Unexpected Frontiers of Black Internationalism: African Americans in Soviet Central Asia, 1930–1976

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Biss, Athan Andreas. " Unexpected Frontiers of Black Internationalism: African Americans in Soviet Central Asia, 1930–1976", *Central Asian Affairs* 2, 2 (2015): 189-206.

Athan Andreas Biss
Phd. Candidate, Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
abiss@wisc.edu

Abstract

Central Asia has long captured the imagination of Western travelers as an exotic and mysterious destination. After the region was incorporated into the Soviet Union, it became a centerpiece of the Soviet modernization campaign. African Americans in particular were greatly interested in Soviet Central Asia and what they perceived as an alternative to Western imperialism and American racial segregation. This article explores how Soviet Central Asia appeared to African Americans who traveled, worked, and lived in the region in the 1930s and compares these impressions with those of African American tourists who visited the region three decades later. Did African American engagement with Central Asia act as an emancipatory, creative force for interracial solidarity or did it constitute another form of Orientalist discourse?

Keywords

travel – Soviet Central Asia – modernization – African American orientalism – inter-racial solidarity

Although Richard Wright never visited Central Asia, Soviet development of the region left a lasting impression on the famous novelist. According to Wright's autobiography, after reading Stalin's *The National and Colonial Question*, he decided to become a communist. In what he described as "the first total emotional commitment of my life," Wright marveled at the way Soviet linguists had "given these tongueless people a language, newspapers, institutions," but he was even more impressed that "these forgotten folk had been encouraged to keep their old cultures, to see in their ancient customs meaning and

doi 10.1163/22142290-00202004

satisfactions as deep as those contained in supposedly superior ways of living." Wright concludes this remarkable passage by contrasting the respect shown by the Soviets to the peoples of Central Asia with the derisive dismissal of black culture in the United States.1 Wright's admiration for Soviet "modernization," as he imagined it, was rooted in a conviction that the Soviets had found a way to improve the lives of the formerly colonized peoples of Central Asia without erasing cultural differences. The intensity of Wright's response to the Soviet nation-building effort in Central Asia, all the more remarkable for having been formed from the vantage point of an armchair observer, testifies to how much the Soviet Union fascinated Western intellectuals during the interwar period. At the same time, it offers a glimpse into the particular symbolic importance of Central Asia—as the most "backward" region of the USSR and home to mil-lions of nonwhite peoples—for African Americans.

Beginning in 1930s, dozens of African Americans traveled, worked, and lived in Soviet Central Asia, drawing the region briefly into the orbit of a rapidly expanding black internationalism. This unlikely cross-cultural encounter fits within the broader historical context of us engagement with the Soviet Union in the interwar years. Recent scholarship, capitalizing on the post-Cold War thaw, has revisited this once controversial topic and demonstrated that the Soviet "experiment" appealed to a variety of us constituencies and generated admiration across the political spectrum.2 As Richard Wright's experience illustrates, African Americans were not immune to the "romance" of Soviet modernization. The Soviet Union's rejection of other colonial models, its apparent solution of the vexing "National Question," and its apparent commitment to racial equality made it especially attractive to African Americans battling racial discrimination at home and colonialism abroad.

Rather than "Russian backwardness," which preoccupied many Western intellectuals, African Americans by and large focused on the general Soviet campaign to eliminate "backwardness" among its various racial groups and paid particularly close attention to Central Asia.3 Perhaps sensitive to their

1 Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 81–82.

2 See, for example, David Engerman, *Modernization From the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

3 Adeeb Khalid has pointed out that while "backwardness" is a relative concept, the Soviet campaign to stamp out *all* forms of "backwardness" within its borders, whether in the Russian countryside or in Central Asia, was profoundly more ambitious than standard colonial civilizing missions. Adeeb Khalid, "The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View From Central Asia," in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (eds), *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, nm: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 113–140.

own ambivalent relationship to this Eurocentric discourse of backwardness, African Americans who traveled and worked in the region identified strongly with Central Asians racially, as a "colored" people, a connection strengthened through a sense of shared historical oppression. Soviet Central Asia provided a backdrop for theorizing new formulations of "modernization" that would include social justice and racial equality as key benchmarks of "progress." If rethinking race in global terms allowed new solidarities to form, it also downplayed or masked completely the brutality of Soviet development. Soviet attempts to "civilize" the Central Asians, which in hindsight might have invited comparisons to European imperialism, instead were perceived as compatible with the ideals of racial uplift, anti-colonialism and Third Worldism. Though they looked at Central Asia through a different interpretive lens than Europeans, African Americans were not immune to the pitfalls of Orientalism.

Tuskegee in Tashkent: Racial Uplift in Central Asia

From 1931 to 1937, Central Asia hosted a unique cultural exchange where the Tuskegee idea met the Soviet experiment. In the fall of 1931 a team of 11 African American agronomists, composed largely of recent graduates from Southern black agricultural and normal colleges, arrived in Tashkent, the capital of the newly formed Uzbek ssr.4 The Soviet government hired the group of African American specialists to improve the efficiency, quality, and volume of the region's precious "white gold." Cotton production dominated all aspects of life in Soviet Uzbekistan, and the men, who also included animal husbandry experts and a civil engineer, quickly found themselves serving on the front lines of the Soviet campaign for full "cotton independence."

Rather than ideological sympathy with the doctrines of communism, most of the specialists were primarily motivated by the professional opportunities not available in segregated America at the height of the depression. A partial exception was Oliver Golden, the group's organizer and lone Communist Party member, who was also one of the few African American alumni of the recently established Communist University of the Toilers of the

4 For an overview of the origins the Golden group and its individual members, see Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, dc: Howard University Press, 1986), 96–99; Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 90–112.

East (KUTV).5 Before attending KUTV, however, Golden studied at the Tuskegee Institute for two years. Each of his alma maters informed Golden's plan to recruit a team of African American agricultural specialists to travel to Soviet Central Asia.

Prior to the team's formation, Golden reached out to his former teacher at Tuskegee, the famous agronomist George Washington Carver. Golden informed Carver of his proposal to send a team of African American specialists to the Soviet Union and attempted, unsuccessfully, to convince the aging scientist to personally accompany the group. "You owe it to your race," Golden wrote to Carver, adding that Carver's presence coupled with "the successes of these men will give Tuskegee an international character."6 Despite these appeals, Carver demurred. He did, however, recommend a former student, John Sutton, to take his place and endorsed Golden's proposal. Carver's reputation alone lent the project legitimacy. Similarly, the presence of Charles Noel Young, son of the late Col. Charles Young, a revered African American military hero, among the agronomists generated human-interest stories and positive coverage of the team's departure in the black press. Young assured the newspapers that his late father would have supported his decision to work for the "new" Russia.7

Golden's conception of the team's mission blended ideals of racial uplift with communist internationalism, stretching the boundaries of each. By helping to build socialism, Golden hoped to reshape Soviet perceptions of African Americans. According to his granddaughter, Golden "wanted the Soviets to see blacks as givers and contributors, not only as oppressed people in need of liberation from afar."8

Though the impact of the agronomists on Soviet racial attitudes remains unclear, one unnamed team member left a lasting impression on Ella Maillart, a former Swiss Olympian and adventurer who traveled through the region in 1932. When a Russian friend first told Maillart about the African American cotton specialists, Maillart had imagined "six woolly-pated negroes, plantation beasts of burden." Days later, Maillart found

5 See Woodford McClellan, "Black *Hajj* to 'Red Mecca': Africans and Afro-Americans at KUTV, 1925–1938," in Maxim Matusevich, (ed.), *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 61–83.

6 Oliver Golden to George Washington Carver, April 18, 1931, quoted in Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2002), 202–203.

7 "Twelve Technicians To Aid Soviet," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 14, 1931. The headline seems to have miscounted the team members. The article only names 11 and the accompanying picture shows 11 as well.

8 Yelena Khanga with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian Family, 1865–1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 90.

herself face-to-face with a sharply dressed black man "radiating intelligence." Embarrassed by her previous assumptions, Maillart was moved by the idea that these sons of former slaves had "crossed the waters and are now masters who teach in turn."9

Golden also thought that his team's assignment to Uzbekistan provided a unique opportunity to "help another people of color." His wife later recalled that Golden believed that "it would mean more for an Uzbek … to see an educated, skilled black American than to see only white specialists." Golden hoped that his team would provide positive role models for the Uzbeks and living proof of "what was possible when people pulled themselves out of oppression."10 Though Booker T. Washington did not have Central Asia in mind when he famously instructed African Americans in an 1895 speech to "cast your buckets down where you are," the wizard of Tuskegee would surely have recognized aspects of his own gospel in Oliver Golden's words.11

Over the next six years, the agronomists worked closely with Soviet officials developing new strains of cotton, breeding waterfowl and developing fibers to be used in rope. The African American press celebrated these technical achievements and presented the cotton specialists as exemplary "race men" who had made good abroad. Though this type of human-interest story was quite common, reports on the African American specialists in Central Asia operated at many levels simultaneously and possessed a rather complex constellation of potential meanings. First, by placing black professionalism in a global context these stories nurtured an international perspective that challenged African American parochialism. At the same time, they carried an implicit, and at times explicit, critique highlighting the negative impact of Jim Crow policies and racist attitudes that stunted African American professional success and limited career advancement at home. Indeed, the remote and exotic location of Central Asia seems to invite this particular

9 The man she saw was most likely Bernard Powers, a Howard University trained engineer with a penchant for sartorial flare. Ella Maillart, *Turkestan Solo*, trans. John Rodker (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 192–193.

10 Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 77.

11 Had Washington been alive he may very well have supported the venture. Contrary to his reputation for parochialism, Washington toured Europe in 1910 on a mission study the agricultural peasantry of different European nations as well as specific government policies designed for the uplift of these peoples. On a different Russian frontier, near the Polish border, Washington remarked that the local population lived "much the same life as I had known and lived among the Negro farmers in Alabama." Booker T. Washington, *The Man Farthest Down: A Record of Observation and Study in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1912), 291.

reading.12 Second, the agronomists represented African American involvement in one of the most compelling historical dramas of the time; they were participants, according to a columnist who visited Soviet Uzbekistan on behalf of the *Associated Negro Press*, in "the great social battle of this century."13 This role had particular significance for African Americans, who had long fought to reshape narratives that placed them outside of history. Finally, the agronomists were seen, and in Golden's case, saw themselves, as agents of racial uplift. At the end of their work, the same article concluded, the men could take pride in the knowledge that they had not only increased cotton production but, more important, they had also "helped thrust a once backward dark race on the road to a western standard of civilization."14 In later decades, the Soviets would promote a similar discourse, in which Uzbekistan and other Central Asian Republics, once the "little brothers" of the Soviet family of nations, became models of development for the post-colonial world.15

"Fellow Traveling" in Central Asia: Langston Hughes and the Soviet"South"

The time that the African American agronomists lived and worked in Soviet Central Asia coincided with a wave of sympathetic Western artists and intellectuals—later dubbed "political pilgrims"—who flocked to the newly formed Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s in order to witness the "Soviet experiment" at close range.16 In 1931, the same year Golden's team arrived in Central Asia, 7,000 Western tourists, nearly three-quarters of whom were Americans, visited the Soviet Union.17 These Western visitors followed itineraries carefully

12 Langston Hughes would later rhetorically deploy a version of what might be called the "*even* in Central Asia" argument in his attempts to underscore the urgency of domestic racial reform.

13 Loren Miller, "Negro Experts Describe Reds' Experiment With Cotton," *Atlanta Daily World,* November 8, 1932, 2A.

14 Ibid.

15 For an excellent study of how this discourse developed over several decades in relation to the Uzbek capital see Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

16 See Ludmilla Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals In Search of the Good Society* (London: Transaction, 1998).

17 See Norman E. Saul, *Friends or Foes? The United States and Soviet Russia, 1921–1941* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 197.

choreographed by the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad, better known as VOKS, its Russian acronym.18 More often than not, they returned full of praise for the young Soviet state and promptly committed this enthusiasm to print. By mid-decade, the "fellow-traveler" phenomenon had already pro- duced a prodigious body of literature comprising a thriving, yet short-lived, sub-genre. Moscow's ability to attract the faithful, convert skeptics and inspire new legions of pilgrims, earned the city a new nickname: the "Red Mecca."

The Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay was one of the earliest of the revolutionary tourists, visiting the young Bolshevik state in 1922 on the fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. McKay received a near rock star welcome from his Soviet hosts. "From Moscow to Petrograd and from Petrograd to Moscow," McKay recalled, "I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise, extravagantly fêted on every side … I was like a black ikon [sic] in the flesh."19 After returning to the United States, McKay presented Soviet Russia as a vibrant society committed to extinguishing all vestiges of racial discrimination and colonial domination. In an article published in the NAACP monthly journal, *The Crisis,* McKay pressed home his belief that the Russian Revolution had presented the American Negro with an unprecedented opportunity to "lift his cause out of his national obscurity and force it forward as a prime international issue."20 McKay's enthusiasm for the Soviet experiment rapidly faded, but his first reports no doubt fired the imagination of many African Americans at a crucial historical juncture that coincided with the rise and radicalization of the "New Negro" movement in the wake of World War I. McKay certainly influenced one of the movement's rising literary stars, the poet Langston Hughes, to make his own "pilgrimage" to the Soviet Union a decade later. Unlike McKay, however, Hughes would spend the majority of his time far from the action of Moscow and Leningrad, instead going to the remote region of Soviet Central Asia.

In this respect, Hughes's itinerary was highly unusual. During the interwar period Soviet officials barred most foreigners from touring the territories of Central Asia.21 For this reason, almost all of the handful of tourists who did

18 *Vsesoiuzenoe obshestvo kul'turnoi sviazi s Zagranitsei*. voks replaced Intourist as the agency in charge of coordinating foreign visitors. For a recent reappraisal of the "fellow travelers" with a focus on the workings of VOKS, see Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow Travelers Revisited: The 'Cultured West' through Soviet Eyes," *Journal of Modern History,* 75, no. 2 (June 2003): 300–335.

19 Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970), 168.

20 Claude McKay, "Soviet Russia and the Negro," *The Crisis*, 27, no. 2 (December 1923), 64.

21 This was especially true of those travelers, like Robert Byron, who attempted to reach the region from the south. Byron made it as far as northern Afghanistan but was unable to cross the Syr Darya. The fact that Bryon was in all likelihood working for British

reach the far off lands of the Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh SSRs enjoyed some level of official sanction and were closely monitored.22 Mass deportations, widespread famine brought on by collectivization, and occasional border raids by *basmachi* rebels provided ample cause for Soviet caution. However, some of the same reasons that made the Soviets apprehensive about allowing visiting foreigners access to Central Asia also made the region an especially attractive destination. As the most culturally and materially "backward" part of the Soviet Union, the storied region seemed to offer the most striking view of the Promethean reach of the Soviet project. At the edge of the Soviet Union's frontier the romance of the timeless Orient—its ancient cities, picturesque villages, and mysterious veiled women—competed with, but also added to, the storyline of Soviet modernization—its collective farms, newly liberated women, and massive hydroelectric dams.23 These extremes made "fellow traveling" in Central Asia both exhilarating and confusing. Joshua Kunitz, an American communist touring Tajikstan with a small international group of writers and authors in 1934, found himself immediately disabused of his Western fantasy of Central Asia. "Please don't fall into the error of most Europeans who visit us, don't descend into exoticism, don't become worked up over the magnificence of chaos," his Tajik guide pleaded, offering the "romance" of telegraph lines, roads, and "Bolshevik tempo" in place of these stale Orientalist tropes.24 In practice, this proposed reframing often proved less than seamless.

The tension between Orientalist representation and the new Soviet mystique is especially apparent in the Central Asian writings of Langston Hughes.25

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intelligence certainly did not help his appeal to enter Soviet Central Asia. Bryon, *The Road To Oxiana* (London: John Lehmann, 1956).

22 See, for example, Ann Louise Strong, *The Road to the Grey* Pamir (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931) or the decidedly less sympathetic Bosworth Goldman, *Red Road Through Asia* (London: Methuen Publishers, 1934). Two notable exceptions who reached Central Asia by virtue of remarkable pluck and considerable luck include the previously mentioned Ella Maillert and, later, Fitzroy MacLean, the inimitable Scotsman and British diplomat who outwitted Soviet officials to successfully reach Soviet Central Asia on two separate occasions between 1937 and 1938. See Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949).

23 Not all visitors were impressed with the Soviet development of the region. Bosworth Goodman, who traveled to Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Ashkhabad in 1934, decried "the ugliness of the Russian invasion of the East." Sovietization, to Goodman, appeared to have destroyed much of the region's unique culture. Goodman, *Red Road,* 176.

24 Joshua Kunitz, *Dawn Over Samarkand: The Rebirth of Central Asia* (New York: Van Rees, 1935), 12–13.

25 As represented by a number of short articles published in the black press between 1933 and 1946, a Soviet-published travelogue, *A Negro Looks at Central Asia* (Moscow: Cooperative

Hughes's accounts of his Central Asian travels do not entirely escape the pitfalls of either discourse. At the same time, even in instrumentalizing a Central Asia of his own creation, Hughes challenged the accepted terms of "backwardness." Though it is tempting to dismiss Hughes's idealized view of Soviet Central Asia as naïveté or youthful folly, explanations Hughes himself would later endorse, his early attraction to Soviet modernization demands a more nuanced explanation. Hughes's Central Asian writings demonstrate the way in which radical political imagination can act as an emancipatory, creative force and as a profoundly limiting discourse at the same time.

Hughes's journey to Central Asia did not follow a direct route. He arrived in Moscow in the summer of 1932 as part of group of African Americans recruited by the Comintern to make a film dramatizing race relations in the United States. The project fell apart, and the Soviets abandoned *Black and White*, as the film was to be titled, following several months of comical miscommunication among the would-be cast, director, government officials, and studio representatives. The film's cancellation sparked a minor scandal in the black press.26 Presented with an offer to extend his tour of the Soviet Union, Hughes and several remaining cast members secured official permission to travel throughout the restricted territories of Central Asia—to the legendary cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, and Boukhara. If the circumstances that made this leg of his trip possible were accidental, Hughes's destination was deliberate. Hughes was eager to see for himself how the "yellow and brown peoples" lived and worked in what he called the "Soviet South."27

Like other attempts to describe the region in familiar us terms, Hughes's "Soviet South" formulation served a larger objective.28 In Hughes's case, the

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Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1934), and finally reworked in his 1956 *Autobiography: I Wonder As I Wander*. See Joseph McLaren (ed.), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 14 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003). For a thoughtful critique of Hughes's Orientalism, see Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and White, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 111–116.

26 See Hughes's account of the film project in *I Wonder As I Wander*, 95–121.

27 Langston Hughes, "Going South in Russia," *The Crisis*, 41, no. 6, (June 1934): 162–163; "Going South…" in *A Negro Looks at Central Asia*, 5–11.

28 Vice President Henry Wallace, on his 1942 trip to Soviet Central Asia described the region to his American readers as "the wild West of Russia" a bastion of rugged individualism and modern day pioneers. The Iowa native later adjusted his metaphor to frame the region as a Soviet mid-west, full of "people of plain living and robust minds, not unlike our farming peoples in the United States" Henry Wallace, *Mission to Soviet Asia* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946), 22.

analogy was meant to subvert and reconfigure conventional notions of "backwardness." If backwardness was not associated with race but with racial discrimination, Hughes asked, then which "South," America's or the Soviet Union's, was more advanced? This creative redefinition anticipated later attempts to forge solidarities among oppressed peoples, from Third Worldism to the more recent concept of a "Global South." Although based on similarities—both regions were large, cotton-producing areas with sizeable non-white populations—Hughes's analogy was the prelude to a study in contrast: a "tale of two Souths." Taking his readers on a parallel journey through each "South," Hughes catalogued the humiliations of travel below the Mason–Dixon line in a way that made the simple pleasures of the Moscow–Tashkent express train—a warm meal, the choice of a seat, friendly conversation—feel revelatory and revolutionary. The us South, represented in Hughes's account by the capricious indignities of Jim Crow, the pseudo-slavery of sharecropping, and widespread political disenfranchisement, stood in stark relief to its Soviet counterpart, represented by racial equality, political liberation, and women's emancipation. This triumphant narrative of Soviet progress in Central Asia was also, not surprisingly, the version trumpeted by Soviet propaganda. In Hughes's somewhat didactic scheme, the presence of African American agronomists, transplants from the us South to the Soviet South, added a human dimension as well as metaphoric bridge. Like other contemporary accounts of the agronomists, Hughes celebrated the men as active participants in a great historical event.29

Though Hughes dutifully stressed electrification, increased literacy, and the unveiling of women in his narrative, it is clear that for him the eradication of "Jim Crow" stands apart from these other modernizing projects as the signal achievement of Soviet development. The revolutionary potential of racial emancipation deeply impressed Hughes.30 In a matter of decades, he told his readers, the formerly oppressed peoples of Central Asia had achieved full

29 "Going South in Russia," for example concludes with a description of a multiracial workers delegation made up of "brown Asiatics, fair-skinned Russians, and an American Negro engineer, Bernard Powers … helping to build roads across Asia," *The Crisis*, 41, no. 6, (June 1934): 162.

30 This is not to say that other observers neglected to mention the region's racial dynamics. Anna Louise Strong, for example, wrote of the power of the "new racial equality which had won the loyalty of the simple praying *dyer* [an Uzbek Muslim she met on a train] even to an atheist state." Bosworth Goldman noted that Russian officials "speak of the native races as though of inferiors." See Strong, *Grey Road,* 15; Goldman, *Red Road*, 182.

citizenship and social equality. In a shot aimed squarely at domestic proponents of a gradualist approach to civil rights activism, Hughes emphatically stated that this rapid and dramatic transformation was proof that it did "not take generations to get rid of ugly, evil, antiquated, stupid Jim Crow Practices—if a country really wants to get rid of them."31 In this context, Hughes's repeated assertion the Soviet Union was the only nation in the world with no Jim Crow can be interpreted as a strategic attempt to expose the hollowness of us exceptionalism rather than a naïve embrace of Soviet exceptionalism.

In his autobiography, Hughes stressed the way that race influenced his assessment of Soviet Central Asia. Whereas his traveling partner for much of his tour, the Hungarian-born Jewish journalist Arthur Koestler, saw Soviet Turkmenistan from a European point of view "as simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization," Hughes asserted that he viewed it from an African American perspective as "a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites." Though accurate in terms of how European travelers described their experiences in Soviet Central Asia, Hughes's insistence that Soviet modernization in Central Asia looked differently when viewed "with *Negro* eyes," deflected his almost total disinterest in the more brutal aspects of this project.32 Hughes found the show trials that he and Koestler attended, and which profoundly disturbed Koestler, "boring."33 Hughes was unable to sympathize with one of the accused because he "didn't like his looks." Although his own notes recorded that the Turkmen defendants felt that the prosecution was motivated by "Russian chauvinism," Hughes failed to draw any connections to the contemporary racist prosecution of African Americans.34 These troubling parallels threatened to reorient Hughes's tale of

31 Langston Hughes, "The Soviet Union and Color," *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1946.

32 All italics in the original, Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 135; Ella Maillart, for example, wrote, "I am living in the heart of the Middle Ages … At every step the fourteenth century rises to meet the twentieth." *Turkestan Solo*, 242; Koestler's perspective is apparent in the title of his planned travelogue, *The Soviet Land Through Bourgeois Eyes*. Richard H. Crossman, ed. *The God That Failed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 56.

33 Ibid., 135; For Koestler's account of the trials see Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 117–120; See also Maillart's description of a similar trial she witnessed the same year in *Turkestan Solo*, 250–253.

34 Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 136. Hughes's inability or unwillingness to question the methods and motives of Soviet trials is especially frustrating since his Central Asian writings frequently mention the case of the Scottsboro Boys, nine African American teenagers tried and sentenced to death in Alabama for allegedly raping two white women on a train in the spring of 1931. The "legal lynching" garnered international attention and became a *cause célèbre* among leftists.

two "Souths" in a direction he was not willing to pursue. Instead, Hughes marshaled his increasingly problematic geographic analogy to explain his indifference to the obvious signs of political persecution. Though Hughes had witnessed first hand the long lines of people waiting outside the headquarters of the secret police to visit relatives and was told by others that the jails of Central Asia were filled with political prisoners, he preferred to think of this wretched lot as "those who had not wished to see the Jim Crow signs go down."35 Elsewhere Hughes confessed that he pitied "these irreconcilables" but only in the way that his "slave grandparents must have been sorry for certain of the gentler aristocrats of the South when the Yankees came."36

In these comparisons, Hughes's determination to interpret events in Soviet Central Asia in us terms enabled a glib dismissal of Soviet injustice in the region and an erasure of the historical voice and agency of Central Asians. Literary scholars have wrestled admirably with other contradictions within Hughes's Central Asian writings while avoiding this particularly thorny area.37 With this omission, they mirror Hughes's own reluctance to engage with the ghosts of his past radicalism. Unlike Koestler, who went on to write several celebrated essays dissecting his initial attraction to communism and the conditions of his subsequent disillusionment, Hughes resisted self-examination in his autobiographical writing. He tepidly suggested that "most idealists [himself, presumably, excluded] expected too much of Russia in too short a time," and offered his race as an explanation of why in his final estimation the positive progress of a "backward people" outweighed the admittedly "deplorable" aspects of Soviet society.38 Taking Hughes at his word, we are forced to conclude that the racial internationalism he developed in Central Asia obscured as much as it revealed.

Conclusion: African American Travel to Central Asia in the Cold War

One year after Hughes completed his travels in Soviet Central Asia, the columnist Chatwood Hall publicly shamed three prominent African American educators for failing to add the region to their itineraries. Perhaps, Hall pointedly suggested, these respected race men—two of whom were sociologists—found

35 Ibid., 185.

36 Ibid., 162.

37 See Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 86–148; David Chioni Moore, "Colored Dispatches from the Uzbek Border: Langston Hughes' Relevance, 1933–2002," *Callaloo*, 25, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 1115–1135.

38 Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 218–219.

the glamorous sites of Moscow and Leningrad more interesting than the "deep south" of the Soviet Union, home to "the dark national minorities." The article concluded, "Black tourists ought not to come to this distant part of the earth without seeing how Russian colored people now live and rule."39 Following his own advice, Hall published reports from Soviet Uzbekistan in the African American press that hailed the opportunities extended to Soviet citizens regardless of race or ethnicity. While these stories bolstered the Soviet Union's reputation as a nation that had banished racial discrimination, they could also serve as pointed rebukes of Jim Crow America. For example, the headline "She Needs Not Sue to Enter Moscow University," ran above a large photo of young Uzbek woman standing in a cotton field. Hall explained that the "race Uzbek beauty," Samabarhag Rahkmanova, had "never heard of Jim Crow" and upon graduating from secondary school in Tashkent would be welcomed to any of Moscow's top universities.40 Hall's message was as much an indictment of us racism as it was an idealization of Soviet policies. Despite Hall's urging, no African American tourists would visit Central Asia for nearly four decades. A number of factors precipitated the long intermission between the first and second acts of African American engagement with the region.

Soviet prestige among African Americans suffered a major blow following the avowedly anti-colonial state's decision to supply Italy with oil during the Italian–Ethiopian War in 1935. The Soviets lost credibility again four years later in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. During the same period, all of the African American agronomists, except Oliver Golden, left Central Asia to return to the United States as a renewed anti-foreign fervor swept the Soviet Union and Stalin's purges intensified.41

After the war Central Asia returned to make a cameo appearance in the black press via the previously discussed articles that Langston Hughes wrote in the summer of 1946. These articles were published at the tail end of what Penny Von Eschen has called the "black popular front," an alliance of African American leftists that flourished in the 1940s only to collapse following the introduction of Truman's anti-communist foreign policy in 1947.42 Domestic

39 Chatwood Hall [Homer Smith] "A Column From Moscow," *Chicago Defender*, October 20, 1934. The tourists were most likely Mordecai Johnson, John Hope, and Charles S. Johnson, presidents of Howard, Atlanta and Fisk Universities respectively.

40 Chatwood Hall [Homer Smith], "She Needs Not Sue to Enter Moscow University," *Chicago Defender*, October 23, 1937.

41 Golden died shortly thereafter, in 1940.

42 See Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

repression of communists, perceived communists, and Soviet sympathizers stigmatized past travel to the Soviet Union. As civil rights leaders reframed racial reform as a national security issue with direct consequences for us power abroad, they self-consciously withheld criticism of us foreign policy.43 In the context of this newly shaped Cold War liberalism, those who continued to openly praise the Soviet Union, like veteran anti-colonialist radicals W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson, endured FBI harassment. Each had his passport revoked in the early 1950s. The era of McCarthyism put pressure on artists as well. In front of a Senate committee in 1953, Langston Hughes dutifully denied membership in the Communist Party, disavowed his early revolutionary writings as "out-dated examples of [his] work," and praised the United States as"the most wonderful country in the world."44

The stifling atmosphere of McCarthyism was only one development that caused Central Asia to fade from the popular imagination of African American intellectuals in the post-war period. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union's anti-colonial rhetoric proved appealing in part because the empires of Western Europe still denied self-determination to much of Asia and Africa. The steady drumbeat of decolonization that followed the end of World War ii added 92 new member states to the United Nations between 1946 and 1970. For African American intellectuals of this generation, it was newly independent states like Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, not the Soviet Union, that provided inspiration and attracted expatriates interested in building a society without racism.45 Similarly, in the 1930s the Soviet Union was the sole communist state in existence. The emergence of communist China and Cuba, while on one level signaling a victory for international communism, also challenged Soviet ideological leadership of the same movement. The Afro-Asian Conference of 1955 held in Bandung, Indonesia, further demonstrated the shifting landscape of anti-colonialism.46 As Richard Wright observed, Bandung represented the fulfillment of Lenin's anti-imperialist vision even as the meeting provided

43 See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

44 While active in a number of leftist organizations, some affiliated with the Communist Party, there is no evidence that Hughes ever joined the CPUSA. "Langston Hughes Speaks," in Faith Berry, ed., *Good Morning Revolution*: *Uncollected Writings of Social Protest byLangston Hughes* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1992), 157–158.

45 Kevin K. Gaines, *African Americans in Ghana: Black Expatriates in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

46 Bandung was organized by Indonesia, Burma, India, Ceylon, and Pakistan and represented an important milestone in the rise of "Non-Aligned Movement." It also signaled China's growing influence in the so-called Third World.

evidence that the Soviet Union had been supplanted as the leading anti-colonial force.47 Against this backdrop, the Soviet Union struggled to maintain its relevancy and revolutionary bona fides. "Who can say with assurance," asked George F. Kennan in 1950, "that the still strong light cast by the Kremlin on the dissatisfied peoples of the Western World is not the powerful afterglow of a constellation which is in actuality on the wane?"48

For its part, the Soviet Union was determined not to lose its standing in the developing world. Soviet Central Asia would play an important role in this effort. As Soviet foreign policy pivoted toward the Third World during the Cold War, the state tourism apparatus actively promoted the region as a destination for tourists and delegations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Air travel had long since replaced rail (and pack animals) as the main means of reaching Tashkent, Samarkand, and Boukhara making the ancient cities more accessible than ever before. Along with the impact of these technological changes, official tours drained much of the thrill previously associated with visiting the "restricted frontier" of Central Asia in the interwar years.49 Tashkent, in particular, became a "post-colonial" showcase of the Soviet development model. The city became a hub of cultural diplomacy and hosted international events like the 1958 International Conference of Writers from Asia and Africa. In addition to being a geographic gateway to Asia, the city was to be, in the words of the poet Khamid Guliam, "Moscow's Ambassador in the East."50 To ensure that cultural relations served the larger foreign policy objectives, visitors followed carefully constructed itineraries designed to highlight the remarkable achievements of Soviet progress and to affirm the Soviet model of development. This approach had long been deployed by Soviet officials interested in cultivating that nation's image abroad.51 The novelty lay in directing tourists to Tashkent rather than Moscow and in actively courting visitors from the "developing world" instead of focusing on Western European and us intellectuals.

47 Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1995).

48 George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, il: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 104.

49 Fitzroy Maclean's return to the Soviet Central Asia in 1958 as a *de luxe* tourist is perfect illustration how travel to the region had changed since his last daring visit, 20 years earlier. See Fitzroy Maclean, *Back To Bokhara* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959).

50 Stronski, *Tashkent*, 234–239.

51 See Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Soviet Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Moscow's efforts also attracted a new generation of African American tourists. Within the Soviet imaginary, as well as the pan-colonialist intellectual tradition of Black America itself, African Americans were felt to have more in common with the "East" than with capitalist America. The second wave of African American travelers to Soviet Central Asia had more in common with Langston Hughes than the African American agronomists who lived and worked in the region for much of the 1930s. Many were involved with the Black Arts Movement and the New Left, which both looked to the 1920s and 1930s as a "golden age" of creative expression and political activism. Just as Rudyard Kipling's writings inspired Britons like Byron, Goldman, and MacLean to visit Central Asia in the 1930s, African Americans who visited the region in the era of détente found that they could not escape the legacy of earlier black travelers and at times even set out deliberately to retrace their steps.52 The expatriate cartoonist Ollie Harrington visited Tashkent in the late 1960s at the behest of the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil*. Sitting on a park bench, Harrington was approached by a young Uzbek girl who presented him with a flower and asked if he was Paul Robeson. Informed that he was only a friend of the famous singer, the girl's mother replied, "Here, he is our beloved Pauli."53 Another African American artist, Elton Fax, traveled to Uzbekistan in 1971 with two of the editors of *Freedomways*, the New Left magazine that grew directly out of Robeson's earlier periodical. Fax used Hughes's account of his travels to Central Asia as both a guide and a literary model for his own book, *Through Black Eyes*.54 As the title of his book implies, Fax also adopted Hughes's racial perspective and felt a strong connection to the Uzbeks as a people who had triumphed over racial discrimination. Fax updated familiar themes—high literacy rates, the impressive cotton harvest, and the genuine interest that Uzbeks displayed for the struggle of African Americans—in a style reminiscent of Hughes's observations four decades earlier.

Fax was surprised to see a large portrait of us Communist Party member Angela Davis, who would make her own trip to the region the following year,

52 In the case of Louise Thompson Patterson, who had accompanied Hughes on the first leg of his Central Asian tour in 1932, this retracing was quite literal. She returned to Uzbekistan in 1969 at the age of sixty-eight.

53 Oliver Harrington, *Why I Left America and Other Essays* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 43.

54 Elton Fax, *Through Black Eyes: Journeys of a Black Artist to East Africa and Russia* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1974). Fax's other reference source for Uzbekistan was Rev. Hewlett Johnson's, *The Soviet Power* (New York: International Publishers, 1940). Johnson is better known by his nickname, the "Red Dean of Canterbury."

hanging in the headquarters of the Young Pioneers in Tashkent.55 In Uzbekistan, Davis received a hero's welcome and was awarded the key to the city of Samarkand as well as an honorary degree by the University of Tashkent. In a speech, Davis championed Soviet nationality policies as a model for ending racial discord and discrimination in the United States.56 Davis had achieved folk-hero status throughout the Soviet Union during her well-publicized trial becoming the first African American woman in a pantheon of "black ikons" that included McKay, Hughes, Robeson, and boxer Muhammad Ali.57 In Central Asia, Angela Davis remained a household name more than a decade after her brief visit.58

Five years later, the poet Audre Lorde, who visited Tashkent for a Soviet-sponsored conference of African and Asian writers, commented on the intense popular interest in Black Americans as well as a broader "fascination with all things American" repeatedly displayed by Soviet citizens. Lorde preferred Tashkent, which she likened to West Africa, to the drab "American" atmosphere of Moscow. Lorde was skeptical of official Soviet statistics and suspicious of her ever-present guide, but the perceived impact of anti-racist policies and stories of the "genuine heroism and persistence" of Uzbek women still impressed her.59 Lorde was less sanguine on the potential of forging meaningful alliances especially in light of the official Soviet stance barring interference with the internal affairs of other nations. "As I've always suspected," Lorde wrote, "outside of rhetoric and proclamations of solidarity, there is no help, except ourselves."60

Lorde's statement serves as a fitting epitaph for this chapter of African American engagement with Soviet Central Asia. The second generation of

55 Ibid., 167.

56 "Miss Davis Hails Soviet Policies," *New York Times,* September 10, 1972. The article intentionally downplays Davis's popularity in the Soviet Union, suggesting that Russian women appeared "put off" by her "Afro-style hairdo."

57 Davis's case attracted immense media attention in East Germany and the Soviet Union, where communist student organizations spearheaded the international "Free Angela Davis" movement. Davis was charged with murder, kidnapping, and criminal conspiracy after two firearms registered in her name were used in a dramatic and fatal courtroom escape attempt. In June 1972, Davis was acquitted of all charges and undertook a celebratory world tour to thank her supporters.

58 For a humorous *glasnost*-era account of a "conversation" in Central Asia using names of various political leaders and celebrities, see Robin Magowan, *Fabled Cities of Central Asia: Samarkhand, Bukhara, Khiva* (London: Cassell, 1990), 91.

59 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 29.

60 Ibid., 30.

travelers were already anachronistic, their visions of black internationalism fueled mostly by memories of a bygone era. If the revival African American tourism in Central Asia was a doomed project from the start, events hastened its failure. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 ended "tourism" as such in Central Asia and made a neutral assessment of Soviet policy in Central Asia increasingly untenable. Angela Davis, as the vice-presidential candidate of the CPUSA in the 1980 election, found herself in uncomfortable position of publicly defending the Soviet's "defensive war."61 The subsequent collapse of Soviet Union and the emergence, much to the surprise of analysts, of independent states in Central Asia has changed the regional profile in ways that have yet to be fully understood. Although the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, violently reintroduced Central Asia into America's public consciousness, Afghanistan's neighbors to the north— the so-called Five Stans—remain virtually unknown and quite literally (in that five distinct nations are lumped into a single name) anonymous. At the same time, the demise of apartheid in South Africa, the last foreign policy issue to truly mobilize African Americans, also marked the end of "race" as a salient factor in foreign policy. It is hard today to imagine, outside of a small range of humanitarian actions, a "black" foreign policy issue, or for that matter, a purely "black" domestic issue. These trends make a third act in the story of African American engagement with Central Asia—in any recognizable form—extremely unlikely.

61 David Andelman, "Communists Rally in City and Recall Past Causes," *New York Times*, October 20, 1980.