Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Julia Peterkin, adapted for Broadway in 1931 – and the name of actress who played the titular role in that production, Ethel Barrymore. While criticism of Peterkin and her complex and flawed attempt to use the Gullah language to give "her characters a native tongue to speak their own stories in their own voice"[154] is implied, this skit "is more a parody of white ability to portray black Americans than of the circumstances of Peterkin's novel."[155]

Scarlet Sister Mary, one of several books Peterkin wrote about the people of the Sea Islands in South Carolina, presents the story of a woman named Mary Pinesett who becomes pregnant before marriage, a sin so severe it leaves her forever "Scarlet," yet who remains unashamed and refuses to limit the scope of her life as a result. Reactions to the work, by both white and black readers, were profoundly mixed:

> On one hand, Mary is black, and her promiscuity can be understood as reinforcing the image of the black Jezebel. On the other hand, Mary knows her behavior is unacceptable to the black community, and this offers an alternative image of

[154] Mary Mac Ogden, "Julia Mood Peterkin and Wil Lou Gray: The Art and Science of Race Progress," in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times, vol. 3*, edited by Marjorie Julian Spruill, Valinda W. Littlefield, and Joan Marie Johnson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 65.
[155] McLaren, 134.

> Mary as a woman liberated from restraints, whether religious or community driver, who lives as she deems fit.[156]

Further complicating the political context and meaning of the novel, the white Peterkin initially learned Gullah from her childhood "mammy," and, as an adult, further mastered the language through speaking with the over four hundred native speakers employed at Lang Syne plantation, where she moved following her marriage to owner William George Peterkin.[157] Her relationship with the Gullah people, their language, and their culture was always mediated through this unequal power dynamic, and, as a result, was inherently appropriative.

Despite this, Hughes liked both the book and its author, whom he had met on several occasions at "literary gatherings in New York at the Knopfs' and at Carl Van Vechten's,"[158] although he still strongly believed that reproduction of Afro-American vernacular speech was "best executed by black authors such as Hurston or Sterling Brown."[159] He had no such sympathy for Barrymore, however, and believed it was unforgiveable for the actress to portray Sister Mary "despite the availability of outstanding African American performers and her avowed respect for the great African American actor Rose McClendon."[160] The anger was both ideological and personal. Hughes and McClendon bonded during the bleak year of 1930, while Hughes struggled through the many private and professional ramifications of the *Mule Bone* meltdown and McClendon experienced the crushing reminder that, despite her profound talent, white supremacist beliefs by audiences and other artists meant that "she had no hope of

[156] Mac Ogdan, 65.
[157] McLaren, 133.
[158] Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 48.
[159] McLaren, 133.
[160] Sanders, Introduction to "Six Satires," 574.

becoming a star."[161] In light of Barrymore's action, "McClendon's quiet revenge was to keep a scrapbook, which she shared with Hughes, of the many hostile reviews of Barrymore's performance."[162]

Those reviews were warranted. Unlike Peterkin, Barrymore had no knowledge of the Gullah language or culture, and her poor rendition of the dialect provides much of the humor in Hughes' burlesque. The shortest of the six satires, it takes the form of a direct address to the audience. It is set in the "Realm of Art," at the time of "Oh!," and features "one actress and her voices." She is "blond and pale on one side, brown-skin and colored on the other, in race and make-up half and half."[163] This division is exploited for physical comedy, as the unnamed Actress positions the appropriate side forward to demonstrate whether she is speaking as the character of Mary or her "true," white self. This divide is further defined through the language of the play; "Barrymore's" lines are all doggerel poetry, "while Mary's" are prose.

Following her entrance, white side first, the Actress introduces herself as "the First Lady of Our Theatre" and "the First Lady of this Stage," titles associated with Ethel Barrymore, and announces her desire "to play a Negress/From a Pulitzer Prize book."[164] She assumes the audience has concerns about her qualifications for the role, but is quick to reassure any skeptical listeners:

I've visited the South, of course,

A day or two at a time –

[161] Rampersad, 191.
[162] Rampersad, 191.
[163] Langston Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 584.
[164] Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, 584-585.

So my Negro dialect naturally

Is perfectly sublime.[165]

The Actress then transitions to her "dark side," in order to provide a demonstration of her "sublime" Gullah dialect. At this point the monologue turns into an imagined dialogue between "Mary" and her husband, July, whose lines are also given by the Actress.

The exchange contains extensive wordplay designed to draw clear attention to the gaps of race and identity between the performer playing the Actress, the Actress and her dual roles of Barrymore and Mary, and the ersatz "stage Negro" and the real Gullah people. It begins with the Actress as Mary proclaiming "Ah hear his gentle vice calling me, Lula Mae! – Cherio [*sic*], Lula Mae!"[166] The source of the name Lula is unclear, though Mae likely refers to Ethel Barrymore's real middle name, reinforcing the fact that her white self cannot help but intrude through blackface performance. This invasive whiteness is also the point of another exchange shortly after:

But July, me, your little Bright Skin's been waitin' for you.

You got a dark way of showing it.

(As she half turns around)

You two-faced hussy!...You betrayed me while I been away, Lula Mae.

And once more when Mae complains "You didn't even wait to see if our chile would be a little blond or a little brunette."[167]

Other lines explicitly mock Barrymore's failure to accurately pronounce Gullah words, particularly the characteristic "gwine," as with the Actress's complaint "You been

[165] Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, 584.
[166] Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, 585.
[167] Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, 585.

gwine – gone – going-go – gone too long."[168] Furthermore, "by incorporating bits of well-known songs associated with African Americans, he mocks white popular music, entertainers, and stage personalities" who, like Peterkin and Barrymore, unapologetically mined black culture for profit without having to ever experience the oppression inspiring it.[169] While Joseph McLaren describes *Scarlet Sister Barry* as an "example of Hughes's lighter side" due to its "humor based on the reversal of stereotypes," the skit is a full-throated condemnation of white supremacist Capitalism, under which talented Afro-American artists like those of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, including Hughes himself, struggled to find regular work, while white artists, such as Peterkin and Barrymore, were routinely awarded for their unauthorized copies of black art and culture.

This theme continues in the last of Hughes' parodies for the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, *Limitations of Life*. As in the other burlesques, this skit creates a complex web of signification regarding popular culture, internalized racism, and economic inequality while parodying the controversial 1934 John M. Stahl film adaptation of the 1933 Fannie Hurst novel *Imitation of Life*. Like Peterkin, Hurst was attempting to create an "accurate" depiction of Afro-American life, but instead reiterates the same tired, dehumanizing stereotypes. Indeed, Hurst's work lacks even the redeeming qualities of cultural specificity and linguistic accuracy of Peterkin's depictions of the Gullah, instead drawing on the broadest, most clichéd versions of the "Mammy" and "Tragic Mulatto" to create the conflict.

Then, when adapted for the highly melodramatic film, these stock characterizations, already inherently flawed, were stripped of any remaining scraps of

[168] Hughes, *Scarlet Sister Barry*, 585.
[169] McLaren, 134.

subtlety, provoking condemnation and outrage from Afro-American audiences of all political viewpoints. Compounding the already fully justified offensive, Hurst struck out against her critics, complaining that the "unintelligent," "petty," and "ungrateful" black critics did not appreciate that the adaptation "practically inaugurates into the important medium of the motion-picture a consideration of the Negro as part of the social pattern of American life."[170] This response did not change any minds on the merits of her work.

In the novel and movie adaptation, the widowed Aunt Delilah, an "enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom…scrubbed and starchy-looking," trades her labor for room and board in the home of the widow Bea Pullman, receiving no wages.[171] Of course, as a stereotyped "Mammy," Aunt Delilah is an excellent cook, specializing in delicious pancakes based on a "secret family recipe." However, the perfect servant, happy to obliterate her own identity to the benefit of her white mistress, quickly reveals the secret recipe to Pullman, who uses Delilah's recipe to open a pancake house and her image to advertise.[172] Aunt Delilah's pancake mix makes Pullman rich, but, in keeping with the romanticized and self-serving ideal of the female servant, Aunt Delilah earns nothing for her creativity and craftsmanship. This, Hurst carefully asserts, is not because Bea is exploiting her; indeed Delilah is offered a "generous" twenty percent of the profits on the product she invented, but she absolutely refuses to accept the payment, instead begging for the privilege of remaining Pullman's de facto slave for the rest of her life.[173]

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[170] Jane Caputi, "'Specifying' Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes's 'Limitations of Life,' Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as 'Answers' to Hurst's *Imitation of Life*," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 1990), 701.
[171] Fanny Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 76.
[172] Caputi, 699.
[173] Caputi, 700.

Peola, Delilah's daughter, functions as a variation on the "tragic mulatta." By her mother's description, Peola is "the purfectest white nigger baby dat God ever dropped down in de lap of a black woman from Virginie."[174] Despite her exceptionally light skin tone, the text insists, Peola is still limited by her race. This is communicated via racist tirades by Bea's daughter, Jessie, and by Delilah's response, which is to insist the abuse is entirely appropriate, and that any resistance by Peola merits punishment:

> Peola's got to learn. What's happed is as nacheral as de tides. Dey been creepin' up on her since de day she was born, and now de first little wave is here, wettin' her feet. Jessie ain't to blame. God ain't, 'cause He had some good reason for makin' us black and white…and de sooner mah chile learns to agree wid Him the better."[175]

From the first time this happens, when the girls are approximately seven years old, Peola tries to pass as white, but her efforts are repeatedly confounded by her dark-skinned mother's appearances. Finally, in an effort to permanently escape from the subservient position forced upon her, she tells her mother she is leaving and never coming back. Delilah, in an appropriately melodramatic scene, takes to her bed and dies of a broken heart. Peola, Hurst intimates, is responsible for her mother's death, since trying to pass as white, and thus resisting God and the natural order of the world, kills people.

Despite the profoundly offensive depictions of race and gender, both novel and movie left a long shadow on the culture of Harlem, as evidenced by the multiple artistic responses and even the local slang, with the adaption of the word "peola" to mean a black

[174] Hurst, 76-77.
[175] Hurst, 151.

woman who appeared or who wished to appear white.[176] Pancake, which can also "signify a white person," was already an insult for a woman who hewed too closely to the "Mammy" stereotype, from the Aunt Jemima line of pancake mixes and syrups, but the film repopularized it.[177] Despite the four years since the release of the film, the collective anger at Hurst's grossly stereotyped depictions of Afro-Americans lingered, and Hughes – accurately – predicted the majority black Harlem Suitcase Theatre audiences would enjoy seeing his razor humor turned on it.

Hughes' parody is set in Harlem and features three characters: Mammy Weavers, Audette Aubert, and Ed Starks. All three names were created through manipulation of the performers' real ones. Aunt Delilah was played by Louise Beavers and Bea Pullman by Claudette Colbert. Ed Starks is derived from Ned Sparks, who played Bea's business manager Elmer Smith, a minor character who first suggests that Pullman sell pancake mix in addition to running her restaurant.[178] Hughes achieves the first layer of humor by reversing the roles of his versions of Aunt Delilah and Bea Pullman, a fact that delighted "the blacks in the audience, who howled throughout 'Limitations of Life' at seeing a black society lady return home from the opera to the ministrations of her shuffling white maid. Most whites were less amused," as the racial inversion serves as a direct challenge to the white supremacist ideology that *Imitation of Life* is crafted to justify.[179]

Not only is Mammy Weavers rich, she appears "in trailing evening gown, with tiara and large Metropolitan Opera Program, speaking perfect English with Oxford

[176] Caputi, 700.
[177] McLaren, 129.
[178] McLaren, 128.
[179] Rampersad, 365.

accent."[180] Audette, on the other hand, uses a minstrel accent, announces her love of "colored folks" and refuses a day off on grounds; she "wouldn't know what to do with it."[181] Instead she tells Mammy Weavers that she wants "a grand funeral when I die" – the only payment Aunt Delilah would accept from Bea Pullman for her years of voluntary servitude.[182] Until then she is content with her tiny room in the basement. The depiction of the relationship between the two women clearly undermines the standard depiction of black/white domestic associations – the servant happily sacrificing everything to the mistress – but it also provides a stark image of the extreme economic inequality that results from Capitalism: Mammy Weavers lives in a mansion and Audette in the basement. By placing a white woman in this position Hughes changes the standard frame of reference, and so challenges his audience members to recognize the inhumanity in similar treatment of the black and of the poor, not that many of his black audience members would have needed the reminder.

Even more threatening to the status quo is the depiction of blackness as something so desirable that a young white girl, a standard emblem of innocence and (racial) purity, would try to become black. When Mammy Weavers asks after Audette's daughter, Audette explains, "Lawd, Mammy Weavers, ma little Riola's tryin' so hard to be colored. She just loves Harlem. She's lying out in de back yard in de sun all day long *tannin'* herself, ever day, tryin' so hard to be colored."[183] Even her Eskimo father, who tragically "melted away the day after Riola were born," couldn't make her dark enough to pass.[184]

[180] Langston Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 582.
[181] Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, 584.
[182] Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, 583.
[183] Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, 583.
[184] Hughes, *Limitations of Life*, 583.

Ironically, this absurd description of Riola's struggle catches an element of Hughes' own experience of identity, and his eternal struggle to meet his own standards of "authentically black."

The final moment of *Limitations of Life* both confirms and challenges the dogma of race as something immutable and defining. In response to Audette's refusal to accept a day off, Ed's declaration "once a pancake, always a pancake," as he displays a box of a pancake mix featuring a white Aunt Jemima,[185] recognizes and questions the defining nature of race. In the movie, Elmer gave the same line in response to Delilah's refusal to accept partial ownership of Pullman's business, indicating the meaning of pancake as originally used here was "Mammy," a role that Hurst never allowed Aunt Delilah to move beyond or outside.

Within the context of the skit, "pancake" signifies on Audette's racial identity, based on the meaning of "whiteness," self-imposed subservience from the same definition of "Mammy" that Elmer uses, only without his uncritical acceptance, and, additionally, her status as a manipulated media figure sold for profit, such as Aunt Jemima. Audette and Delilah cannot escape their racial identities, and through their investment in their own servitude cannot escape their oppressive circumstance, which in turn traps them within the media image created for Mammy Weavers'/Bea Pullman's pancake empire. However, should Audette ever take advantage of the possibilities that Hurst denied Delilah and choose to stop empowering her own oppressor, she can step out of the "pancake" roles of eternal servant and smiling face on the box to transcend the socially proscribed "place" demarcated by her race within Hughes' inverted world, just as he managed to do that through supporting himself as a writer in the real world.

[185] Hughes, *Limitations of Life,* 584.

From this rejection of racially based social roles and class based exploitation, Hughes returns to the themes of *Em-Fuehrer Jones,* international politics and the rise of Fascism, with *America Hurrah!* This first of the two entirely original micro-dramas presented during the second Harlem Suitcase Theatre season, alternatively titled *Jersey City Justice*, is credited to Hughes "with Louis Douglas," an actor in the company, though his contribution is unclear.[186] This skit takes an unambiguously anti-Fascist position, revealing a change from the previous season earlier in 1938. During the editing process of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Hughes cut the most anti-Fascist verse of the final song:

> Who wants to know what American can be?
>
> Who wants to make a land that's really free?
>
> Who wants to save it from a fascist plight?
>
> Then let's get together, folks, and fight, fight, fight![187]

After his depressing summer in Paris he was determined to take an even harder line against the threat of Fascism abroad and in the United States.

In the late 1930s, Mayor Frank Hague's style of governing Jersey City turned to the Fascist, so much so that he attracted the attention of Trotsky in Mexico. In his authoritarian, anti-labor, and pro-Capitalist efforts, he "used city cops, municipal employees and war veterans in cooperation with the company goons to prevent the CIO from organising in the area; picketing was outlawed and union organisers run out of town."[188] Though conservative and even moderate observers dismissed these actions as

[186] Sanders, Introduction to "Six Satires," 574.
[187] Hughes, *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, working draft, 36.
[188] James Patrick Cannon, *The Fight against Fascism in the USA* (Chippendale: Resistance Books, 2004), 42.

commonplace corruption, in the view of radicals like Hughes, Hague was running one of the most successful Fascist establishments in US history. Hughes uses the comedic skit to sound the alarm about the danger of the rising Fascist threat and to convince any skeptics in the audience of its emergence on the other side of the Hudson River.

In this scene, Hughes exploits stereotyped characterizations typical of vaudeville ethnic roles to create the only humor in what is otherwise a dark depiction of the power of whiteness and the role of the Repressive State Apparatus in maintaining the racialized power structure of American society. The playlet features four characters, their identifications confirmed by visual symbols in the manner of Blue Blouse agitprop:

> *The GERMAN-AMERICAN wears a large Swastica* [*sic*] *in his button-hole, the ITALIAN-AMERICAN a fasces. They both speak with accents, look slightly foreign but well-dressed, evidently have jobs. The NEGRO is unemployed. The POLICEMAN might be Irish. The scene, a street corner.*[189]

The play begins with the German- and Italian-Americans discussing their desire for a European style Fascist to seize control of the United States:

> GERMAN: Vat dis country needs is a good Hitler.
>
> BOTH: Heil, Hitler!
>
> ITALIAN: Or either a good Mussolini.
>
> BOTH: Viva, Il Duce![190]

Their awkward recitation of the required salutes turns the action, threatening in propaganda films such as those by Leni Riefenstahl, into an absurdity. From there they

[189] Langston Hughes and Louis Douglas, *Hurrah, America!*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 580.
[190] Hughes and Douglas, 580.

turn to the subject of "heroic" acts of Fascism they want to see continued. Only marginally exaggerated, these include: conquering African territories like Ethiopia, sending the Jews to concentration camps, giving guns to babies, burning books, supporting Franco, and purifying the white race. If only the U.S. had a Fascist in power, the Italian-American frets at the end of this recitation, "then America would amount to something. Democracy's no good, no how!"[191]

Clearly demonstrating one of the greatest dangers represented by the Fascist leaders, the Negro, until this point unobserved, is overcome by the excitement aroused by the charismatic speakers. Ignoring the content of their speech, he crosses to join them in their nationalistic frenzy, yelling "Hurrah, America!"[192] The other two men, angry at his interruption of their moment, "*both light in on the poor NEGRO and begin to beat him right and left. Police whistles blow. A COP comes running. The COP grabs the NEGRO by the collar.*" [193] Following the logic of the white supremacist ideologies of both Fascism and American Democracy, the Cop cannot conceive of a scenario in which the Negro could be the victim and thus arrests him. Satisfied with this violent confirmation of their power and status, the three white men take turns making ritualized tribute to their leaders: "Heil, Hitler!" "Viva, Mussolini!" and "Long live Mayor Hague!" while the Negro is hauled away still chanting "Hurrah, America!"[194]

Unlike the other skits in this set, *Hurrah America!* offers no complexity, no word play, and almost no laughs. However, it does remove any pleasant illusions his audience might be harboring as to the danger of Fascism, both in Europe and locally, and offers an

[191] Hughes and Douglas, 580.
[192] Hughes and Douglas, 581.
[193] Hughes and Douglas, 581.
[194] Hughes and Douglas, 581.

implicit condemnation of the American tendency towards isolationism. Furthermore, through the Negro's self-destructive enjoyment of losing his sense of self into the mob mentality of chauvinistic Nationalism, it reveals the fine line between that ideology and Fascism, as well as the dangers of embracing mass experience over critical thought. While this micro-drama's didacticism renders it less appealing to audiences than the complex interplay of ideas and significations in the other satires, its inclusion reveals the continuing influence of orthodox Communist agitprop on Hughes' Harlem Suitcase Theatre plays.

In his final work for his theater, *Young as We Is*, Hughes fuses his two critical perspectives as he did in *Don't You Want to Be Free?* and examines the effects of poverty and fine gradations of class status on three young boys, all "typical little negro boys of the city streets," working despite their ages.[195] Compared to the other two, the Newsboy is well off. His father works for the WPA and his mother is at home. He attends school in addition to selling papers for pocket change, and is not dependant on his own labor for survival. The comfort of his life has made this young member of the petite bourgeoisie idealistically indifferent to actually selling papers: he is trying to sell the *Amsterdam News* in a white neighborhood, a choice he justifies by asking "Why not? Colored folks reads white papers. How come white folks ought'n ter read colored papers?"[196]

The rather more streetwise Shineboy answers "they ought to. But they ain't. You can't sell nary one here."[197] While the Newsboy works for spending money, the Shineboy works because he must, and this makes him much more aware of the market realities of

[195] Langston Hughes, *Young as We Is*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v. 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, by Langston Hughes, edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 586.
[196] Hughes, *Young as We Is*, 587.
[197] Hughes, *Young as We Is*, 587.

the neighborhoods. His father is dead, his mother a domestic, and he eats based on what he makes. A transplant from Mississippi, the proletarian Shineboy doesn't attend school and his thick dialect provides both a running joke and an object lesson in the function of language as a marker and self-sustaining creator of race and class. He will be able to support himself as long as he is physically healthy, but will never be able to change his social position.

The third boy only appears at the end of the sketch, and as a result his character and circumstances are less developed. He busks as a dancer, for the princely sum of a dime a dance. He is emphatic that he is a professional, and is insulted when the relatively privileged Newsboy tries to convince him to perform for free:

> NEWSBOY: OH! I thought maybe you'd dance for nothing.
>
> DANCER: You gonna gimme one of your papers for nothing.
>
> NEWSBOY: No, that's my business.
>
> DANCER: Dancing is my business, so what?[198]

The Dancer's class status is ambiguous; his manner of speaking indicates that he has had more education than the Shineboy but less than the Newsboy, and he never says whether he dances to support himself or if he has family or a guardian who provides the necessities. Within the micro- economy of the streets, the Dancer is the artist/intellectual whose cultural capital places him outside the rigid class system that benefits the Newsboy and traps the Shineboy, placing him in the same position Hughes' fought to occupy throughout the 1930s – that of an independent creator, unbounded by the limits of other work or patronage.

[198] Hughes, *Young as We Is*, 590.

In the last moments, the skit zooms out from the boys and their competition for status within their small society and places them within the larger context of New York life. The children, all black, are driven out of the wealthy white neighborhood by an Irish cop with the thick accent of an immigrant. He, like they, would not be welcome were he not providing a service to those living in the area, but in this instance he is holding the race and class lines. The boys return to Harlem and to the community which supports them, but the audience is left to wonder about the possibilities for an alignment of class interests across cultural lines, thus returning to the very note Hughes strikes so clearly in *Don't You Want To Be Free?*

Young as We Is serves as the culmination of Hughes nearly decade long leftward arc, from his uncertain declaration of his own Communism in *Scottsboro Limited*, through the unsuccessful orthodoxy of *Harvest* and *Angelo Herndon Jones*, and finally to his mature work at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, where he was finally able to successfully integrate his critical perspectives and create the radically political art he wanted for the audience that nurtured him. This delicate balance of Marxism and race consciousness allowed him to coax his relatively conservative black audiences into supporting the Red views they rejected from white activists while reminding his militantly Red audiences of the unique experience – for better and too often for worse – of living while black in America. With *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Hughes brought a Marxist perspective to the revolutionary history of Afro-American resistance to white supremacy and its relationship to labor and Capitalism, and with his six satires he expands on threats from Fascism at home and abroad to the thoughtlessly dehumanizing prejudice of white liberals. While Hughes' theater ultimately would not last, for a brief moment in 1938 he

was able to find and present to the world his authentic self, both truly black and truly Red.

CONCLUSION

The end of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre's second season marked the end, as well, of Langston Hughes' time as a Communist playwright. It was also the beginning of the end of his involvement with the radical left. Multiple factors contributed to this shift of political position and public persona: the international upheaval resulting from the outbreak of the Second World War after years of rising violence, Hughes' increasingly desperate financial situation due to the unprofitability of his theater, and the personal impact of his mother's death, among others. As a result, Hughes ended the decade as he had begun it, remaking his life and work to match his changing circumstances, negotiating between ideological conviction and practical need to craft a new self for the new era. That his Red period was so brief has led some to dismiss its significance entirely, but examination of this period is nonetheless revelatory as it exposes both the constructed manner of Hughes' identities throughout his life, including the necessary compromises even within his apparently most ideologically pure statements and actions, and his use of his creative writing, in all genres, to bring those identities into being.

The Harlem Suitcase Theatre was already in trouble even as its second season began in grand style with "a gala evening that drew dozens of celebrities, black and white, to the International Workers Order community center in Harlem."[1] The company was badly underfunded, and Hughes, already desperately short on funds, was forced to beg money from friends[2] or cover the costs himself.[3] The performers were inexperienced and unprofessional, with individual members of the troupe drifting in and out almost at

[1] Rampersad, 365.
[2] Rampersad, 364.
[3] Rampersad, 360.

will.[4] Furthermore, most of them were neither well versed in the workers' theater style nor dedicated to radical politics, and they rebelled against the minimalist staging and didactic material. A few even went to cofounder and executive committee chairman Louise Thompson, demanding that the group abandon Hughes' writing to produce works by Noel Coward.[5] Furthermore, Hughes had overscheduled himself during the autumn of 1938, and had fallen so badly behind on his writing that the final act of *Front Porch* barely arrived at Karamu House in Cleveland ahead of the play's scheduled opening.[6] He had dreamed of copying the Russian master artists, such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and Nikolai Oklopkov, and of creating a theater shaped by his dramatic vision alone. The reality, however, was far more difficult than he had expected or was prepared to carry through.

Hughes responded as he usually did to distress: he fled. In this case to Los Angeles and the hyper-Capitalistic world of Hollywood, to help Clarence Muse write the script for a new film. The two men had first met in May of 1932, while Hughes was in the city for the world premiere of *Scottsboro Limited*.[7] While Hughes had wandered, Muse had remained in LA, building his reputation as an actor and musician. Then, in 1938, Muse scored an unexpected box office hit with his direction of Hall Johnson's *Run Little Chillun'* for the local Negro Unit of the Federal Theater Project. The show ran for almost a full year prior to the dissolution of the Federal Theater, during which time scalpers sold the fifty-five cent tickets for up to four dollars each. When Congress killed the Project in 1939, the production "was reorganized and opened under private

[4] Rampersad, 360.
[5] Rampersad, 364.
[6] Rampersad, 364.
[7] Rampersad, 238.

sponsorship."[8] In light of this incontrovertible evidence of public interest in Muse's work, producer Sol Lesser proposed that Muse write a new vehicle for the white child star Bobby Breen. Muse accepted, despite not having any experience as a scriptwriter, then immediately reached out to Hughes for help.[9]

The mid-November timing of the request was fortuitous for Hughes. He was looking for an excuse to abandon Harlem and his disappointment with the Suitcase Theater, and he was deeply in debt, to the point that six months after his mother's burial he still could not pay for her funeral expenses. Leaving for Los Angeles provided a solution to the first problem, and writing for the movies would solve the second. He set out for Hollywood, hoping that this time running away would allow him to escape all his problems. On December 4, 1938 he arrived in Hollywood intending to stay. [10] Six months later Hughes officially withdrew from his position as director of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, a mere month before the theatrical release of Muse's and his collaboration, *Way Down South*. Without his vision and influence the company crumbled, finally disbanding in the fall of 1939.[11]

Leaving as he did would likely have triggered criticism even if his film debut had managed to overcome the engrained racism of Hollywood depictions of blackness. As it was, *Way Down South* added nothing to the standard treatment other than a stamp of approval from the "Negro Poet Laureate." At the outset, however, Hughes had good reason to hope that he could escape the strictures of this form. Lesser had promised he

[8] Robert Holocomb, "The Federal Theatre in Los Angeles," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June, 1962), 143.
[9] Rampersad, 366.
[10] Rampersad, 366.
[11] Jonathan Shandell, "The Negro Little Theatre Movement," in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, edited by Harvey Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 111.

could write without restriction, other than the antebellum Southern setting, and, furthermore, director Bernard Vorhaus was a fellow Communist and public antifascist, sympathetic to Hughes' radical and anti-racist beliefs.[12] It seemed that he had a chance to create meaningful work that challenged Hollywood's white supremacy, while making Hollywood wages for the first time in his life. However, that blissful vision was, of course, an illusion.

The draft Muse and Hughes finished in early January was "so remote from Lesser's wishes, Vorhaus's idea of a good Bobby Breen vehicle, and the Hollywood formula of the fabled Southland that he [Lesser] called a meeting in mid-January" to demand the two writers begin again under far stricter limitations.[13] Hughes, with limited assistance from Muse, despite Muse's higher billing, worked through March writing and rewriting, trying to find some way to insert some honest details about life under slavery, none of which survives into the final film.[14] Instead *Way Down South* depicts a world of happy, singing slaves, well fed, relaxed and coddled by an adoring master, who voluntarily divides his profits with his slaves in order to "have a little happiness for everybody."[15]

This utopian world is only disturbed when plantation owner Timothy Reid, Sr. is killed in a freak carriage accident while Timothy Reid, Jr., played by Bobby Breen, is still too young to inherit. Instead control passes to Reid's Northern lawyer and the executer of his will, Martin Dill. Dill decides to sell the slaves in order to increase the

[12] Thomas Cripps, "Langston Hughes and the Movies: The Case of *Way Down South*," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, edited by John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 309.
[13] Cripps, 309.
[14] Cripps, 312.
[15] Clarence Muse and Langston Hughes, *Way Down South*, directed by Bernard Vorhaus (The Roan Group, 2005), DVD.

value of the estate, something that the film repeatedly assures audiences that no "true" Southerner would ever do. Through a series of comedic plans, mostly enacted off screen, the younger Reid saves the day by having the auction cancelled. The slaves will stay on the plantation, where they will live in perfect happiness without another moment of suffering forever. The end result was a depiction of the pre-Civil War South so saccharine and so egregious in its racism that Lesser was able to arrange an opening at the RKO Movie Palace on Broadway,[16] a success that only confirmed "the futility of attempting to alter the traditional plots."[17]

Mainstream white audiences and critics responded positively, happy to see Hughes and Muse confirm their biases.[18] Even some activists for Afro-American rights, notably NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White, saw hope in the Langston Hughes and Clarence Muse work, despite its manifest flaws, as they were the first black artists to be credited as screenwriters within the Hollywood studio system.[19] Hughes' comrades on the left, however, particularly other black radicals, were horrified. His earlier mainstream work, such as the Karamu comedies, could be forgiven, as it did not actively challenge the ideology promoted in his Communist plays. *Way Down South*, however, actively apologized for and promoted the white supremacist and ruthlessly Capitalist trade in human lives and bodies, all because Hughes desired money. Furthermore, he abandoned, in their view, the radical and racially conscious Harlem Suitcase Theatre in order to profit. Louise Thompson, who had traveled with him along the radical path from their 1932 trip to the Soviet Union to the establishment of his theater, was particularly

[16] Cripps, 316.
[17] Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 115.
[18] Rampersad, 371.
[19] Cripps, 316.

distressed, and wrote from New York to ensure Hughes knew how she and the rest of the community felt about his literal sale of his ideals.[20]

Hughes, on the other hand, felt that he was owed a chance to briefly escape the cycle of poverty and debt, particularly after so many years of sacrifice for his people, both Red and black. He struck back with a sarcastic open letter, comparing the experience of writing *Way Down South* – which allowed him to pay off his many debts while still leaving enough for his first new clothes in three years – with that of writing *Don't You Want to Be Free?* – which was celebrated widely, performed across multiple states, and earned him exactly $40.[21] Hidden behind this response was his own guilt over betraying the legacy of his family, particularly his grandmother, the proud widow of one of John Brown's raiders, and his beliefs of Proletarian and Afro-American resistance, sharpening his response to the harsh, but fully accurate, criticism. Unfortunately, this understandable expression of frustration and resentment at the harsh response from the left only confirmed for radical audiences that their hero had betrayed them for Capitalist gains.

The mutual resentment between Hughes and his erstwhile allies pushed him away from the identity, public and private, he had finally perfected in Harlem. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, however, Hughes ceded the field with his profits, and retreated once more to the home and patronage of the now deeply reactionary Noel Sullivan to write his autobiography.[22] While he worked to craft a safe and saleable narrative of his life, carefully scrubbing the tracks of the strident radicalism of his last few years, the combined impact of two unexpected events finalized the break with the Communists begun by *Way Down South*. The first was the announcement of the Nonaggression Pact

[20] Rampersad, 371.
[21] Rampersad, 371-372.
[22] Rampersad, 372.

between Hitler and Stalin on August 23, 1939. Hughes had been an apologetic supporter of both the Soviet Union and Stalin for most of the previous decade, even through the show trials and purges. He could not, however, forgive any alliance with the forces of Fascism and the ideology of ethnic purity it represented.[23]

Then, in January, 1940 the Book of the Month Club selected Richard Wright's *Native Son* for distribution, the first time for a book by a black author, instantly making Wright both wealthy and famous.[24] Hughes was instantly jealous that Wright could achieve such success with only his second book, in one stroke of extreme luck, while his own decades of work left him still struggling to pay his basic living expenses. He was also humiliated when his long time publisher, Blanche Knopf, set out to sell *The Big Sea* on the coattails of *Native Son*, rather than believing it could succeed on its own merits.[25] Finally, and despite the distinct differences between the two situations, he was unwilling to forgive the radicals who still admired and worked with Wright, despite his newfound wealth, while the money Hughes had made on *Way Down South* was sufficient to ruin his reputation after his years of dedication to the cause. It was the final straw. Hughes the Proletarian was finished.

His transition back to a writer and activist of race still took time to process. The creation of a new artistic and public persona did as well. Furthermore, while he had abandoned his Communist position, his belief in workers' causes remained and had to be slowly re-crafted to fit within his new identity. The results of these processes leave tracks in his writings, similar to those showing the ambiguity in the work generally considered his declaration of Communist alignment, *Scottsboro Limited*. In particular these traces of

[23] Rampersad, 374.
[24] Rampersad, 382.
[25] Rampersad, 383.

non-Party communist or socialist belief shape his creation of the character of Jesse B. Semple, as writer Brian Dolinar argues in his study of black radicalism. The Semple stories, according to Dolinar, "were the culmination of Hughes's desire to create a working-class character for a working-class audience."[26] In addition, Dolinar finds similar proof of lingering leftist alignment in Hughes' *Chicago Defender* articles even through the 1960s.[27] In the end, the beliefs that had shaped his decade of Communist work could not be so easily set aside.

This lingering ideology is unsurprising when considering that Hughes did not abandon his Proletarian writer status out of conviction, but rather due to the personal and political upheavals of 1939, shaped by the sense that the radical left had failed him by reacting so harshly to *Way Down South*, and the Soviet Union had failed all dedicated anti-Fascists, particularly those non-white activists and fighters who were uniquely vulnerable to Fascist white supremacism. His ideological change, however, can be traced through his rewriting of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* That play, more than any other work, brought Hughes' fractured and competing identities into balance, and, as a result, he was unable to set it aside when he abandoned the Harlem Suitcase Theatre. Instead, he would periodically revisit the work to reshape it according to his beliefs of the moment, making these variations a record of his changing view of himself and his politics through the decades.

In addition to the play performed at the Suitcase Theater, there are effectively three versions, more or less complete, of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* The earliest and most fragmentary revision was written during World War II and takes an explicitly

[26] Dolinar, 71.
[27] Dolinar, 72.

nationalistic position. The second variant was written during, and celebration of, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. The final version is from 1963, in honor of the centennial anniversary of the "Emancipation Proclamation," and shifts away from the integrationist Civil Rights Movement script to a more militant, oppositional approach to fighting racial discrimination. However, through all variations, the rights of the working class remain a clear concern, even as his dedication to interracial, class based organization wanes in favor of exclusively intraracial organization. Both the Red and black Hughes remain in conversation, both discoverable within his work, long after he had supposedly abandoned the left for his supposedly "true" identity as a writer of race.

While recognizing these traces of radical thought in his supposedly post-radical period complicates the narrative promoted by scholars such as Arnold Rampersad, it does not describe the relationship between these two identities, or the manner in which Hughes passes from one to the other. However, explanation can be found within the vocabulary of performativity. In 1990, with her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler destabilized notions of sexual identity by removing the assumption of a single, fixed truth, instead viewing it as a changing and changeable performance, enacted moment to moment though the action of the body.[28] In the decades since, her vocabulary of performative identity has "continu[ed] to shape, impact, and influence different fields of inquiry, including and especially gender and sexuality studies, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies, and, to some extent the humanities academy as a whole."[29]

Expanding from her original framework, Butler's insight into the creation of gender can be used to better understand Langston Hughes' negotiation of his two primary

[28] Butler, 191-192.
[29] Vasu Reddy and Judith Butler, "Troubling Gender, Subverting Identities: Interview with Judith Butler," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 18, no. 62 (2004), 115.

identities of Red and black. Hughes' performances, however, were principally enacted through his writing and publishing, his public speaking in both ideologically defined and ideologically unaffiliated spaces, and his political advocacy, rather than primarily through daily action as with the performance of gender. Furthermore, as described in the preceding chapters, Hughes intentionally and self-consciously created and negotiated these performances to craft public identities that served his professional needs throughout his career. In doing so he alternately revealed and obfuscated his ideologies, as best suited his goals at the time. The careful crafting of his persona was enacted through his performed identities, but is calculated to a degree beyond Butler's understanding of the constructed nature of gender.

It is here that Hughes' brief period as a dedicated Communist becomes most useful to scholars studying his writing, as these works' profound difference from the bulk of his oeuvre reveals his otherwise invisible machinations. While his identity as a writer of race is recreated, refined, and edited over the years in order to stay up to date with the always changing political landscape of the United States, a process made most visible through his variations on *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, its apparent continuity as an exploration of a single facet of self disguises the degree of change in the personae and the calculation behind the practice. Furthermore, like gender prior to Butler's innovative exploration of the topic, race is culturally essentialized into a static trait rather than a continuing and discontinuous performance, obscuring changes within racial identity over time, whether unconscious or, in the case of Hughes, carefully controlled. However, his far more dramatic changes of political and artistic alignment at the beginning and end of the Great Depression cannot be essentialized and erased in the same manner, and so it is

his work during this fleeting time in his long career that lays bare his careful crafting of his public self to ensure he would always have the ability to support himself through his work. That Langston Hughes managed his personae, his publishers, and his audiences through carefully controlling the appearance of identity created by his many writings does not render his work or his beliefs insincere. This constant negotiation of authenticity and compromise, to use Chinitz' title description from his study of Hughes' poetry, is performed more or less consciously by all writers who, like Hughes, set out to live only through their work.[30] Awareness of the realities of the market is necessary to have a successful career, and sensitivity to the needs of the audience is part of the artistic dialogue. That Hughes so deftly balanced his two dominant understandings of the world, through the too often competing lenses of race and class, reveals his awareness of the challenges of intersectional writing and activism. Furthermore, it shows his determination to live up to the ethics of each identity and to do justice to the communities he loved, both black and Red.

[30] Chinitz, 3.

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