

# Black Marxism, Creative Intellectuals and Culture: The 1930s

Tracy Flemming, Ph.D.  
tracy.flemming@gmail.com  
Houston, Texas

The collision between the black radical tradition and Enlightenment-derived Marxism left both transformed. Marxism, in the same way as many world religious traditions, was transformed by the historical and cultural matrix of each group that adopted it.

– Michael Dawson, “Black and Red: Black Marxism and Black Liberation”<sup>1</sup>

This comparative essay focuses on the relationship between theory and practice in the cultural work of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright during the 1930s. It particularly assesses Hughes’s “To Negro Writers” (1935) and Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) and engages some of their respective writings during this period, such as (for Hughes) short stories and political plays and (for Wright) selections from *Uncle Tom’s Children*. The 1930s was a period that presented an altered political landscape in the United States for (among others) African Americans. It was the era following the immediate effects of the First World War; the waves of southern Black migrants in flight from post Reconstruction and Jim Crow nightmares and in search of the “land of hope;”<sup>2</sup> the flowering of Black artistic expression in Harlem; the romantic nationalism of Garveyism and the Universal Negro Improvement Association; and the New York Stock Exchange crash of 1929. Indeed, the vicissitudes of particularly the Roaring Twenties politicized the American landscape.

This essay, while narrow focus, allows us to concentrate on issues that have been particularly interesting for students of African American letters, offering an exploratory snapshot of African American intellectual history. Langston Hughes’s suggestion that African American writers can do “certain practical things ... through their work” captures the essence of his widely acknowledged radicalism during the 1930s and his “move increasingly towards fiction” – a trend, according to Arnold Rampersad, that “younger writers of the Harlem Renaissance” followed after “earlier successes ... as poets.” Susan Duffy contends that Hughes’s “embrace of the political Left in the 1930s coincides with two events”: his split with his white patron, Charlotte Mason – a phenomenon that Hughes brilliantly fictionalizes in his “The Blues I’m Playing” (1934) – and the case of the Scottsboro Nine (1931), the episode that Hughes dramatizes in *Scottsboro, Limited*.<sup>3</sup>

I suggest that Hughes's "fellow traveler" position played a critical role in his efforts to "reveal to the Negro masses ... [their] potential power" in a manner fundamentally different from Richard Wright, who was deeply influenced by communism during the 1930s. Because Hughes was a part of the younger Harlem "Renaissance" intellectuals, and due to his general cognizance of earlier Black intellectual traditions, I argue that Hughes's goals for the Black intellectual's role during the 1930s was far more grounded, at least for African Americans, than Richard Wright's cultural work during this period.

Wright's concentration on "the problem of nationalism" can certainly be read as an early indication of what Cedric Robinson observed as Wright's realization of the limits of Marxism for Black (and other non-Europeans) peoples. As opposed to the common focus on Wright's shift away from communism, and particularly Robinson's ground-breaking focus on Wright's place within the "Black radical tradition," I suggest that both Wright's adherence to Communist Party orthodoxy and subsequent misunderstanding of not only Black "folk" culture as being nationalistic, in addition to his apparent lack of awareness of Black intellectual life before "Harlem was in vogue," are crucial issues to understanding the relationship between Marxism and Black culture during the early twentieth century. Indeed, Wright utilized Black folk cultural expression – interpreted by him as being nationalistic – in his *Uncle Tom's Children*. It does not appear to be an overstatement to suggest that Wright's communism, while clearly a radical political stance, also blinded him to the fact that folk culture was frequently not (Black) nationalistic. This is not to suggest that Wright's conceptions of nationalism were not in accord with the Community Party's notion of "proletarian nationalism" – indeed, it was. However, Rob Bush's observation regarding the "mechanical position" of the Party on the "Negro National Question" is precisely my point. Bush argues:

I do not think that a revolutionary movement can be built without the significant participation of the working class, but it is necessary to mobilize other sections of the population as well. When the lower working class is an ethnic subproletariat, nationalist-oriented intellectuals have to be involved in the struggle. And as [Harold] Cruse pointed out, it is illusory in such cases to want a "national question" without nationalism (or national consciousness).<sup>4</sup>

Although several Black intellectuals did join the Community Party (including Wright) or were involved with Party activities as fellow travelers (such as Hughes), Bush's insistence that "[t]he attacks on the middle-class membership of the NAACP and the Urban League were, it would turn out, counterproductive" – particularly during Communist Internationalist calls for a "united front against fascism" – raises the fundamental issue of what Michael Dawson regards as the Community Party's "uneven" work "when it came to questions of culture." Indeed, "the spectacle of black cadres dressed like Russian peasants attacking a church in a black Chicago park" would undoubtedly strike many Black observers "as at least ludicrous if not offensive."<sup>5</sup>

The Communist Party, according to Dawson, “proved to be the organizational vehicle for the most sustained organizational attempt by African Americans to develop an Afrocentric version of Marxism within a doctrinaire organization.” As opposed to the small number of Black members during the 1920s, the Community Party experienced a significant increase in African American membership and interest during the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Dawson contends that the small number of Black cadre during the 1920s resulted from a myriad of factors, including Garveyism’s continued popularity during the early twenties, “black suspicion of whites in general and white workers and leftists in particular,” and the internal conflicts of Community Party officials regarding the “Negro National Question.” Dawson suggests that the 1928 Comintern resolutions “called for self-determination, but nowhere were African Americans characterized as an oppressed nation;” rather, “trade-union organizing” and “shallow” attention to Black women were emphasized, “without specifying the nature or existence of a black ‘nation’.”

By the 1930 resolutions, which would in theory govern the CPUSA for years to come, self-determination was expressly tied to the black-belt nation in the South that had the right to “governmental autonomy”. Organizing among blacks in the North was to operate under the slogan “equal rights” for blacks. In either case, there was still an anti-autonomy line in the 1930s resolutions ... “It is advisable for the Communist Party to abstain from the establishment of any specific Negro organizations, and in place of this to bring the black and white workers together in common organizations of struggle and joint action.”<sup>7</sup>

Dawson’s argument, here, runs counter to Robin D.G. Kelley’s assertions that the 1928 resolution recognized Blacks in the American South as a nation with the right to partake in self-determining national struggle.<sup>8</sup> While the question of Black (national) self-determination was certainly not an issue that American communists debated alone – indeed, Kelley points out that V.I. Lenin’s works completed between 1915-1917 “suggested that blacks constituted an oppressed nation”<sup>9</sup> – it was clearly a debate whose results influenced the Black members and supporters, particularly intellectuals during the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

Nell Irvin Painter’s “doubt that anyone ever joined the Communist Party on strength of the self-determination theory alone” supports both Dawson’s and Kelley’s suggestions that the Community Party’s progressive, anti-racist actions largely resonated with the immediate concerns of Black creative intellectuals; in regards to southern Blacks, Painter maintains that “[i]t was the Party’s more pragmatic activities that succeeded in attracting (if not holding) large numbers of southern blacks during the 1930s.”<sup>11</sup> This attraction applied to Black creative intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, two of the most visible, but in many respects different, “Negro” writers. Not only did their relationships with the Community Party, as well as to earlier Black intellectual traditions, diverge, but their influences as Black writers led them to compose manifestos for future Black writers.

For both artists, the written word was to be a weapon for writers who hailed from communities reeling from the affects of oppression and terror in the so-called land of the free. A comparison of their work reveals not only the undeniable dual influences that Marxism and the actions of the Community Party on Black creative intellectuals, but it also reveals that Black intellectuals' ideological proximity to earlier Black intellectual traditions sharply affected their poetics.

### **Langston Hughes's "Racial Mountain"**

Although composed in 1926<sup>12</sup>, any serious analysis of Hughes's writings during the 1930s has to take into account his "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."<sup>13</sup> Considered as his "landmark essay" by Arnold Rampersad, this essay, while it anticipates (as well as contradicts<sup>14</sup>) many of the themes in Hughes's "To Negro Writers" (1935), captures not only Hughes's "spirit of individuality" and sense of pride in his "racial background," but it also provides clues to Hughes's fellow traveler status as reflected in his cultural work during the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> In lieu of slavishly mimicking "Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art" and seeking "an Episcopal heaven," which Hughes contends young, future Black artists are acculturated to do by "what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class," Hughes urges the Black artist to (dis)cover "the beauty of his own people."<sup>16</sup> Such initiative would presumably lead to a deep appreciation of the "so-called common element," whose experiences would provide the raw materials necessary for artistic creativity – in effect, "a true Negro art in America." The most crucial element of this piece by Hughes, for our purposes, is his reference to previous Black intellectuals and their work, such as "the fine novels of [Charles W.] Chesnut" and "the humor of [Paul Laurence] Dunbar's dialect," in addition to W.E.B. Du Bois and Jean Toomer (whose *Cane* he refers to as "excepting the work of Du Bois ... contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of [Paul] Robeson, it is truly racial."<sup>17</sup>

This prelude of sorts to his work in the 1930s clearly indicates Hughes's intellectual background, particularly his familiarity with the writings of earlier and contemporaneous Black writers. Paul Laurence Dunbar is an especially interesting influence on Hughes, and his "Ode to Ethiopia" and ideological position within the "discourse of uplift" has been the subject of historical studies.<sup>18</sup> The use of Black "folk" dialect, the seeming pessimist and satiric portrayals in "Slice Him Down"<sup>19</sup> and "Why, You Reckon?"<sup>20</sup>, as well as the trenchant critiques of racial and class oppression found in "Slave on the Block"<sup>21</sup> and "Cora Unashamed"<sup>22</sup> can be found in the works of Hughes and Dunbar.<sup>23</sup> For example, "Slice Him Down" and "Why, You Reckon?" can both be read as Hughes's characterization of not so much as Black nihilistic behavior, but as depictions of the outcomes of alienation and systemic denial of the fruits of the idealized American Dream. In "Why, You Reckon?", Hughes portrays a dog-eat-dog world, but the White victim of a "crime" committed by two "hongry" Black men (one of them more "dishonest" than the other) actually enjoys the experience of being mugged:

“Gee this was exciting,” said the white fellow, turning up his tux collar.

“This was thrilling!”

“What,” I says.

“ ... This was the first time in my life I’ve ever had a good time in Harlem. Everything has been a fake, a show. You know, something you pay for. This was real.”

After assuring the White fellow that he would be pleased to be in his economic position and departing, the puzzled narrator asks, “What do you suppose is the matter with rich white folks? Why you reckon they ain’t happy?”<sup>24</sup> Hughes’s call for Black writers to “reveal to the white masses those Negro qualities which go beyond the mere ability to laugh and sing and dance and make music,” is powerfully reflected, for example, in “Why, You Reckon?” In addition, even when Hughes did in fact include these aspects of Black cultural expression in his work during the 1930s, he attempted to move beyond reincarnations of minstrelsy. His political plays, a genre which necessarily complicates my narrative of Hughes's fellow traveler status, also represent a praxis that is consistent with his theories that remained grounded in a deep understanding of Black culture and, just as importantly, his conception of the role of the Black creative intellectual.

Noted as the most frequently mentioned of all of his plays “by scholars when they address Hughes’ [sic] ties to the political Left,” Susan Duffy contends that the characters in *Angelo Herndon Jones* “represent a substrata of society: prostitutes, unemployed workers, unwed mothers, corrupt police (black and white), and evicted tenets.”<sup>25</sup> Their lives are “dark and sordid,” and they are eventually given “hope and inspiration” by the “spirit of Herndon.” To Duffy, Hughes uses Herndon as a cover for discussing inequality, and he uses leftist politics to “elevate” Herndon to “folk hero status.”<sup>26</sup> While my reading of the play differs in some respects from Duffy’s, it should be pointed out that Angelo Herndon – a Black Georgia Communist sentenced eighteen-to-twenty years on a chain gang for allegedly inciting a riot – provided his own account of his conversionary experience with Communism, which is quite interesting; one can argue that his earlier religious “training” (so to speak) is reflected in his narrative.<sup>27</sup> *Angelo Herndon Jones* clearly contains components of Hughes’s “To Negro Writers,” especially his insistence on interracial unity and struggle on a “solid” as opposed to “nebulous” basis, and this seems to more than suggest that he does not intend for the characters in his text to be viewed as simply a “substrata of society” in the manner that Duffy maintains. On the surface, this play is essentially a piece that is in accordance to “standard” Communist Party literary orthodoxy. Buddy Jones, “a young Negro worker,” and “his pal” Lank are both unemployed and in search of work. They both anxiously anticipate Herndon’s upcoming visit – the “messiah,” if I may – that is represented as an illuminated poster, a voice, and the future (i.e., Buddy and Viola’s expected “son”). References to “comrades,” “the working class,” and “incendiary literature” are also made. It would be nonsensical to ignore the “politically” leftist aspects of this play.

Yet, one of the most striking dimensions of this play is that even with the prevalence of female characters, masculine themes dominate. In particular, none of the women exhibit or can even imagine visions that transcend immediate concerns. Thus, one can argue that this play definitely contributes to the masculinist aspects of the Black Marxist tradition.<sup>28</sup>

This is not to suggest that Hughes portrays women in a completely dismissive manner. In fact, one of the most progressive elements of this play is Hughes's inclusion of Black women – and most surprisingly prostitutes – as a part of the exploited working class; moreover, these characters demonstrate a level of consciousness that signifies Hughes's fellow traveler position. It is important to note that these very same members of a “substrata of society” possess a grounded understanding of navigating dire realities and (at least partially) recognize causal elements of their respective sufferings. For example, Lottie, a “streetwalker” who refers to the image of Herndon as “this hot papa's picture,” pays a “Negro Cop” – “Sweet Papa Big Billy” who “never forgets” – in order to persuade him to “leave [her] be.” She later informs Sadie Mae, another streetwalker, that “Between the cops and the pimps, we don't never have nothing.”<sup>29</sup> Viola, Ma Jenkin's (“an old washerwoman”) daughter, is a liminal character between Buddy's (and by extension Herndon's) revolutionary vision and the prostitutes' immediate concerns. During an argument with her deeply religious mother over her (Viola's) pregnancy, she exclaims, “That's all you ever tell anybody—is to be careful. Why can't you tell us how we can get married, how we can get jobs, how we can live, or something useful?” Of course, Ma Jenkins responds that “De Lawd'll tell you that, daughter.”<sup>30</sup> Upon Ma Jenkin's eviction from her apartment due to delinquent payment (and poverty), Sadie Mae, after finding the evicted elderly woman and her belongings on the street corner and in an effort to assist her, informs others who have gathered to aid the woman that “[She's] gonna try and make a dollar tonight to give this old lady so she can get herself a room.”<sup>31</sup> A final example can be found in Lank, who, upon being asked by a group of detective who raid his and Buddy's apartment about “incendiary literature”, exclaims

What you talkin' about, man? I don't need to read no books to know I'm hungry ... I don't need to read books to know I ain't got no job, to know I'm black, to know they ain't no chance for me.

Lank's proclamation, unsurprisingly, provokes a sharp “Shut up! Where's Buddy Jones?” from one of the detectives (Lank responds, “I ain't his mammy.”), who then warns him against attending “them Herndon Jones meetings, and everything like ‘em.”<sup>32</sup>

Susan Duffy's assertion that *Angelo Herndon Jones* “serves a parable for conversion to the cause of leftist labor,” then, is partially correct. While beyond the scope of this essay, it is arguable whether this play is indeed the “most radical” or “most compelling” of the political plays in her collection.<sup>33</sup>

In regards to subaltern or marginal characters – defined, here, as those characters *other* than Buddy Jones, Viola, and possibly Lank – the *potential* radicalism of these characters is something that I consider to be one of Hughes’s most substantial, radical contributions. *Angelo Herndon Jones* is far more than a standard Marxist play – it reveals the subjectivity of a creative writer whose position was one that was committed to both leftist politics<sup>34</sup> as well as to a more concretized understanding African American dilemmas.

### **Richard Wright: Theorizing about a Backward “Folk”**

How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live? How do they discuss it when alone among themselves? I think this question can be answered in a single sentence. A friend of mine who ran an elevator once told me:

“Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn’t fer them polices ’n’ them ‘ol lynch-mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down here!”

–Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow”<sup>35</sup>

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,”<sup>36</sup> Richard Wright conveys his ideas on the role of Black creative intellectuals and charges these intellectuals to move beyond the prior “so-called Harlem school of expression.” The central issues that Wright is most concerned with in this skeletal “blueprint” for Black writers are Black cultural nationalism and its relationship to Black “folk” culture. Negro writers must not only grapple with “the nationalist aspects of Negro life” that are most noticeable in social institutions and folklore, but they must also strive to transcend them. According to Wright, the most important aspects of Black nationalism can be found in its cultural manifestations, as opposed to its political implications. Such nationalism is most powerfully reflected by the Southern Negro or in the transplanted cultural remnants found among Southern migrants in Northern urban centers, such as Chicago and Harlem (New York).<sup>37</sup> In order to transcend the narrow confines of nationalism, Black writers must also “*possess and understand it.*” Only then will Negro writers be able to utilize the tools of an international vision – in this case “a Marxist conception of reality and society” – in the initial stages of their unique contribution to international social and political change in an ever changing “modern” capitalist era.<sup>38</sup>

Wright's concentration on "the problem of nationalism" can be read as an early indication of what Cedric Robinson observed as Wright's realization of the limits of Marxism for Black (and other non-Europeans) peoples.<sup>39</sup> As opposed to the common focus on Wright's shift away from Communism, and particularly Robinson's groundbreaking focus on Wright's place within the "black radical tradition," I suggest that both Wright's adherence to Community Party orthodoxy and subsequent misunderstanding of not only Black "folk" culture as being nationalistic, in addition to his apparent lack of awareness of Black intellectual life before "Harlem was in vogue," are crucial issues to understanding the relationship between Marxism and Black nationalism during the early twentieth-century.

Wright's focus on the Black folk culture-as-nationalism is rooted in the changes within the Communist Party regarding "aesthetics and some of the cultural work produced by African Americans radicals from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s."<sup>40</sup> In an examination of the changes within the Communist Party regarding the "Negro Question," Robin D.G. Kelley makes a strong case for the ability of Black radicals to situate themselves in the Communist Party. According to Kelley, the 1922 decision by the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern essentially regarded Africans Americans as a domestically colonized nation and their plight as necessarily anti-imperialist.<sup>41</sup> The "most successful black nationalist mass movement in the history of the United States,"<sup>42</sup> Garveyism, was one which the Communist Party could not ignore. To be sure, this does not suggest that the Community Party of the United States of America fully embraced Black nationalist movements as they stood. Their efforts to "redirect Garveyism," as Kelley notes, were unsuccessful during the mid-1920s.<sup>43</sup> However, the Communist Party's mechanistic perceptions of Black "folk" culture as (according to Kelley) "virtually everything black people did,"<sup>44</sup> created critical space(s) for cultural expression that would have been censured as "petty bourgeois chauvinism" prior to debates on the "Negro Question." The significant point is that Black writers in Communist Party publications did not simply promote integration, as Harold Cruse argued in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the line(s) separating Black cultural nationalism and internationalism became blurred and, as Kelley illustrates, casts a very new light on "traditional" perceptions of Black communists.

Richard Wright's 1937 "Blueprint," then, reflected the Communist Party's internationalism, which theoretically transcended racial solidarity. His creative practice, such as the selections which appear in *Uncle Tom's Children* (HarperPerennial expanded edition), illustrates Wright's efforts to put argumentation into practice.<sup>46</sup> According to Richard Yarborough, all the selections in *Uncle Tom's Children* reflect the most significant influences on Wright at the time, such as communism, "Chicago" sociologists, naturalists, and even Langston Hughes; these selections also reflect themes that he drew upon throughout the rest of his literary career.<sup>47</sup> In declaring that "Uncle Tom is dead!" with *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright, along with the "countless black authors who followed in his wake," further compounded an already ahistorical myth.<sup>48</sup> This is, arguably, critical to Wright's view of attempting to deal with Black folk culture (or, to Wright, nationalism). Indeed, "the lines between the cultural and political are not particularly clear, especially when oppression prevents 'normal' means of political expression."<sup>49</sup>



Partha Chatterjee's powerful argument that "two domains" exist within colonial societies (as well as states where racialized groups are dominated) – "the material and the spiritual" – is an engaging one. Chatterjee suggests that within the "domain of spirituality" exists a cultural (religious, linguistic, etc.) space where components of a discursive ideological framework – indeed, in many cases an alternative historical narrative<sup>50</sup> – can be developed by dominated subjects.<sup>51</sup> The Communist Party's implicit consideration of this did not include a sophisticated understanding of culture in regards to African Americans; Wright's theorizations on the "folk" and the "national question" is an example of this type of approach to African American culture.

While the majority of Black characters in the five stories in the text are the antithesis of the mythical Uncle Tom, the fact that they are descendents of enslaved people appears to be an issue of much anxiety to Wright, for he does not perceive African Americans as anything but "traditional" peasants who are innocent (and, in effect, unprepared) for "modern" realities. How else can we explain Sara's seeming inability to cope with her encounter with both a White traveling salesman *and* a graphophone, ("modern") technology which transmits not only the commodified rhythms of the Gospel, but her, too, to another world, causing her sense of reality to lull and be exploited?<sup>52</sup> For Wright, who was certainly familiar with the Jim Crow Southern order of things, Black peasants were "imprisoned" in a system "built upon a plantation-feudal economy": the cultural manifestations that he perceives as "nationalism" are essentially reactions to this system of exploitation.<sup>53</sup> It is his objective to capture such characteristics in his creative writings, namely through his utilization of "the fluid state of daily speech" and depictions of Black religiosity, as opposed to adhering to a "simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of people devoid of wider social connotations."<sup>54</sup> To be sure, who can seriously criticize Wright for the latter?

Wright's lament against "Negro writing in the past," while a noteworthy political intervention, was a gross misrepresentation. It is clearly a political intervention in that his attacks on the prevalence of patron-relationships during the Harlem Renaissance and their stifling effects on Black creative intellectuals. His effort to deal with "folk" culture as part of an international political movement, as opposed to exoticism, is a fundamental element of his argument. Yet, Wright's and prior New Negro writers' perceptions of Black "folk" culture are also strikingly similar, for the basic assumption was that "folk" was the opposite of "modern."<sup>55</sup> However, we now know that "terms like 'folk,' 'authentic,' and 'traditional' are socially constructed categories" and that failures to deconstruct "the reproduction of race, class, and gender hierarchies," inherent in the maintenance of modernism's "boundaries," only reinforces the power of hierarchical dichotomies.<sup>56</sup>

A more fundamental problem, and somewhat fairer criticism, is Wright's notion of "folk" culture-as-nationalism, which reveals his unawareness of earlier forms of Black cultural (and political) nationalism dating from the end of the eighteenth century and extending beyond Harlem.<sup>57</sup> Such an awareness would have forced Wright to seriously consider the underlying reasons behind the Victorian displays of racial pride by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, for Garveyism was arguably the final culmination of a tradition of bourgeois Black nationalism that was rooted in exalting past grandeur of "African civilization" and the contemporaneous place of persons of African descent in the "Caucasian milieu."<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that even these earlier (racial) nationalistic intellectuals did not have a remote appreciation for "folk" culture and that "New Negro" writers frequently exoticized the "folk," which Wright correctly pointed out. But it is even more important to theorize about the discontinuity among the Black intellectual strata from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century – something which Wright attempts to address but ultimately distorts.<sup>59</sup> That very same group of writers who apparently "went a-begging to white America ... dressed in knee-pants of servility" that Wright describes contained "staid intellectuals, rugged labor leaders, tough-minded preachers and conservative pan-Africanists." In other words, as Wilson Moses suggests,

[T]here were two groups of New Negroes associated with the Renaissance of the 1920s: the "old" New Negroes, [such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, William H. Ferris, and John E. Bruce], and the "new" New Negroes, including ... Claude McKay ..., Countee Cullen ..., and Langston Hughes. The latter group celebrated the fast, jazzy life-style associated with the Harlem myth.<sup>60</sup>

With an understanding of earlier Black nationalist theorizing, Wright would probably have realized that his, at times brilliant, characterizations of "folk" culture was only a gradual step away from earlier dismissals *and* exoticizations of the "folk" – possessors of some social organization and peculiar group sentiments (i.e., "nationalism"), but, ultimately, backwards, in some eyes.

## Conclusion

The key issues raised by Michael Dawson and Rob Bush regarding Black Marxism and cultural work during the 1930s – Dawson suggests that Black Marxism was "hurt by subservience to ... ideological dependence on foreign models"<sup>61</sup> and Bush highlights the CP's "inability to attract ... more nationalist-oriented intellectuals"<sup>62</sup> – capture the contours of the arguments that I have tried to make in this essay. Rather than provide a celebration of Hughes and an indictment of Wright, I have attempted to demonstrate that a comparison of their theories and cultural work yields useful results for students of Black Marxism and Black intellectual history.

It also provides historical clues to those seriously interested in contemporary radical thought and action; its inherent “mistakes” and their implications; and, ultimately, visions of revolutionary change. Langston Hughes and Richard Wright were both radical intellectuals who, at different times due to their differing experiences, offered “criticisms of Marxism” (as Cedric Robinson notes in regards to Wright, but this arguably applies to Hughes as well) not [to] entirely reject it” but in an effort “to locate it.”

“As an *ideology*, [they, at different times,] recognized that it had never transcended its origins. It remained an ideology *for* the working classes rather than an ideology *of* the working classes.”<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps, here, Harold Cruse was right:

We do not hold Marx accountable for any deviations or distortions that either history or men have imposed to detract from his doctrine ... [Y]et to say, nay insist, that history should act just the way Marx thought it would is to do an injustice to a great thinker and to imply that dialectics is a philosophical fraud, as many have tried to do (even some who call themselves Marxists) ... It is the peculiar juxtaposition of time, place, and social circumstances which decide who is going to play the role of prime movers in history. Considering this, we can all understand Marx’s own assertion, “I am not a Marxist.”<sup>64</sup>

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 174.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction" in *Short Stories of Langston Hughes*, Akiba Sullivan Harper, Editor (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), xv. Susan Duffy in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes With Introductions and Analyses by Susan Duffy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 134. Bush's argument resonates with that of Partha Chatterjee's complication of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and its implications for the (non-Western) colonial world. According to Chatterjee, "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would see, has decreed that ... Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of ... enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our ... resistance and ... misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized." Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5 (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Bush, *Ibid.*, 134. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson notes that "there is a widespread acknowledgement that by the mid-1930s party membership had mushroomed to more than ten thousand black members." Dawson, *Ibid.*, 183. Dawson's loose employment of the term "Afrocentric" may be an overstatement. For an exceptional source that chronicles the varying manifestations of this tradition, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Dawson, *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>8</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 109.

---

<sup>9</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 261 (n. 6).

<sup>10</sup> Harvey Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206-07. Teres cited in *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, 9, 206 (n. 19).

<sup>11</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, "Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Communist," in *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 152. This essay was taken from the "Preface to the 1994 Edition" (W. W. Norton & Company) and the Introduction to *Narrative of Hosea: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Kelley also notes that the "self-determination slogan" was less important to Black members than the Communist Party's progressive political actions. Kelley, *Ibid.*, 110. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 190.

<sup>12</sup> To give an idea of the political climate in 1926, Alton Hornsby, Jr. notes that "The U.S. Supreme Court, *Corrigan v. Buckley*, held that racially restrictive covenants were not in violation of the Fifth or Fourteenth Amendments in relation to equal protection under the law ... Discriminatory contracts, were, in effect, declared constitutional as long as no government actions were involved." A white homeowner whom had agreed to refrain from selling property to an African American was later sued after attempting to subvert the "neighborhood agreement." See Hornsby, *Chronology of African American History: From 1492 to the Present*, Second Edition (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), 133.

<sup>13</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Hughes's makes a distinction between the "upper-class Negro church" that prefers "[t]he drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks" and "common people [who] are not afraid of spirituals" in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." However, in "To Negro Writers" he refers to "the sick-sweet smile of organized religion—which lies about what it doesn't know, and about what it *does* know. And the half-vooodoo, half-clown, face of revivalism, dulling the mind with the clap of its empty hands." Of course, Hughes may have been referring to *only* "organized religion." Despite this, Robin D.G. Kelley observes that "Hughes was unusual among black poets who contributed to the Communist press for his often explicit depiction of ordinary black folk dispensing with or questioning religion altogether." Among the "more profane works" that Kelley's cites, is Hughes's "Goodbye Christ" (*New Worker*, November-December 1932). Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 265 (n. 45).

- 
- 15 Rampersad, "Introduction," xv.
- 16 Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."
- 17 Hughes, *Ibid.*
- 18 Dunbar's "Ode to Ethiopia" is included in Wilson Jeremiah Moses's analysis of "The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W.E.B. Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism," in *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Camden: Archon Book, 1978; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 158. Moses makes the important note that Dunbar, a member of the American Negro Academy, was also once an "elevator operator. *This sort of fact becomes significant when we attempt to question the class stratification of in the black community at the turn of the century.*" Moses, *The Golden Age*, 301 (n. 71) (emphasis added). See also Kevin K. Gaines, "Between Uplift and Minstrelsy: Paul Laurence Dunbar, James D. Corrothers, and the Ambivalent Response to Urbanization, 1900-1916," in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 179-208.
- 19 Langston Hughes, "Slice Him Down" (*Esquire*, 1932) Reprinted in *Short Stories of Langston Hughes*, 132-144.
- 20 Langston Hughes, "Why, You Reckon?" (*New Yorker*, May 17, 1934) Reprinted in *Ibid.*, 66-71.
- 21 Langston Hughes, "Slave on the Block" (*Scribner's Magazine*, September 1933), 32-39.
- 22 Langston Hushes, "Cora Unashamed" (*American Mercury*, September 1933), 40-49.
- 23 On Dunbar work, see Gaines, "Between Minstrelsy and Uplift," 177-193.
- 24 Hughes, "Why, You Reckon?" 70-71.
- 25 Susan Duffy, "Politics and Social Commentary: Angelo Herndon Jones," in *Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, 138, 145.
- 26 Duffy, *Ibid.*, 145.

---

<sup>27</sup> Angelo Herndon, "A Black Communist Tells What the Party Meant to Him," in *Black Protest in the Twentieth Century*, August Meier et al, Editors (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 132-147. My observation is not to undermine Herndon's narrative. Rather, one of the most striking aspects of the text is his deep reverence for the Communist Party.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between Black Marxists and "proletarian realism," see Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Langston Hughes, *Angelo Herndon Jones*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Hughes, *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Duffy maintains that it is not.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Duffy notes that Hughes "played down his association with Communist groups in his autobiographies and statements made later in his career." Duffy, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Loving Jim Crow," in *Uncle Tom's Children*, HarperPerennial Edition with an Introduction by Richard Yarborough, 1993, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge*, 1937.

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that Wright asserts that Negroes do not have "fixed and nourishing forms of culture, [but] the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom." See Wright, "Blueprint."

<sup>38</sup> Wright, "Blueprint."

<sup>39</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983; 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 105.

---

<sup>41</sup> Kelley writes, “The Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922 adopted a set of theses describing blacks as a nationality oppressed by worldwide imperialist exploitation. Because black workers’ struggles were now considered inherently anti-imperialist, American Communists were now obliged to view Garveyism and other notable nationalist movements anew.” Kelley, *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 241.

<sup>43</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Kelley, *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1967; 1984).

<sup>46</sup> Although “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1937) appears one year prior to “Blueprint,” the theoretical aspects of “Blueprint” are quite clear in “Big Boy Leaves Home.”

<sup>47</sup> Richard Yarborough, “Introduction to the HarperPerennial Edition,” in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, ix-xxix.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses notes that “[i]t is ironic that the humble heroism of old Uncle Tom has been transmuted into racial treason by the subtle alchemy of social amnesia.” See Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, Revised Edition (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982; 1994).

<sup>49</sup> Alan Wald, “Comments on Diagnostic Essay—Black Marxism for Tracy Keith Flemming,” (in the author’s possession).

<sup>50</sup> This phenomenon has been one of the hallmarks of Black nationalist oriented intellectuals.

<sup>51</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> It is not clear, I think, that Sara’s sexual liaison with the white salesman is rape, although a contextual consideration of bio-power – defined here by the White salesman’s employment of sexual coercion towards a Black woman – certainly leads weight to an analysis that concludes rape. See “Long Black Song.”



---

<sup>53</sup> Wright, "Blueprint," 319-20. One can certainly point out how this interpretation echoes that of E. Franklin Frazier in 1926. Frazier argued that Marcus Garvey's Pan African appeal provided dignity to the struggles of persons of African descent, a significant number of whom, according to Frazier, were reeling from the psychological effects of domination in the United States; hence, the importance of otherworldly alleviation of physical and psychological trauma. See Frazier, Frazier, E. Frazier, "The Garvey Movement," *Opportunity*, IV (November, 1926), pp. 346-48. Reprinted in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, Eds., *The Making of Black America: Volume II: The Black Community in Modern America* (New York: Atheneum), 204-08.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, *Ibid*, 318, 320.

<sup>55</sup> Black Nationalists have historically shared this perception. See Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sterling Stuckey, "Introduction," *The Ideological Roots of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Wilson J. Moses, "Introduction," *Classical Black Nationalism*; Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*.

<sup>56</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Folk'," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 97, Issue 5, December 1992, 1402.

<sup>57</sup> This is not to suggest in any way that these are the definitive characteristics of early black nationalism or Garveyism. The most authoritative treatment of pre-twentieth-century Black nationalism is Wilson Jeremiah Moses's *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, and most recently Dean E. Robinson in his concentration of "Anglo-African Nationalism," concentrates of this aspect of black nationalism. See Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The enigmatic, Yale and Harvard educated William H. Ferris is an intellectual who can be considered a critical link between earlier Black nationalist traditions and the gradual shift to Garveyism and so on. See his bulky, two-volume *The African Abroad, or His Evolution in Western Civilization, Tracing his Evolution under Caucasian Milieu*. 2 vols. (New Haven, Connecticut: Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor Press, 1913). See also Kevin K. Gaines, "The Crisis of Negro Intellectuals: William H. Ferris and Black Nationalist Thought," in *Uplifting the Race*, 100-27; Moses, *Afrotopia*.

---

<sup>59</sup> There are notable exceptions, as scholars have pointed out the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century links among the likes of Alexander Crummell and W.E.B. Du Bois, William H. Ferris, John E. Bruce, Carter G. Woodson, and others. As students of Black intellectual life can quickly detect, nationalism and romantic racialism are common themes that link these thinkers.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson J. Moses, "The Lost World of the Negro, 1895-1919: Black Literary and Intellectual Life before the 'Renaissance'," *Black American Literary Forum*, Vol. 21, Issue ½ (Spring-Summer, 1987), 73.

<sup>61</sup> Dawson, *Black Visions*, 237.

<sup>62</sup> Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 133.

<sup>63</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 304-305.

<sup>64</sup> Harold Cruse, "On Explaining 20<sup>th</sup> Century Negro History," in *The Essential Harold Cruse: A Reader*, William Jelani Cobb, Editor, With a Foreword by Stanley Crouch (New York: Palgrave, 2002), Originally published in *Negro Digest*, July 1967.