Langston Hughes’s Radical Poetry and the “End of Race”

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For a number of reasons, Langston Hughes’s radical poetry, the bulk of which he wrote between 1932-1938, has received little scholarly attention and has yet to make its way into many anthologies of American literature (with the notable exception of a few poems in the vanguard second and third editions of The Heath Anthology of American Literature). The origins of this benign and not-so-benign neglect lie in Hughes’s own retrospective ambivalence toward his earlier radical activities and poetry. As early as 1940 he substantially repressed the memory of his involvement with the proletarian literary movement in his autobiography, The Big Sea. And we can surmise that the hostile recovery of this memory by none other than House on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in the 1950s did little to encourage Hughes to include his explicitly “red” poetry in his Selected Poems (1959). But Hughes’s repression of his radical poetry in the 1940s and 1950s was only one symptom of a debilitating neurosis in American society: all-too familiar Cold War fear of the radical “other” and its shadow, that even deeper fear of one’s own “un-American” impulses. Of course, writers rarely exercise power over the public reception of their work, and Hughes was no exception. The repression—that is, exclusion—of proletarian literature from academic canons was in large part a New Critical achievement; 1930s radical poetry was disqualified as poetry, since it was not—nor ever aimed to be—self-referential. With a few exceptions, scholarship on Hughes’s poetry tends to dismiss the works of this period because they don’t measure up to aesthetic standards, or, as Arnold Rampersad has written, because they fail to express the “essential identity” (40) of the black American. After all, they embrace an internationalist perspective that is critical of the black nationalist or Pan-Africanist ideology attributed to his earlier Harlem Renaissance poems.

The neglect of Hughes’s radical poetry is unfortunate. He ought to be considered one of the first American poets effectively to challenge
the post-World War I ethnic nationalism that to some extent informed the politics of the Harlem Renaissance, including some of his own early "blues" poetry, as well as that which fueled European fascism. More specifically, Hughes’s internationalist poetry aims dialectically to preserve and transcend the categories of "race" and "nation" in order to overcome the fragmentation of global working class struggles. This effort may not have produced what some of us would deem formally or tonally "beautiful" works, but if Hughes chose to sacrifice artistry for politics, it was not because the two are mutually exclusive but because the blues aesthetic of his early poems embraced a form of nationalism he could no longer abide. Ironically, then, Hughes’s work during the 1930s speaks directly to those who would dismiss it, challenging us to look more critically at current efforts to reclaim a black nationalist literary aesthetic, and prodding us, perhaps, to rethink the historical relationships between poetics and politics.

To understand Hughes's challenge we must first consider the construction, emergence, and ultimate hegemony of nationalism in the years following the first World War, as well as its effects on Hughes’s early aesthetic theory. Many contemporary thinkers have convincingly shown that nationalism is a shifting concept, at times defined by the possession of a common language, territory, race, ethnicity, religion, psychology, and so forth. Benedict Anderson's conceptualization of nationality as an "imagined community" aptly underscores its fictive character. After 1880, nationalism became increasingly defined by an ethnic-linguistic criterion: if a number of people could claim a common ethnicity or "race" and language, then they could constitute a "nation." Another important feature of modern nationalism has been its hostility to its antithesis, or better, nemesis: internationalism. Common to all nationalisms leading up to World War I was their "rejection of the new proletarian socialist movements, not only because they were proletarian but also because they were, consciously and militantly internationalist, or at the very least non-nationalist” (Hobsbawm 122-23). Nationalism and internationalism came to function as two antagonistic ideologies, wherein "the advance of one [can be viewed] as equivalent to the retreat of the other" (123). Internationalism challenged nationalism because it posited the unity of global working class interests against appeals to "national interests" by local imperialists in times of intra-class conflict (war) and inter-class conflict (civil unrest). World War I (and later the importance of the principle of nationality in the Armistice) constituted a significant advance of nationalism in Europe. Yet the defeat of socialism in Eastern
Europe certainly did not cancel out nationalism’s other. The victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia resurrected on a grand scale the long-feared specter of socialism for the imperial powers. October 1917 signified the emergence of international working class interests as a real threat to imperialism. It would not be far-fetched to date the beginning of the Cold War here, since the policies of first world powers became increasingly concerned with defeating the inroads of internationalism by appeals to nationalism. Herbert Hoover, then head of American relief in Europe, wrote in 1921: “The whole American policy during the liquidation of the Armistice was to contribute everything it could to prevent Europe from going Bolshevik or being overrun by their armies” (qtd. in Dutt 47).

In the post-war era, the U.S. government also “contributed everything” to stemming Bolshevism and any progressive labor and political activities domestically. As has been well-documented, Attorney General Mitchell Palmer’s infamous “raids” achieved their appointed task of destroying organized labor and left-wing organizations. In an attempt to drive a wedge of nationalism through the labor movement, the government rounded up and unconstitutionally deported thousands of “aliens” under the pretense that they were anarchists (Zinn 366). Those who protested the jingoism of the War, such as the socialist Eugene Debs, were imprisoned under the Espionage Act (358). And fearing that blacks returning from the war would agitate for equality under the law, Palmer had his J. Edgar Hoover-led “Radical Division” investigate black intellectuals and activists, such as those associated with The Messenger (Dunn 65). One sign that the campaign of terror worked is its effect on once radical black intellectuals. Nathan Irvin Huggins writes: “The Messenger, which had called itself ‘the only radical Negro magazine,’ had by 1924 become a mere cultural organ, with surprising interest in bourgeois social life” (9).

And, added to this, the deficit of jobs for returning white soldiers during the post-war recession exacerbated the pre-existing racism in America, particularly since many blacks occupied “white only” jobs during the war boom. The fateful mixture of recession and racism culminated in race riots across the U.S. It would be an understatement to state that, while existent, ideas of multiracial unity or internationalism were not propagated nor dominant among the masses in post-war America. Internationalism was simply “un-American.”

As might be expected from this dense, divisive atmosphere of racism and nationalism, a segment of the black community fought fire with fire by countering the onslaught of Anglo-nationalism with black nationalism. We can identify Harlem, Alain Locke’s “race capital” (50), as an important locus of that resistance and the center for
discourse on black and white race relations. It is through a revaluation of the concept of "race"—the concept that Du Bois rightly identified in 1900 as the central problem of the twentieth century—that a segment of the urban black community waged its defensive war. Here, Marcus Garvey is the figurehead for a politics of Pan-Africanism and black nationalism. In the 1920s Garvey, whose appeals to "race pride" gained him a large following in the U.S., directed his energies to building support for his separatist notion of a mass black exodus "back to Africa." He premised his ultra-nationalist program for the African exodus on the specious notion that concrete social determinations of subjectivity are of no consequence, since "[e]verybody knows that there is absolutely no difference between the native African and the American and West Indian Negroes, in that we are descendants from one common family stock" (37). Garvey's nationalism allowed him to forge alliances with the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations, who likewise advocated deporting African Americans to Africa (Marable 118). (Ironically, he never set foot in Africa.) We can trace Garvey's scheme for an independent Pan-African state back to a school of thought in nineteenth century anti-slavery discourse; however, its dramatic appearance in the 1920s reveals its debt to the dominant nationalist discourse of the period: if the self-determination of "nations" was good for European peoples, then it was good for those of African descent. And, not surprisingly, therefore, Garvey's was an ethnic nationalism. In 1921 A. Philip Randolph forcefully linked Garveyism to post-war nationalism when he wrote in the then still radical Messenger: "Garveyism is an upshot of the Great World War. It sprang forth amidst the wild currents of national, racial and class hatreds and prejudices stirred and unleashed by the furious flames of battle" (27). W.E.B. Du Bois's Pan-Africanism and advocacy of the popular belief in the right of nationalities to self-determination at the Second Pan-African Congress in Paris, which he convened contemporaneously with the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and his subsequent Congresses held in 1921, 1923, and 1927, should likewise be historicized as such. "Given the official commitment of the victorious powers to Wilsonian [ethnic-linguistic] nationalism," Hobsbawm writes, "it was natural that anyone claiming to speak in the name of some oppressed or unrecognized people...should do so in terms of the national principle, and especially the right to self-determination" (136). The 1920s provided Pan-Africanists with a strategic moment to construct and valorize Pan-African identity and nationhood.

The relevance of post-war nationalism to Hughes's poetry is found in its effect on him and many black intellectuals in and around
Harlem during the 1920s. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the Harlem Renaissance in the absence of the predominance of the ideology of nationalism in World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, the Pan-African Congresses, UNIA, Du Bois, the NAACP, and the Crisis. Many Harlem Renaissance literati did in fact embrace black nationalism and Pan Africanism out of a desire to resist the avalanche of white racism in America and to create a distinctly black culture that fairly represented and honored black life. And like Garvey, many of these writers aimed to construct this national culture out of essentialist notions of black identity. They believed that the “substructure” of race produced a “superstructure” of black literature (Gates 30). Charles S. Johnson wrote at the time:

The new racial poetry of the Negro is the expression of something more than experimentation in a new technique. It marks the birth of a new racial consciousness and self-conception. It is first of all a frank acceptance of race, but the recognition of this difference without the usual implications of disparity. (145)

A cursory reading of many of Hughes’s poems from the 1920s (such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Our Land,” “Danse Africaine,” “I, too,” and his “Proem” from The Weary Blues) would confirm that he too had a strong sense of “race pride,” borne out of “a new racial consciousness and self-conception,” which is why Johnson hailed Hughes’s poetry as “without doubt the finest expression of this new Negro Poetry” (145). In his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” Hughes clearly formulates his position on the black aesthetic. He argues that the impasse to developing a black aesthetic is the hegemony of American white culture (figured as the “racial mountain”) over representations of “race.” And he particularly finds middle class black artists, who have been taught through their education and social milieu to emulate white culture, denying their racial identity and heritage. Working class blacks, on the other hand, are the repositories of an authentic black culture, since they “still hold their own individuality” and can furnish black artists with the proper subject (black life) and expressive forms (jazz, blues, spirituals, folk music). Hughes concludes that the chief responsibility of the black writer is to produce a racial literature drawn from African American life and culture. “We younger Negro artists who create,” Hughes defiantly writes, “now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (309). Onwuchekwa Jemie, who identifies Hughes as a black nationalist, notes that “Hughes’s insistence on a distinct black art...[is]...a recognition of
the fact that Afro-Americans are a distinct people within the Ameri-
can nation” (103).

It is important to note that, as with most forms of nationalism, Hughes’s also functions through a hierarchy of “race.” “Nordic” cul-
ture is amorphously represented as homogenous (306), “dull” (307), and implicitly incapable of providing the black artist with anything useful—a notion, I will presently show, he dispenses with in the
1930s. Nonetheless, the purpose of Hughes’s spirited critique of and
call to white-identified black artists was to shake up the status quo of Anglocentric cultural hegemony. I underscore the racialist
thrust of his essay to place it squarely within the cultural nationalism
of the post-war period. For Hughes, and many other writers in and
around the Harlem Renaissance, “race” must be the foundation of a
national art. It is no wonder that Alain Locke proclaimed Hughes the
“spokesman” of the “Negro masses” (44).

One final point on Hughes in the 1920s, if we are to understand his
political and literary transformations in the 1930s: he also shared
with his contemporaries a skepticism toward political practice.
“What we have come to think of as the Harlem Renaissance,” Hug-
gins notes, “seems to have been a channeling of energy from political
and social criticism into poetry, fiction, music, and art” (9). With the
exception of a few of his poems from the 1920s, Hughes’s Harlem Re-
naissance work address an essentially politically passive, oppressed
black subject, which suggests that he did not view the black masses
as embodying the type of political agency necessary for social trans-
formation. In general, Hughes’s subjects are politically incapacitated
by a weariness of social oppression, which is not to say that they do
not find forms of personal joy, relief, and resistance in cultural activi-
ties such as music, dance, and song. In various ways Hughes seems
to insist in a kind of carpe diem for the black oppressed: “Shake your
brown feet, Liza, / (the banjo’s sobbing low) / The sun’s going down
this very night— / Might never rise no mo’” (“Song for a Banjo
Dance” 29).

And yet, like many Anglo-American high modernists, Hughes be-
lieved it was possible for an aesthetic movement to transform social
reality. “We build our temples for tomorrow,” Hughes prophesied,
“and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (“The
Negro Artist” 309). His idealistic conception of spiritual freedom in
the land of Jim Crow, and of the future “temples,” which, we can as-
sume, will be the cultural centers of a divine black literati proclaim-
ing freedom, led him to place an unwarranted emphasis on art as a
way to gain equal citizenship in the U.S. Echoing Huggins’ earlier re-
mark, Rampersad writes, “through the display of black sensitivity,
intelligence, and artistic versatility, it was believed, whites would come to a new understanding of the humanity of African Americans and help to accelerate social change” (xvi). If anything was going to convince a “white” America of the humanity and equality of blacks, it would have to be “culture,” that realm where human beings differentiate themselves from the “savage” and aspire to the divine. Thus, what would ordinarily be constituted as political was subordinated to or subsumed by what counted as cultural, that is, what could take the form deemed most acceptable to the dominant culture. This idea resulted in a cultural movement created by an intelligentsia who hoped to compete with white artists for cultural authority. Given the intense repression of progressive political praxis in post-war America, the cultural nationalist aesthetic can be theorized as a response to the crisis of political agency and the desire to transform social reality.

During the Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance’s dream of equality achieved through cultural production “crashed,” along with many other hopes of economic and political progress in America. The emergent political mobility of large masses of workers changed the political and ideological landscape of the country by throwing into question the post-war view popular among disillusioned intellectuals of a history devoid of active proletarian agency, and, consequently, the role of the artist. For Hughes, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) became a focal point of interest, because he saw the CPUSA as an organization with an explicitly anti-racist and democratic program that could organize the stirring masses. As Hughes wrote in 1932, “If the Communists don’t awaken the Negro of the South, who will?” (qtd. in Berry 142). His later renunciation of Communism in the 1940s and 1950s, and his insistence that he was never a member of the CPUSA, are of little consequence here when we consider the depth of his support for Communism and its influence on his work in the 1930s.4 Hughes’s experience in the 1930s forced him to rethink race, politics, and aesthetics.

Hughes’s move to the left was in large part a recognition of the limitations of a cultural nationalist perspective of social relations. We can assume that witnessing the millions of white workers unemployed and underemployed made it difficult to continue to believe that the “white man” was master of his own fate, let alone that of African Americans. In the 1930s, the working class was publicly amassing—whether on breadlines, in marches, or strikes—to an unprecedented degree. “[T]he external facts of the Depression remained visible to all in stock-market statistics, boarded-up factories, apple
vendors, and breadlines” (Hart 249). In *The Big Sea*, Hughes vividly depicts this experience of the Depression around 1930, when he was about to quit the rich white patron, Charlotte Mason, who had supported him from 1927 to 1930. He writes:

New York began to be not so pleasant that winter. People were sleeping in subways or on newspapers in office doors, because they had no homes. I got so I didn’t like to go to dinner on luxurious Park Avenue [with his patron]—and come out and see people hungry on the streets, huddled in subway entrances all night and filling Manhattan Transfer like a flop house. I knew I could very easily and quickly be there, too…. (319-20)

Perhaps Hughes would not have quit his patron as soon as he did if not confronted with the visible contradiction between New York’s multiracial homeless and jobless and Park Avenue’s wealthy elite. In any case, we know that Hughes decided to break with Mason because she wanted to prevent him from writing about the issue that the Depression threw into relief: class inequality. Not surprisingly, one of the culminating events in his break with Mason was his publication of “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (1931), which satirizes an advertisement for the opening of the luxurious hotel in 1931. “So when you’ve got no place to go, homeless and hungry ones,” Hughes writes, “choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags…” (144).

Yet, the shock of the Depression (especially the recognition of mass multiracial unemployment) was not itself the determining factor in Hughes’s move away from nationalism. Hughes’s politicization is more closely linked to the CPUSA’s revolutionary Third Period politics (1929-1935) that informed the proletarian literary movement of which he was a part. Of importance here is the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) held in 1928. The Sixth Congress was instrumental in galvanizing the American Communist Party, as well as other parties in the International, into a “Bolshevik” party that fought for both reform and revolution. The existence, program, and very name of the Comintern inspired the CPUSA to become internationalist in outlook. One year later, the CPUSA’s Workers Library Publishers published a collection of decisions by the Comintern on tasks for the American Communist Party, as well as a document by the Central Committee of the CPUSA that wholeheartedly accepted the decisions, significantly entitled *On the Road to Bolshevization*.

At the Sixth Congress the Comintern also formulated the political line that would inform the CPUSA’s handling of the “Negro Ques-
tion” during the 1930s and beyond. The Communists resolved that black Americans were an oppressed “nation within a nation” in the South and a “national minority” in the North. They defined nationality primarily according to Stalin’s 1913 definition, which reads: “A nation is an historically developed community of people with a common language, territory, economic life, and historical traditions reflecting itself in a common culture” (qtd. in Haywood 30). As one might imagine, such a definition was hotly contested on the American Left, but in fairness, black Communist Harry Haywood’s line of defense for the definition—i.e., that the key word in the definition is “common” not distinct—deserves noting (30-33). Nonetheless, the Communist analysis in the 1930s recast the issue of “race” in terms of a “nationality” constituted by common experience rather than a common racial ancestry. The CP argued that African Americans as a nation had a right to national self-determination in the region where they were most concentrated, namely the “Black Belt,” which stretched from Virginia to Arkansas (originally so-called because of its rich black soil). The CP defenders of the “Black Nation Thesis” made it clear, however, that black and white working class unity before and after a proletarian revolution was of central importance, and that it was hoped that the “Negro Republic” would freely federate with a Soviet America (Ford and Allen 32). In this way, one could say, the black “nation within a nation” would determine its political and economic relationship with the international working class federation. A significant consequence of the “Black Nation” thesis is that it spurred the CPUSA to launch massive anti-racist organizational, reform campaigns for African Americans, and, in the process, won over many black workers and intellectuals to the Party. The highly publicized defense of the “Scottsboro boys” (nine black youths unjustly accused, tried, and imprisoned in Alabama for allegedly raping two white women) by the CP’s International Labor Defense was one result of their anti-racist campaign.

I do not wish to suggest, however, a one-to-one correspondence between the CP’s line on the “Negro Question” and Hughes’s politics. Of the two tendencies within the Comintern’s political program from the 1930s concerning African Americans—i.e., a quasi-nationalistic view of African American identity, oppression, and emancipation, and an anti-racist, internationalist perspective—it is the latter tendency that Hughes chose to incorporate into his literary practice. Hughes, interestingly, can be said to have been left of the CP on the issues of race and nationality. One should note that, while it is difficult to take seriously many of Hughes’s statements during the McCarthy period concerning his involvement in the Communist move-
ment, in the 1950s he claimed that he was not persuaded by "the Communist theory of a Negro state for the Black Belt" (Good Morning Revolution 158).

Hughes's radical perspective is most apparent in his analysis of black oppression in the U.S. By 1932, he clearly was moving away from his nationalist perspective as a Harlem Renaissance writer and toward a view of class rather than race alone as the basis for both economic racism and collective struggle. In Scottsboro Limited (1932), for example, an agit-prop verse play about the Scottsboro incident, Hughes represents the accused young men in the process of becoming politically astute. While "hoboing" on a train in search of work prior to their arrest, the nameless (and emblematic) black young men realize the class basis of their wage-slavery and thus their class affinity with white workers:

6th Boy: (In wonder)
   Look a-yonder you-all, at dem fields
   Burstin' wid de crops they yields.
   Who gets it all?
3rd Boy: White folks.
8th Boy: You mean de rich white folks.
2nd Boy:
   Yes, 'cause de rich ones owns de land.
   And they don't care nothin' 'bout de po' white man.
3rd Boy:
   You's right. Crackers is just like me—
   Po' whites and niggers, ain't neither one tree.

A characteristic Hughesian discursive strategy here is the dramatization of the movement from a nationalist to a "post-nationalist" consciousness and self-identification. In fact, in his radical poetry, he consistently replaces the "black, like me" self-identification of his Harlem Renaissance period with a class-conscious sentiment that might be paraphrased "worker, like me." In "Air Raid Over Harlem" (1935), for example, he ends the poem with a call to workers' multiracial unity: "Black and white workers united as one...THE BLACK AND WHITE WORKERS— / you and me" (188).

A glaring example of Hughes's critique of a nationalist consciousness occurs in his rather aesthetically crude poem entitled "White Man," which begins with a black nationalist persona who comments on how the "white man" has exploited blacks economically by confining them to only low paying, menial jobs as garbage men and janitors; imperiallyistically by colonizing Africa; and culturally by signing
black jazz musicians and garnishing profits. Yet, two thirds into the poem, we find a similar discursive strategy, as in Scottsboro Limited when Hughes’s persona comes around to asking a ‘post-nationalist’ rhetorical question: “Is it true, White Man? / Is your name in a book / Called the Communist Manifesto? / Is your name spelled / C-A-P-I-T-A-L-S-T? / Are you always a White Man? / Huh?” (194-95). It is difficult to know what capitalists of color Hughes had in mind when he typed those words, but it is not inconceivable to suppose he could have been referring to those “champions of the darker races,” as the Japanese imperialists represented themselves, or perhaps the small black American bourgeoisie who, as one CP pamphlet at that time explained, “makes its profits by taking advantage of segregation and the ideas of ‘white superiority’...by speculating in real estate in the segregated sections of large cities and by extracting extremely high rents from their Negro tenants...[or in the cosmetic industry] by commercializing the idea of ‘white beauty,’” etc. (Ford and Allen 8). Nonetheless, Hughes’s radical poetry shatters from “below” the myth of exclusively white domination by depicting the existence of a poor white working class exploited in common with blacks, and from “above” by representing the existence of a rich class of color exploiting in common with wealthy whites.

But it is not as if Hughes’s class consciousness made him oblivious to the importance of “race” in America and around the world. Independent of the Communists’ position on the “Negro Question,” he knew well that black workers are subject to special forms of oppression under capitalism such as segregation, racist violence, and super-exploitation. Yet, to quote a title of a speech he addressed to the Second International Writers’ Congress in 1937, he did not want to make “too much of race.” He believed too much has been made of race, because even the ruling classes will “overlook” the racial antagonisms they created in the first place if they need people of color for canon fodder or cheap labor:

The same Fascists who forced Italian peasants to fight in Africa now force African Moors to fight in Europe....Japan attempts to force the Chinese of Manchuria to work and fight under Japanese supervision for the glory and wealth of the Tokyo bourgeoisie—one colored people dominating another at the point of guns. Race means nothing when it can be turned to Fascist use. (“Too Much of Race” 103.)

Hughes witnessed the ways in which “race” is manufactured for devastating nationalist ends. Franco and the Spanish fascists, for instance, mobilized African Moors under the banner of “Viva España.”
In “Letter from Spain” (1937), a poem Hughes wrote while visiting war-torn Spain, he captures the tragic irony of a Moroccan soldier fighting for Spanish fascists when, in the voice of a black American International Brigade soldier, he writes: “We captured a wounded Moor today. / He was just as dark as me. / I said, Boy, what you been doin’ here / Fighting against the free?” (201). “Race,” or what Etienne Balibar calls that “fictive ethnicity around which [nationalism] is organized” (49), is clearly illusory for Hughes: “We Negroes of America are tired of a world divided superficially on the basis of blood and color, but in reality on the basis of poverty and power—the rich over the poor, no matter what their color” (102). Conversely, because “race” is a fluid concept without scientific validation it is an important issue for Hughes: fascists manipulate the concept to “hurt and impede the rising power of the working class” through the old strategy of divide and conquer. It is fair to say that the purpose of Hughes’s radical poetry is to explode pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference among the working class in order, ultimately, to abolish the socio-economic system that propagates and thrives from racism. But it is through a double strategy of recognition of the consequences of the concept of “race” and a rejection of “race” as an a priori category that Hughes struggles for internationalism. It is for this reason that he concludes his speech by stating how he and other progressive black writers and activists “represent the end of race”: internationalism represents a dialectical conceptual model that must recognize a world artificially and devastatingly divided by “race” as a way of conceptually and, eventually, materially, negating the concept of “race” altogether. “Fascists know that when there is no more race,” Hughes states, “there will be no more capitalism, and no more war, and no more money for the munition makers, because the workers of the world will have triumphed” (104).

Hughes’s provocative claim to “represent the end of race” is borne out powerfully in “Always the Same,” published five years earlier in Liberator. The poem presents a panoramic view of the global exploitation of blacks by First World imperialists. Irrespective of locale, whether in Harlem, Haiti, Central America, or Tripoli, to be black is to be “Exploited, beaten, and robbed, / Shot and killed / … / For the wealth of the exploiters” (165). The binary Hughes sets up between white imperialists and people of color has the potential to be interpreted according to a nationalist politics, but Hughes undermines a nationalist take on the exploitation by suggesting that, instead of residing in any of these besieged black locales, and fighting for national self-determination, he is driven away from “all the black lands everywhere” (165). He would, rather, deracinate himself by having
his "blood"—that pseudo-scientific "race" marker—make "one with the blood / Of all the struggling workers in the world" (165). In other words, here operates a notion of class "blood" that serves to disperse Hughes across national/racial boundaries. And, specifically, it is the notion of the "blood-red flag" of Communism that unifies the world's workers: "faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown" (166).

We should keep in mind, however, that Hughes's dialectical view of "race" and "nation" carries within it the problem of accepting the notion that nations (as defined by a common cultural identity), if not races, exist. Like his Soviet and American Communist counterparts, he simultaneously recognizes non-race based national and class determinations of working class identity. His radical poetry works to situate national identities within international class coordinates. Thus, he concludes "Good Morning, Revolution" (1932) by imagining the "signing" of the first radio broadcast from Soviet America to the world's workers: "And we'll sign it: Germany / Sign it: China / Sign it: Africa / Sign it: Poland / Sign it: Italy / Sign it: America." And then, significantly, "Sign it with my one name: Worker" (163).

This vestige of nationalism in otherwise radical thought becomes particularly important in the poetry Hughes wrote during the Popular Front period (1937-1940), whose quintessential formulation was that of Earl Browder, then Chairman of the CPUSA, who claimed that "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism" (269). That is, in the American context, the relatively critical notion of "nationality" in the Third Period rather easily fell prey to the powerful current of nationalism in the dominant American culture. The Popular Front rhetoric of the American Communist Party at points becomes virtually unrecognizable from mainstream American nationalist discourse. As early as 1936, Browder stated in a radio interview that the CPUSA had "no different definition of revolution than that given to us by Thomas Jefferson" (199), which, needless to say, is a misreading of both Jefferson and the classic texts of Marxism-Leninism. Hughes never became an unquestioning patriot of America—as a black man, he knew first hand the hypocrisy of what he termed "the old My-Country 'Tis-of' Thee lie" (Good Morning Revolution 136)—but, during the Popular Front, he (along with his fellow Communists) did somewhat uncritically embrace American nationalism. A prime example is his "Let America Be America Again" (1938), a lament for the failure of the "American dream" and a plea for a truly democratic and egalitarian America. The point of the poem is relatively simple: the democratic and egalitarian ideal of "America" does not and has never existed in practice because of class inequality, because of "those who live like leeches on the people's lives" (191). The poem is
highly ironic since the title and refrain—"let America be America again"—is undermined in the poem by the absence of a pre-existent manifestly ideal America. In Hughes characteristically multiracial perspective, the dispossessed include Native Americans, working class European immigrants, blacks, and poor whites.

Hughes participates in the myth-making processes of a rather popular version of American nationalism: the true "America" of the future will embody Jeffersonian political ideals: it will be a nation of, by, and for "the people," based on the notion of inalienable rights, and free from tyranny. "America" signifies the constitution of a free and democratic society. Granted, the poem does not contain the central myth-making components of the post-war ethnic nationalism. Nonetheless, Hughes's poem (re)creates a cultural fiction of a nation, which, as Timothy Brennen has persuasively argued in another context, is an important role that imaginative literature plays (49). Significantly absent from Hughes's reconstruction of the "American" past is a recognition that America was colonized in the first place, and not simply for abstract political concepts by "the one who dreamt our basic dream / In that Old World while still a serf of kings" (190). While he does recognize "the red man driven from the land," he confusingly situates the Native American as one of the peoples’ chorus who want "America [to] be America again." And, what particularly brings the poem into conflict with his earlier internationalism is its exclusive focus on a national, and not international, "peoples'" identity. The publication of "Let America" signifies that by 1938 Hughes, influenced by Popular Front politics (which, aside from advocating a "peoples" nationalism, no longer advocated socialist revolution and the class-based politics of the Third Period) was moving away from his radical beliefs.

Interestingly, between 1932 and 1938, Hughes does not draw on African American expressive forms (most notably the blues), which may appear odd considering that a large part of his fame in the 1920s rested on his poetic appropriation of such forms. While he did not explain his rationale for abandoning African American expressive forms—another aporia of this little known "red" Hughes—we can surmise that he no longer believed that they were appropriate vehicles for the content of his ideas. We can stipulate that he viewed them as limited in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, as evident in "The Negro Artist," for Hughes African American expressive forms expressed a common African American subjectivity that constituted black community. Writing of Hughes's earlier view of blues and jazz, Jemie rightly argues that "Black music, in short is a paradigm of the black experience in America..." (103). In an attempt to distance himself from
1920s-style nationalistic theories of black cultural forms, Hughes shies away from “national” aesthetic forms that could not adequately express the subjectivity of the white worker as well.

On the other hand, the use of blues, spirituals, etc., in the 1920s did not express (at least explicitly) militant politics against oppression. Hughes’s use of these forms in the 1920s mirrors the absence of a mass, political movement that could inspire masses to viable social action. As stated earlier, a “weariness,” bred of a sense of hopelessness about oppression, infuses Hughes’s blues poetry. Protest against the life-negating racism of 1920s America is expressed as a longing for mythic racial origins and identity or in culturally affirmative activities such as African American dance and song. The multiracial solidarity and militancy that Hughes experienced in the 1930s could not be adequately expressed by the nationalism, despondency, loneliness, or even the cultural rebelliousness associated with these forms. He views the collective optimism that imbued the proletarian movement as incongruous with the “blues.” He hints at this notion when he commented in 1933:

The time has passed for us to sit by and bemoan our fate. We need now an art and a literature which will arouse us to our fate. Already we have had too much literature in the vein of the spirituals, lamenting our fate and bemoaning our condition, but suggesting no remedy except humbleness and docility. (qtd. in Berry 183)

In other words, he appears to recognize and embody a new type of subjectivity and a radical politics that he believed needed a new mass form.

The language Hughes does use in the 1930s can be characterized as a working class vernacular he believed could have multiracial mass appeal. His diction has much in common with that of Carl Sandburg, who was one of his early literary influences. Hughes’s poetic language is informal, often intimate, not unlike speech one would hear between friends. It is devoid of philosophical or political abstraction, like much proletarian poetry, in order to appeal to the average worker unschooled in Marxist theory. In “Good Morning, Revolution” (1932), for example, he apostrophizes revolution as a new “buddy”: “Listen, Revolution, / We’re buddies, see— / Together, / We can take everything / ...And turn ’em over to the people who work. / Rule and run ’em for us people who work” (163). In his “Open Letter to the South” (1938), his poetry displays the mainstream masculinist bias of much proletarian literature in an attempt to speak “straight” to Southern, white, male workers. Referring to the Southern workers
as a "brother," Hughes concludes in a gentlemanly manner: "White worker, / Here is my hand. / Today, We're Man to Man" (161).

Like much of his poetry, a significant portion of Hughes's radical poetry is also intended to be performative. In order to bridge the gap between art and the working class that inheres under capitalism, he wrote songs, recitations, short plays, and poetic sketches to be performed by and for multiracial workers. Hughes's *A New Song* (1938), a pamphlet of poems published by the International Workers Order, includes two chants, two ballads, three songs, and a number of other free verse poems. His "Chant for May Day" clearly illustrates his intention to appeal to the working class. In a prefatory note to the chant, he writes: "To be read by a Workman with, for background, the rhythmic waves of rising and re-rising Mass Voices..." (209). The "Mass-Voices," ten voices at the poem’s beginning and from 60 to 100 at its end, declare multiracial, working class solidarity and swear to "Take Power" (210). In this context, one should also read Hughes's "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." (1934), which reads like a radical song out of the Wobblies' *Little Red Song Book*. The chorus reads:

Put one more s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.
One more s in the U.S.A.
Oh, we'll live to see it yet.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men--
The U.S.A. when we take control
Will be the U.S.S.A. then. (176-77)

One can easily imagine this poem sung at any number of the many Communist meetings and manifestations of the 1930s. (Ironically, this poem would later be "sung" into the Senate record by Senator Albert Hawkes as proof of Hughes’s Communist sympathies.)

Interestingly, foregoing traditional African American expressive forms led Hughes to produce a poetry that was a little too "international," according to the standards in the proletarian movement for black writing. Literary proletarians took the CP's lead in identifying a "common culture" as requisite to nationhood. Because Communist intellectuals believed black Americans to be an oppressed nation/nationality/minority, they sought to reconstruct "traditions of revolt," to use Eugene Gordon's phrase at the time (145), in working class black culture. As Barbara Foley comments, "some Marxist writing in the early 1930s celebrated black music and folk mythology as intrinsically oppositional...[although critics]...tended to draw the line at
spirituals and other expressions of folk consciousness that did not express open resistance” (184). One could say that the Communist critics’ slogan for noteworthy black culture prior to the 1930s was that it should be “national in form and proletarian in content” (qtd. in Foley 184). “Proletarian” here signifies a general class consciousness, however immanent it may be, among black worker/”peasant” artists. For black writing produced during the revolutionary 1930s, the slogan was somewhat different and more demanding: what was wanted was black writing that was “national in form and socialist in content” (Filatova 107 emphasis added). Common to both definitions is the desire for “content” to be expressed in black expressive forms.

The Soviet critic Lydia Filatova took Hughes to task for not adhering to the formula for black writing when she wrote in International Literature, the organ of the Soviet-based International Union of Revolutionary Writers:

Hughes’s verses are impregnated with the spirit of proletarian internationalism, which ought to be welcomed in every way. Yet the poet goes to extremes by obliterating national boundaries and to some extent destroys the specific national atmosphere of his poetry. We are for an art that is national in form and socialist in content. Hughes first of all is a poet of the Negro proletariat... The writer should present with the utmost sharpness the problems of his own race, but they must have a class aspect. The force of Hughe’s [sic] poems will be stronger, the influence deeper, if he will draw closer to the Negro masses and talk their language. (107 emphases added)

Filatova criticizes Hughes for failing to incorporate the “Black Nation” thesis into his poetry; in the main his “un-African-American” poetry does not define African Americans in terms of black “national” characteristics, which, for Filatova, is largely marked by the possession of a black vernacular. Hughes seems to confound the CP’s desire for an authentic black national expressive culture. In essence, Filatova criticizes Hughes for not being “black enough.” Indeed, Hughes’s poetry is not “national in form” and is “socialist in content,” which reflects his disagreement with the Comintern’s “Black Nation” thesis and its application by literary proletarians.

Hughes’s attempt to create a working class aesthetic with mass appeal must be construed as a utopian project, however. It points to the problem of creating a truly collective poetry in form. That now quaint cityspeak of much 1930s poetry (the versified “hey buddy, can you spare a dime” line) cannot be construed as a “universal” American working class dialect, a workers’ Esperanto of sorts. Clearly such a dialect arose among second and third generation working class Euro-
pean immigrant urban populations and became "national" primarily via mass media, such as film and radio in the 1930s. Hughes's poetry has a markedly "anglofied" class vernacular. His erasure of "national boundaries" is therefore more profound than Filatova could imagine: the frequency of the "national" sound of his working class Anglo-American poetry escapes her because it poses as "universal." In truth, Hughes, like no other poet, can write a universal form for poetry, since language itself is "national in form," or, in other words, language is always cultural, and it is impossible to imagine what a poetry would look and sound like in a communist world without "race" or class. On the whole, Hughes's aim of transcending cultural differences ignores the diverse cultural dialects in America that could serve as useful media through which to reach a multicultural working class audience.

In spite of its unnecessary formal limitations, Hughes's radical poetry is truly an accomplishment of modern American poetry. It is unlike most other twentieth century poetry, which even when progressive, is often marred by spurious nationalisms. Hughes has much to contribute to arguments used for the opening—or rather, the prying open—of the American literary canon to include what we now call multicultural literature. For me, Hughes's radical poetry suggests that a multitude of cultural voices can but does not necessarily provide a necessary rebuke to some of the Anglocentric voices (irrespective of "race" or "nationality") from whom we have heard too much. What is primary is what the voices are saying, since we can easily imagine, and perhaps know of, minority voices that espouse conservative ideologies. In what some are calling a neo-nationalist phase of history, Hughes's internationalist voice reminds us that a multicultural perspective that affirms constructed cultural differences over fundamental, working class interests is not necessarily oppositional to the political mainstream, and can have dire consequences for how we conceive of those old but persistent ideals for an egalitarian society.

Notes

1. See Marable and Sundquist on Du Bois's Pan Africanism.
2. Exceptions to this fact are two poems he published in Fine Clothes to the Jew. See "Elevator Boy," and "Porter," which depict two personae that express a quasi-political understanding of their oppression.
3. See Dell's criticism of post-war demoralization among intellectuals. In the 1920s Dell took his contemporaries to task for intellectually capitulating to the new political and historical problems that confronted the working class following the defeats of working class movements in America and Eastern Europe. Writes Dell: ""Facing an ironic doom which it feels powerless to avert, the intelligentsia of our time has for the most part put aside with a kind of shame
its broken and shattered ideals, and has confessed its hopelessness by the very nature of its new aesthetic and intellectual interests. Some, indeed, refusing to face at all so black a reality, have retired into a sort of new Ivory Tower hastily jerry-built according to some fantastic futurist blue-print, and occupy themselves with such harmlessly esthetic pastimes and intellectual cross-word puzzles as will serve to pass the time" (241).

4. For his account of his involvement with the Communists, see his "My Adventures as a Socio Poet," "Langston Hughes Speaks," and "Concerning Red Baiting" in Good Morning Revolution. These accounts should be read in conjunction with Berry’s biography detailing Hughes’s support for Communism.

5. For an in-depth discussion of the CPUSA and the "Negro Question," see Foley and Kelley.

6. After 1931, with the publication The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations and "Sylvester's Dying Bed," Hughes clearly moves away from the blues form. In fact, in The Negro Mother, he only suggests the use of the blues, jazz, and spirituals to accompany the recitations of three conventional poems. (See "Broke," "The Black Clown," and "The Negro Mother." ) Only in 1939, after what I have been calling his radical phase, does he return to the blues form of his Harlem Renaissance poetry. Between 1939 and 1940 he published a total of six blues poems, among them "Six-Bits Blues," "Red Clay Blues" (with Richard Wright), and "Hey-Hey Blues ."

7. I do not wish to suggest that Hughes's view of the blues is the only or correct cultural interpretation of the blues. My purpose in defining Hughes’s view of the blues is to clarify why he might have employed them in the 1920s, and why he does not employ them in the 1930s. The blues also have been interpreted as an expression of self-pity, celebration, protest, etc. For a useful discussion of the cultural interpretations of the blues, see Tracy.

8. Given Filatova’s criticism of Hughes, it is a wonder that Arnold Rampersad can assume that the CPUSA and the proletarian cultural movement were responsible for Hughes’s anti-nationalistic writings from the 1930s. Referring in detail to Filatova’s article, but failing to mention her formula for “good” African American proletarian writing, he argues that the “communist aesthetic” is to blame for Hughes’s loss of “essential identity” (40). See “Langston Hughes and His Critics”: 34-40. For a view in the U.S. proletarian cultural movement similar to that of Filatova’s, see Gordon: 141-45. For a dissenting U.S. Communist view, which appears to be in direct response to Filatova, see Clay: 145-53.

9. A noteworthy, and, in fact, only exception to this rule about Hughes radical poetry is "Sister Johnson Marches" (1937), perhaps the first sign of Hughes’s return to a black vernacular. The poem powerfully speaks for a working class black woman on a May Day march and, like so much of his poetry in a black vernacular, has the potential to speak powerfully to African American audiences.

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