

BEYOND THE COLOR LINE AND THE IRON CURTAIN

READING ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN BLACK AND RED, 1922-1963



★ ★ ★ KATE A. BALDWIN ★ ★ ★

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Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963 | *Kate A. Baldwin*

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FOR BRIAN AND OLIVER

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Because many of the readers of this book will not know Russian, I have translated original Russian passages and provided the Russian transliteration in the notes. The modified Library of Congress system is used, except in the case of well-established English spellings of names and nouns, such as Dostoevsky and czarist.

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INTRODUCTION

The Demand for a New Kind of Person:

Black Americans and the Soviet Union, 1922–1963

In Russia the darker peoples were serfs without land control [whose history] paralleled that of American freedmen.—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Russia and America*

The history of the Russian peasant closely parallels that of [the] Negro peasant in America.—Paul Robeson, interview in *The Observer*

The historical affiliation between the Russian peasant and the American black as involuntarily indentured servants who were emancipated from servitude at roughly contemporaneous moments is an affiliation that has sparked the interest of some of the twentieth century's most influential African American intellectuals. Not only did Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and W. E. B. Du Bois comment on this parallel history at different points in their careers, they each also spent concentrated periods of time in the Soviet Union exploring the fertile territories of comparison.¹ All of them produced significant work while traveling in the Soviet Union and all wrote about their experiences. At the same time, as public figures, each was the subject of Soviet media attention and cultural production, and had reciprocal influence on the way the questions of “Negroes” and by extension Africa were thought about in the Soviet Union.² Despite the importance of the relationship of the Soviet Union to these men, their work and Soviet responses to them—together what I call the Soviet archive of black America—have been largely overlooked or read in isolation from their larger oeuvres, pushed to the sidelines of their careers. As a result, many of the texts that I address in this

book remain unpublished; others have been left out of standard anthologies. Much of the Russian material I consider has heretofore not been translated into English.

This book retrieves and rethinks routes of influence between Moscow, Tashkent, and Harlem. Beyond its focus on these four African Americans, this study is about an extended moment—from 1922 to 1963—when the Soviet Union and Soviet Communism drew scores of African Americans beyond the color line and across the East/West divide to visit the experiment under way in the USSR. The turn in Russian history from czarism to Bolshevism (and later to Stalinism) seemed to offer black Americans not only a means of contesting the exclusionary practices of citizenship and national belonging on which their understandings of identity were based. In the name of an international movement poised to challenge Western domination, Soviet Communism established an interracial alliance between “blacks” and “whites,” and it was this cross-racial affinity between Russians and blacks as marginalized, world historical “others” that enabled, in part, the belief that the Soviet alternative was preferable to that of the United States. The records that document such traversals are significant because they offer not only a sense of Russia’s receptiveness to these figures but a sense of how these crossings had reciprocal effects—both in terms of specific policy and cultural perception. In retrieving the chronicles of these interactions, the book examines them as products of interracial exchange made possible by arguably parallel routes of subordination to “the West” and put forth as alternatives to accounts of political modernity that reiterated the dominance of Western paradigms. *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain* explores how these figures used their encounters with the Soviet Union as a means of transforming exclusionary patterns into an internationalism that was a dynamic mix of antiracism, anticolonialism, social democracy, and international socialism.

In recent years, the emerging field of diaspora studies has helped to illuminate the cultural, social, and systemic links between geographically distant peoples. Paul Gilroy’s 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* navigated the route for one region within this field that has challenged existing paradigms used to understand the cultural production of a black diaspora.³ In the wake of Gilroy’s study, interrogations of the relationship between the historical event of the middle passage and wave of cultural production with which black modernism is identified

have solidified the argument for a black transatlantic tradition. Rewriting the conventional configuration of “black” identity as primarily national in content, these assertions have questioned African American exceptionalism and widened the context in which black American cultural production is interpreted. The idea of black internationalism has played a key, if sometimes unpredictable role among the variety of forces at work in this reconfiguration. Although in the twentieth century the concept of the “international” has distinct links to Soviet rhetoric, the interplay between black American culture and the Soviet Union in the formation of internationalism has not been sufficiently explored.⁴ Retrieving the Soviet archive provides a fuller picture of the patterns of “nation” in which Soviet internationalism was etched.

Outlining the dynamism of the cultural, social, and racial pulls behind the involvement of these black Americans with the Soviet Union, this book argues that a phrase like “black internationalism” cannot be understood without documenting the specific interaction between Soviet ideology and black American aspiration toward racial liberation and a society free of racism. The fruits of this interaction—the various ways in which these black authors negotiated between ideology and aspiration—established paradigms that affected black modernism and persisted through the early cold war period. The period under consideration here, 1922–1963, encompasses an era that stretches from the meeting of the Third International in Moscow to the decline of Nikita Khrushchev’s reign, from the rise of black cultural production associated with the Harlem Renaissance to the death of Du Bois. This book offers a genealogy of “the Negro question” as it emerged in dialogue between the Soviet Union and these black Americans, and demonstrates how thinking through this question in the 1960s linked back to its earlier associations established in the 1920s. At the same time, I maintain that the occlusion of this dialogue bears a crucial relation to the exclusion of race in debates over the meaning of “nation” and “national identity” that affected some historiography of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ It is largely due to enduring paradigms that marginalize the important relationships between race and radicalism that there is less awareness of the Soviet archive of black America than there might be. The writings of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson reveal how the conceptual aid of internationalism enabled an exposure of the ways in which the major antagonisms with which the early Cold War period was associated—a fear

of Soviet imperialism—had a genealogy in U.S. attitudes toward race. A fear of blacks transgressing the racial status quo of white supremacy characterized by Jim Crow was restated as fear of outside infiltration and contamination of the national polity during the 1950s. It is both the specificity of the Soviet-inspired black challenge to U.S. conceptions of national belonging and citizenship and its occlusion in standard accounts of a black transnationalism that arise from the black Atlantic model that this book seeks to reconsider.

Discounting the significance of the Soviet archive reflects a tendency to disregard both the international impulse put forth by these authors and the Russian language in which this impulse sometimes found its voice. In this guise, black internationalism does not equate itself with an easy mobility that cancels out national boundaries but rather with a framework in which to contemplate linkages between peoples of the African diaspora and their nonblack allies—those bound together by a shared sense of exclusion from the nation-state, from citizenship. Internationalism conceived of in this manner stresses the connectedness between nations, thereby allowing the specter of nation to hover ambiguously. This ambiguity was key to the interest of black Americans who by joining the cause of internationalism, were nonetheless reluctant to throw away national belonging with the proverbial bathwater of the “nation-state.” Their interests in the internationalism of these theoretical underpinnings brought them to the Soviet Union as journalists, writers, activists, and performers. My book thus argues against a marginalization of the international—whatever its native tongue—in black American authorship. In this sense, the question of the translation of these authors’ works and their images into Russian is viewed not simply as a function of a Soviet imperialist project, of Sovietization through the Russian language. Rather, the fact and availability of textual production in Russian facilitated types of resistance unavailable to these men in the United States.

The figures under consideration here spoke varying levels of Russian: Robeson achieved near fluency, but Du Bois mustered only a few words; McKay’s and Hughes’s proficiency fell somewhere in between. McKay expressed a desire to return to Russia and “study the ‘ochen krasivy’ [very beautiful] Russian language.”⁶ Hughes picked up both Russian and Uzbek phrases during his several months of traveling and study. Nonetheless, the materials that comprise the Soviet archive of black America include many

texts written in Russian. For example, there are Russian translations of speeches and articles written by McKay while in the Soviet Union for which the original English version has been lost; correspondence between Robeson and the Union of Soviet Writers; media coverage of Du Bois in such periodicals as *Pravda* and *Ogonek*; Soviet political cartoons depicting Robeson; and Comintern files documenting McKay's participation in deliberations over the so-called Negro question. These materials have rich implications for black internationalism because they indicate the reception these writers, as public figures, received in the Soviet Union. Their reception, in turn, affected their perception of the Soviet Union, their sense of status, place, and belonging. Together, these elements produced a dialogue that was key to the formulations of black internationalism that emerged from these encounters. Reclaiming the transnational routings of this black radicalism, I assert that the authors' interest in the boundary-challenging formations put forth by the promise of Soviet internationalism—as by definition a multilingual and hybrid project—led these men to the Soviet Union in the first place and to contemplate U.S. race relations from a new perspective. While in the Soviet Union, these figures tinkered with alternate myths of self-consciousness, of being, that traversed the boundaries separating black and white as surely as they themselves had trespassed the borders delineating “East” and “West.”

The material offered here owes a debt to work that has preceded it. In the field of black radicalism, the scholarship of Mark Naison and Robin D. G. Kelley has offered historical accounts of black/red relations that countered prevailing cold war assessments of black involvement with communism as necessarily a relationship of the deceived to the deceiver. Picking up from the important inroads made by Nell Painter, Naison's and Kelley's work connected the personal experiences of black Party members with the political agenda of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), emphasizing the varying degrees of black autonomy and agency within Party lines. More recently, scholars such as William J. Maxwell and James Smethurst have drawn on this historicist approach to contribute assessments of the relationships between black agency and Communist doctrine in terms of the literary production of periods prior to World War II. Maxwell sees the relation between black modernism and communism as a reciprocal one of give-and-take; Smethurst is more interested in the formal strategies and thematic concerns with which the result-

ing texts were imbued. But whatever the specific point of entry into the dialogue, each of these critics makes a case for the importance of communism to African Americans (whether in terms political or aesthetic, or both) as a function of the newness of the paradigm at hand. As Naison puts it, “Because of its links to an international revolutionary movement and efforts to encourage integration within its entire sphere of influence, the Party represented something decisively new in Afro-American life.”⁷

It is not so much on the question of “newness” per se that my work departs from that which has preceded it but on the specific derivation of this decisive novelty. Although as evidenced in the quotes that open this introduction, Du Bois and Robeson both noted the parallelism between Russians and African Americans, the territory on which this internationalist stake was claimed has not been thoroughly explored in previous studies. For instance, in his study of depression-era black poetry, Smethurst stresses the communist-inspired representation of the folk voice as linked to “romantic assessments of African-American rural culture based in no small part on European valorizations of peasants, soil, and blood. . . . [T]his approach, which saw African Americans as an integral part of the United States and yet culturally distinct, had a huge impact on black poetry and its audience.”⁸ While Smethurst credits the Comintern for its contribution to this cultural model, he determines that its basis was singularly European. In point of fact, however, the Europeanism of the Soviet movement was at issue from the Bolshevik get-go: it was precisely the non-Western or anti-Western aspect of the call to the proletariat that helped to form the basis of its mass appeal. The Bolshevik promise of a global internationale offered a means of contesting Western paradigms of identity, subjecthood, and relatedly, nation—models with which Russians had for years struggled to come to terms, either through triumph or disdain. Imbued with this spirit of dissent from prevailing norms, the international revolutionary movement did not simply promise something new, nor did it offer a European reflection of emancipation. Rather, this movement had a specific genealogy in Russian cultural paradigms and models for shaping the (inter)nationalist project.

An inability to account for the persistence of the appeal of the Soviet project to black intellectuals throughout the decades spanning 1920–1960 can, I believe, be linked to this oversight of the specificity of the nation-building project at hand. Even though Maxwell and Smethurst have chal-

lenged the periodicity of earlier accounts—Maxwell arguing for the integration of the 1920s and 1930s, and Smethurst for that of the 1930s and 1940s—scholars have yet to interrogate the continued attraction of Soviet internationalism for African Americans through and beyond World War II. While the appeal of the Soviet Union was historically specific and modified throughout the decades, its ability to maintain a continued allure seems to come back to a Soviet advocacy of integrationist internationalism combined with a rudimentary populism based in non-Western national identification.

As early as the nineteenth century, theorists of Russian national identity were jockeying for a place on the scale of world historical progress established by their Western counterparts. Having been all but dismissed by German idealist philosophy, marginalized by Hegelian and Herderian accounts of the *Geist* of global evolution, Russian intellectuals were determined that their national essence was a more universal one, befitting eventual global leadership if not domination. However differing in opinion on the particulars of Russia's role, nineteenth-century Russian thinkers agreed that Russia had a unique and providential role to play in world historical progress. Vladimir Lenin parlayed this thinking into his theories of the nation in which he left ample space for ambiguity between the terms of unity and consolidation he used to distinguish between populist and colonialist approaches. Support for self-determination, under Lenin's guiding gaze, went hand in fist with an advocacy of Sovietization, but as the saving grace from Western domination. Although Lenin would certainly not have put it this way, the Soviet Union became the twentieth-century space in which previous models of the nationalist project fell apart. One could perhaps be emergent and benevolently unifying at the same time, in Lenin's vision.

This idea of unity in multiplicity is, of course, a centuries-old Russian notion taken from Russian orthodoxy. And it is into theorizations of Russian nationalism that I interject this spectacle of black internationalism. By placing accounts of black involvement with the Soviet Union in conversation with those of the Russian nationalist project, the question of communism's specific lure to African Americans can not only be opened up but it can also offer a counter to assessments of the Soviet nationalist project as singularly constraining. Liah Greenfeld, in her work on Russian nationalism, identifies resentment as the defining mechanism behind

Soviet assertions of statehood. Greenfeld's argument is that although leading up to the Bolshevik period there were two dissenting camps that theorized Russia's position vis-à-vis European concepts of national identity—Slavophiles and Westernizers—both groups were effectively sprung from the same seed and linked together by pangs of resentment. Whatever the particular typos within this larger wave of feelings—negative or positive—for the West, Russian intellectual elites imagined the West as a locus of progress. This sense of inferiority persisted into the twentieth century with compelling force. Claiming that “in his very advocacy of the sudden Russian internationalism, Lenin clarified the national sentiment behind it,” Greenfeld sees nationalist resentment masquerading as global goodwill at the root of the Bolsheviks' internationalist project.⁹ In maintaining that Russians were self-destructively blinded by the lure of this sentiment, Greenfeld contends that its impact could be only negative. So intense was the desire for recognition from Europe that “to gain self-respect,” Russia “took upon itself the burden of the world's salvation,” sacrificing themselves in the process. A singular focus on the costs to Russia of Soviet internationalism diverts attention from the importance this kind of agitation provided for emergent nationals such as McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson. It distracts from internationalism's potential to trigger others' national self-consciousness, however blindsided by the universal motto of Russia. Greenfeld is not the only critic to be skeptical about the opportunity afforded Russia's others by Soviet internationalism. Andrew Wachtel, for example, in his theorization of the relationship of Russian nationalism to translation seems to agree with Greenfeld that little good came out of the Soviet project; it was either self-destructive or devolved into Stalinist debasement. In part, I too agree with these conclusions. But my contribution here is to point out how the Soviet work of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson opens up such assessments, offering specific instances of textuality that challenge the idea that internationalism was necessarily negative in its effects. If Soviet internationalism is interpreted as primarily definable by its destructiveness to Soviets, it is occluded as a narrative of possibility for non-Soviet others.

Moving away from the European paradigm also affords an opportunity to reconsider the illuminating account of black modernism provided by Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*. Putting Russia into this configuration changes its shape precisely because Soviets were theorizing “transnational-

ism” under the guise of internationalism long before contemporary theory provided the impetus. The absence of Marxism in Gilroy’s study has been noted before, but it seems particularly apt to mention it again in the context of Russian cultural dualism—the persistence of a kind of double consciousness not theorized by, but certainly applicable to Greenfeld’s account of resentment. In fact, resentment seems to contain all the markings of double consciousness—an observation further confirmed by Gilroy’s own deployment of the term.

Gilroy’s black Atlanticism draws on Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness to extrapolate a structure of subjectivity that in spite of its indebtedness to modernity, cannot be reduced to the official, master narrative of modernity based as it was in practices of exclusion and normalization. This double consciousness, in Gilroy’s words, “emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalistic in that it derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not-yet-citizens find themselves rather than from their aspiration towards a nation state of their own. The third is diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universalist.”¹⁰ Gilroy argues that the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment informs the writings of black intellectuals who formed a counterculture of modernity against the ethnic absolutism of Western nationalist discourses. Through webbed networks informed by the processes of exclusion from the nation-state, black intellectuals challenged the rigid bounds of ethnic particularity, using their encounters with Europe and imbrication in Western models as a means of reworking these paradigms, thereby refashioning them toward transcultural models “in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not fuse.”¹¹ Key to Gilroy’s formulation are the conceits of mobility and travel, and the ways in which black experiences of elsewhere—in particular Western Europe—changed their understandings of race to preclude binary oppositions between national and diasporic perspectives.

For all of Gilroy’s discussion of the relationship between national discourses and international ones, his occlusion of the Soviet Union—the nation most invested in a dual rhetoric of national and multinational federations—is surprising. My book thus extends Gilroy’s analysis to Russia and demonstrates how the frame of the Soviet Union alters the black Atlantic model. Because Russia’s own position vis-à-vis Europe and the

West was historically vexed, Russia cannot be easily appended onto Europe, and its own intellectual heritage cannot be uniformly traced to Western models without some difficulty. Captive to nationalist resentment, Russia was neither “European” nor was she removed from the influence of occidental thought. This duality is pointedly apparent in the intellectual genealogy of Lenin, whose Marxian-derived theory of internationalism became the launching pad for a Soviet directive intended to entice black Americans to renounce the color line for a communist one. Lenin’s internationalism encouraged both the self-determination of peoples united by culture and yet oppressed by a national unit that excluded them, and the transnational alliance of peoples similarly excluded by ethnic absolutism—under the mantle of world internationalism. For McKay, Hughes, Robeson, and Du Bois alike, the ambiguity between the support for black self-determination and the call to disband ethnic particularity through affiliated countercultures to combat imperialism and racism was an enabling one. Despite the turns in Soviet policy away from these endorsements in the postwar years, the galvanizing effect of this early Leninist thinking held firm. Thus, in the Soviet Union’s formulation of a world internationalism one sees some of the more subtle points of Gilroy’s black transnationalism made explicit. And yet, the occlusion of the Soviet Union from Gilroy’s book has been significant not so much because the USSR radically alters his schematic but because the black Atlantic model has become common parlance for negotiating the webbed, international genealogies of black modernism. As the sourcebook, the book that seeks routes instead of roots, Gilroy’s model has come to be synonymous with the study of black transnationalism. A consideration of Russia extends the geographic confines of Gilroy’s mapping, moving it beyond Anglophone archipelagoes and resisting the continental confines of a Europe-Africa-U.S. triangulation. Whereas Gilroy uses black Atlanticism to rethink modernity, black internationalists, from McKay to Robeson, used Marxism to focus on the worlding of capitalism. In the words of Neil Lazarus, who decries Gilroy’s occlusion of “countervailing or alternative theories of transnationalism or globalization”—namely, Marxism—“the only form of politics capable of presenting a decisive challenge to the globalism of actually existing capitalism is an internationalist socialism.”¹²

I am not the first to call attention to the resonant affinities between the sense of marginalizations with which some Russian and African American

cultural practices are imbued. Drawing on the affiliation established famously in Nikolai Gavrilovich Cherneshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* Dale Peterson's *Up from Bondage* focuses on a parallel sense of "soul" that he articulates as carved from the experience of historical peripheralization and conducted into emergent expressive cultures. Peterson's book aptly links the counterdiscourses of Russian and African American soul. But positioning some of his insights alongside Gilroy's offers an opportunity to open up Gilroy's admittedly limited formulation to consider other routes of slavery and subordination that gave rise to similar kinds of challenges to the dominance of the West. Coupling these works enables one to pursue the question of how these individually powerful alternative cultural and political expressions *interacted*—a topic that neither critic examines.¹³ To this end, Gilroy's project of disrupting modernity, or traversing its specifically racialized axis, is more in keeping with my own.¹⁴ Unlike Peterson's study, my book offers an account of internationalism in order partially to reframe Gilroy's discussion of transnationalism by taking up related areas prominently absent from *The Black Atlantic* (and *Up from Bondage*): Marxism, the Soviet Union, and the alternate theorizations of the international that were so important to some black American intellectuals of the twentieth century. If, as Peterson contends, a "kinship" between Russian and African American literatures has been forgotten, I would remind readers that it has been forgotten with a purpose.¹⁵ A sedimented ideological structure of separation has contributed to the maintenance of boundaries between Russian and African American studies, and to the forgetting of the field in which actual crossings and cross-pollenization did occur: that of black radicalism.¹⁶ I offer the Soviet work of McKay, Hughes, Robeson, and Du Bois as ciphers for an "internationalist socialism" that understood social formations from a perspective that criticized capitalism's determining role in shaping modernity.

In gathering together the materials for this book, both here and in the ex-Soviet Union, I learned many lessons about the relationship between the archival and theoretical that the nexuses between race and the legacy of the Cold War invariably summon. The complexities of this relationship were at no time better outlined for me than during one of my routine visits to the microfilm department of a U.S. library where I planned to pick up copies of manuscript materials I had ordered a few days earlier. While filling out the forms that would finalize the transaction, I overheard a

student worker express confusion as she sat at the microfilm copier. Aware that this student was engaged in duplicating materials I had requested, I listened. Apparently stymied by the contents of the frame before her, she asked a coworker, "Do you think she really wants this? It's just a bunch of scribble." "Well," the coworker responded, stepping over to assess the projected frame for herself, "you never know." The student shrugged her shoulders as she pressed the green button labeled "print."

Russia no longer holds the cloak-and-dagger allure for students that it once did prior to 1991, when Boris Yeltsin mounted the tanks outside Moscow's White House and declared the passing of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost along with the death of the Soviet era. From 1980 to 1990, years dominated by Ronald Reagan's evil empire rhetoric, there was an 86 percent increase in enrollments in Russian language courses at the college level. By 1995, after the Cold War had officially been declared won and the evil empire vanquished, enrollments had dropped 44.6 percent from their 1990 numbers.¹⁷ Government funding of Russian scholarship has slowed with the cutbacks of recent years, and the cancellation of funding for areas once designated "strategic" or "critical" such as the former Soviet Union have continued to dull opportunities for U.S.-based scholars of Russia and Eastern Europe. Similarly, there is very little work in the humanities that engages Russian and American cultural production comparatively.¹⁸ For U.S. departments of Slavic studies, this lack of work can be attributed to an entrenched sense of disciplinary boundaries as well as the historically heavy influence of Soviet and East European émigrés, few of whom had fond associations with Marxism and thus did not warm to the incursions of Marxist-infused analytics into their milieu. For the interdisciplinary field of American studies, translation problems of a different order have stymied comparative work. Simply put, the demands of Ph.D. requirements have not encouraged graduate students in American literature and American studies to pursue foreign languages such as Russian, and older comparative literature programs have not privileged African American literature as a "national literature." Even when the war on everyone's mind was a cold one, and Russian language was correspondingly "hot," there was still a paucity of comparative work in Russian and U.S. cultures. In spite of Reagan's injunction that Gorbachev "tear down that wall," the kind of American exceptionalism that characterized the Reagan era affected the larger trends of U.S. historiography in which walls of a different

type were not denounced but reinforced. Although this era saw the proliferation of cross disciplinaryity that gave rise to cultural studies, the challenging of disciplinary boundaries did not extend to Slavic departments. More often than not, the result—like Reagan’s reproof—was not intended to equalize access to resources but to establish one side as the dominant zone through which contact would be monitored and superior goods exported.

With the wall gone and the precipitous decline in enrollments in Russian language courses intact, I suspected that neither of these young women in the microtext department had encountered handwritten Cyrillic before. Because the materials I had ordered included large portions of handwritten documents in Russian, I guessed that the student worker was somewhat mystified about the viability of some part or another of Russian text I had requested. And although seemingly cavalier, her response highlights the theoretical stakes of my book. Easy readability and transparent immediacy—and our own desire to seek out these qualities as readers of the past—are what this book works against. Even though many people are aware that a relationship existed between the Soviet Union and some of the most prominent black American intellectuals of the twentieth century, few assessments of these relationships have refused to place them in a framework of perfectly defined choices between “good” and “evil.” The Soviet work of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson has been cast as misguided and for the most part understood as regrettable missteps in otherwise illustrious careers. This book attempts to rectify some of this imbalance.

Without retreating to the shell of a reductive motto, it would be fair to say that *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain* pursues what the student in the microfilm department described as “scribble.” In seeking out that which appears indecipherable at first glance, that which has been situated in the background of our attention, this book argues that the archive of materials linking McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson to the Soviet Union must be kept open. Rather than forcing these materials into a preordained model safeguarded by the contemporary pressures of hindsight, this book uses them as a departure, as a means of unlocking a past that has heretofore been silenced and/or obfuscated. Yet in spite of the fact that they have been consistently ignored, these stories are no less valuable than the more familiar ones. This is not an attempt to replace one narra-

tive with a better or more accurate one but rather to exhibit how, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has taught us, “presences and absences embodied in sources or archives are neither neutral nor natural.”¹⁹ A refusal to repeat the mistakes of the past by placing materials retrospectively in a seamless continuum offers instead an investigation of the seams, irresolutions, and complexities of this extensive archive. The questions that this book poses are: Can one recapture the moments in which the energy of alternate myths of subjecthood offered by the Soviet Union found their way into the imaginative minds of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson? Can one read the texts that display this imaginative synergy without pressing them into a foregone conclusion of closed debate based on a superior vantage point? Despite efforts to consolidate the past into a fluid running narrative of the Cold War as “won,” can the efforts made to counter the early Cold War fictions of East/West binaries be recalled while maintaining some of the more sobering facts of U.S. and Soviet doublespeak, tyranny, and suppression of dissent?

THE MAGIC PILGRIMAGE

Beginning with McKay’s journey to attend the congress of the Third International in Moscow in 1922, many blacks endeavored to make the “magic pilgrimage” to the Soviet Union during the early years of the Communist regime.²⁰ A system that claimed to condemn racial segregation along with class stratification was something that many African Americans felt they needed to see and experience firsthand. Oftentimes, the sustenance offered by the Soviet project was not only ideological but material as well. But the black Americans who ventured to Russia and other Soviet republics were not credulous dupes strung along by empty rhetoric and vacuous enticements as the standard account of black involvement would imply. Rather, they were active participants in the shaping of the Union that was evolving, and their imprint lingered in arenas ranging from party policy to consumer culture. Some prominent examples: Corretti Arle Tietz, Harry Haywood, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, and Otto Huiswood were four of the first black Americans to make the eastward journey. Arle Tietz toured Russia with a theater group just before 1917 and stayed to partake in the Revolution; Haywood and Fort-Whiteman arrived as scholarship students at the Comintern’s Communist University of the Toilers of the East

(KUTVA), and both later shaped Comintern policy on the Negro question.²¹ Huiswood was a CPUSA delegate who greeted McKay when he arrived. Du Bois made the first of his four trips to the USSR in 1926. And in 1932, twenty-one black Americans traveled along with Hughes to Russia to make the ill-fated film *Black and White*. Organized by the politically active Louise Thompson and arranged under the auspices of the Meschrabpom Film along with the U.S.-based Friends of the Soviet Union, the group included Wayland Rudd, Loren Miller, Matt Crawford, Homer Smith, Dorothy West, and Lloyd Patterson.²² This enterprising group of young students, journalists, social workers, writers, and actors was surprised to find what Hughes later called a “colony” of African Americans residing in Moscow, and even more startled to discover a similar settlement of black Americans headed by the agricultural expert Oliver Golden in the Central Asian town of Yangiyul. Soon after, in 1934, Paul and Eslanda Robeson would make their first journey to the Soviet Union, and like Hughes, spent time with Golden outside Tashkent. In the late 1940s, the Robesons deposited their son Paul Jr. with his grandmother and uncle (Eslanda’s brother Paul Goode) in Moscow for elementary schooling. Paul Jr. was in a community with a number of African Americans who had settled permanently in the Soviet Union. Wayland Rudd became a member of Meyerhold’s Moscow theater and Lloyd Patterson worked as a set designer for Meschrabpom. Homer Smith was enlisted to help modernize the Soviet postal system.²³ Under the pen name of Mary Christopher, Dorothy West wrote about her experiences for the first issues of her journal *Challenge*, using titles such as “Room in Red Square” and “Russian Correspondence.”²⁴ But following the surge of pilgrimages in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the Khrushchev revelations of 1956 led to a slackening of black interest in the USSR. As black Bolshevism dropped to an all-time low in the 1950s, Du Bois and Robeson strengthened their ties. In the wake of their undaunted support, Angela Davis and Audre Lorde each made journeys to the Soviet republics in the 1970s, attesting to an ongoing fascination of radical blacks with the Soviet promise that Lorde described as a “mythic representation of that socialism which does not yet exist.”²⁵

While there were a number of black Americans who traveled to the Soviet Union, producing a variety of responses and written accounts, this book focuses on four. This stress enables a concentrated engagement with the ways in which the inspiration and failures of the Soviet promise of a

new society filtered through the work of some of the twentieth century's most influential black American cultural producers. Thus, this book is not a comprehensive account of black involvement with the Soviet Union from its inception to its demise. I have instead chosen to study McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson because they were the primary shapers in two cultural contexts—the USSR and the United States—of representations of black America.

Without reifying the category of “experience,” this book maintains that the experience of the Soviet Union as elaborated by each of these authors was crucial to the identifications and perceptions of the Soviet Union that influenced their formulations of black internationalism, and in turn, influenced the Soviets’ associations with the Negro question. Although the analytic apparatus of Marxism and communist adages were important to these figures, the trips were the events that altered and reconfigured their thinking. Following his 1926 trip to Russia, Du Bois wrote, “My mental outlook and the aspect of the world will never be the same.”²⁶ In the works of these authors, experience becomes a site of intervention and theory, a place where dialogue between Soviet reception and black identity proceeds, a location where specific crossings materialize into alternative myths of black self-consciousness. Hence, other prominent black authors who were attracted to communism during the period—most notably Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright—are outside the scope of this book, since despite an interest in and involvement with communism, they did not travel to the Soviet Union. The slippage between communism generally conceived and the Soviet Union as terra firma often has enabled the difference between the two to be elided. But in my account the terms become detached, so that traveling to the Soviet Union is not trivialized as a logical conclusion to an interest in communism. At the same time, the relatedness of the aspirations housed in a turn toward communism and the Soviet Union is not dismissed but rather seen as a starting point from which to discuss the accounts that these travels conspired to reveal. While the investigations of communism penned by Ellison, Wright, and Himes are beyond the parameters of this book, it is hoped that this study will serve as a springboard from which to better assess the involvement (and eventual disillusionment) of each with communism.

Of these three writers, the case of Richard Wright is the most difficult to

dispense with without an additional mention. This book was originally structured to include a chapter on Wright and the trip not taken. When I began to do research in the Soviet archives for materials on Wright, however, I found a thin file. Although there was expressed interest in Wright visiting the Soviet Union as a guest of the Union of Soviet Writers, and even an expectation that he would come in 1940, Wright's failure to do so resulted in an abruptly foreclosed dialogue. The materials that would help construct an argument about the Soviet influence on Wright's concept of internationalism, and Wright's influence on Soviet policy, simply do not exist. This is not to say that Wright did not leave an impression on the Soviets, though. As Ella Winter remarked in her 1945 *I Saw the Russian People*, in addition to the popularity of Hughes's work, Wright's *Native Son* was "a best-seller in Russia" that "every farmer, worker, and schoolchild knows."²⁷ Like *Native Son*, *Black Boy* was also translated in 1945, and clippings of various articles by Wright that appeared in the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* can be found housed under the archival auspices of the Foreign Commission of the Union of Soviet Writers at RGALI. Nonetheless, his refusal to visit the Soviet Union foreclosed the possibility of Soviet media coverage or a public reception, and the response of Soviets to his work did not shape his own thinking about communism or internationalism in the way it did the work of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson. Neither Wright nor Ellison nor Himes effected anything like the kind of popular influence on Soviet accounts of "Negroes" and "Africa" that McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson did.²⁸

My decision to focus on four men and not include a chapter on, say, Louise Thompson Patterson, Eslanda Robeson, or Shirley Graham, all of whom did visit the Soviet Union, was the result not so much of limited archival materials but the limited influence that women, sadly, had on Soviet awareness of black America. It was indeed part of Soviet short-sightedness and doublespeak on women's issues that these women received peripheral notice during their visits to the USSR. While the Soviets may have been remiss in their attention to women, however, Eslanda Robeson and Shirley Graham received more positive media coverage there than they did in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁹ An interpretation of these dialogues is reserved for another, future project. Still, throughout this study, I've been influenced by a commitment to feminist methodologies and indebted to feminist work that precedes my own.

Hazel Carby has written that contemporary feminism's greatest challenge is to transgress the boundaries of previous feminist inquiry and write about "constructions of gendering across the board." And in her compelling *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman specifies such inquiry, instructing her readers about the importance of acknowledging the differential ways in which black masculinity is gendered. This is a crucial point and one that with small exception often gets overlooked.³⁰ Following Carby's and Wiegman's leads, in its earlier chapters my own work investigates the pairing of political commitments deemed unconventional with racial marginalization. Its later chapters also explore how black masculinity has been gendered in its association with communism. While it is certain that a pivotal aspect of the attraction of Soviet ideology was its emphasis on the "new" people under construction there, it is also possible that this very stress enabled enthusiasts to believe that gender inequities would be subsumed in and solved by the formation of the new *chelovek*.³¹ Thus, as I discuss in chapter 1, the masculine contours of reformulated Soviet citizenship often went undetected even as the necessity for outlining linkages between racial and women's emancipation was being pronounced. At the same time, the works of McKay, Hughes, Du Bois, and Robeson each highlighted the centrality of sexual emancipation to racial liberation. Each author addressed this issue differently and with varying degrees of urgency in his Soviet work. For example, Du Bois subsumed his outward appreciation for women's equality beneath a rhetoric of male exceptionalism, whereas Hughes staked out territories in which he challenged a compulsory heterosexuality encoded in the "veil" of black masculine consciousness. In this manner, my book attends to the place of women and the feminine in each of these authors' works, from McKay's engagement with miscegenation and the "woman question" and Hughes's fascination with Uzbek unveiling, to Shirley Graham's rephrasing of portions of Du Bois's autobiography and Eslanda Robeson's alliance with her husband's political/aesthetic goals. A focus on black masculinity therefore becomes an opportunity for thinking through gender's links to racial difference, and interrogating the presumed neutrality of a category like "men."

This book, then, is neither a full account of nor an apology for African American involvement with the Soviet Union. Rather, it is an attempt to weave back into the larger tales of these particular authors' aesthetic and

political attachments the marginalized place of the Soviet Union, demonstrate how this marginalization threatens to be renewed in contemporary accounts, and establish the stakes of such potential reproduction. Two of the authors willingly turned away from their earlier involvements with Russia; the other two did not. Some readers may wish that Robeson and Du Bois had renounced the Soviet Union, as did many members of the CPUSA, following Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. But the correcting of past errors is not this book's aim. This book instead shifts our knowledge about these figures' Soviet attachments, and in so doing, not only repositions their work but also wages against a historical hegemony that would keep these particular collusions of radicalism and desire silenced.

The absence of the Soviet Union from the black Atlantic routes is at once hard to critique and necessary to announce. A specific configuration of a black Atlantic to the exclusion of other geographic regions and hemispheres enacts its own silencing of the past. Even though the Cold War era is over, its vestiges remain. On Du Bois's death in 1963, the *Wall Street Journal* commented, "You really have to forget about the last years of Du Bois's life"; this request now threatens to become a historiographical reality.³² Such fusions of past and present in which one seems to be inescapably immersed in a mind-set of years gone by are not necessarily attributable to an irremediable prolongation of a "Red scare" mentality. Rather, these convergences emerge due to an academic ambivalence that corresponds to a lack of resources and research in areas that appear to have become superannuated. While the problem is institutional and broad based, its influence targets specific areas and threatens to foreclose on histories about which one is not aware one knows nothing. As Trouillot remarks, "The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position."³³ Differential access to the means of historical production are reflected and reproduced in the retrieval of sources in which those differences are themselves housed. As a contemporary of the past, then, one is also engaged in the intertwined processes of inclusion and exclusion. It is this fact that the prior silencing of the Soviet archive—and the various mechanisms and forces that conspired to keep it so—makes explicit. Thus, rather than boasting a superior vantage point or more trustworthy tale, this narrative stakes as its ground the claim that in as much as archives assemble, they

also dissemble in performing this authority. This is particularly true in the case of Russian archives, where the very means and conditions of preservation are themselves under siege.

Over the last few years, archives in the former Soviet Union that were once inaccessible to scholars have opened their doors and materials. But even the most enterprising researcher will find that this very openness forces one to come to terms with a redefinition of “access.” For example, my own interests led me to a number of different state-run archives, including RTSKHIDNI and RGALI, both in Moscow. While the elaborate procedures through which one must navigate in order to find oneself legitimately poised in a Russian *chitatel’nyi zal’* or “reading room” will not sound unusual to anyone familiar with the process of doing research in Eastern Europe, some of the labyrinthine ways bear mentioning.

The researcher must first establish her legitimacy as a scholar. If she is not emerging from an immediately recognizable institutional genealogy—that is to say, not conducting research through the conventional arm of a government-sponsored program such as International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Social Science Research Council (SSRC), or a Fulbright grant—then the researcher must first find a way of obtaining a nontourist visa to enter Russia. Once in the country, she must establish an *otnoshchenie* or official “relation” with a Russian institution willing to vouch for the validity of the project. With *otnoshchenie* in hand, the researcher makes her way to the designated archive for an interview to establish the combined legitimacy of the person and their project. At this point, she receives a *propusk*, a card that verifies who the researcher is and the length of time for which that individual will be granted admittance to the archive, sometimes including the days of the week and hours during which she will be admitted as well. Most materials are uncataloged so depending on the archive, one is left with two options: as I did at RTSKHIDNI, to either describe the kinds of materials one is seeking to a librarian and hope that the librarian likes the project and feels sympathetic enough to be helpful; or, if (as is now the case at RGALI) one can gain admittance to the card catalog room, plow through the musty stacks of index cards on which handwritten notations from various years, hands, and it seems, classification systems suggest possible *fond*, or collections, in which one might look. From here on, it is another delayed process of ordering materials (no more than three at a time) and waiting an unpredictable amount of time

(a day or two usually) for the designated files to surface. Once the documents are in hand, there are the difficulties of inconsistent policies regarding laptops, maximum quotas on copying, and prohibitively exorbitant costs for reproducing materials. Unpredictably foreshortened summer hours or an impromptu, month-long closing of the archive for an annual “cleaning of the pipes” can leave even the most intrepid scholar feeling discouraged, if not distraught, particularly when visas are not easily extended.

These challenges aside, the results of recent research in the ex-Soviet Union have produced exciting new reassessments in fields from policy studies to art history. These newly available resources, however, have not yet affected our reading of those black American writers who spent significant time there. Bringing together well- and lesser-known materials, each of the following chapters relocates a figure in light of such reassessment. The Soviet work of each of these men reflects a dialectic of displacement in which an imaginary and actual elsewhere furnishes a space to rethink crucial aspects of social and cultural life at home. Against Western claims of unrealized universality, Soviet rhetoric offered something new. The promise of Soviet internationalism did not entail reshaping old relations but as Hughes put it, transforming selfhood “from the ground up.” The figures I discuss saw connection with the USSR as a means of escaping old oppressive affiliations and establishing in their place new liberating ones. Although this book spans several decades, the emphasis on the newness of the Soviet project, of society reconfigured, continued as a linking strand of “mythic representation” throughout the years. “The Soviets are making a new people,” Du Bois wrote in the late 1950s.³⁴ At the same time, Russia promised that national longings—the desire to adhere in a community—would not be left behind, and offered an opportunity for multinational, international federation while nurturing a sense of national separateness and self-determination for blacks in the U.S. South. Thus, while “there can be no doubt that a socialist society demands a new kind of person/man,” as Robeson reported to *Pravda* in 1960, the desire to renounce the old in favor of the “new” also revealed how the constraints of nation were not easily escaped.³⁵

Still, what Russia offered black Americans was different from the paradigms and experience of Europe. As Hughes noted in “Poor Little Black Fellow,” written in Moscow in 1933, Europe was only the beginning. The

construction of a new Soviet citizen in the 1920s drew Left-leaning individuals in the United States to the Soviet Union to explore a national identity putatively free of class, gender, and racial biases. Unlike the repositioning of self in a territory of relatively familiar class, gender, and to a purportedly lesser degree racial inequities offered by expatriate experiences of Europe, the new Soviet citizen, dubbed the *novy Sovetsky chelovek*, advanced a breathtaking reconfiguration of selfhood, a reconfiguration of inner and outer subjectivity. For Louise Thompson, a journey through six of the fifteen Soviet republics in 1932 was a revelation. In a still-unpublished manuscript, Thompson writes,

My Soviet journey had an enormous personal and political impact on me and shaped my life for many years to come. . . . I had seen more and learned more in the Soviet Union than I ever had before in such a short span of time. What I had witnessed, especially in Central Asia, convinced me that only a new social order could remedy the American racial injustices I knew so well. I went to the Soviet Union with leftist leanings; I returned home a committed revolutionary.³⁶

After the 1929 stock market crash, the Soviet alternative appeared all the more attractive, and hundreds of black Americans migrated east to see the Soviet experiment for themselves. Following World War II and the unraveling of the wartime alliance between Russia and the United States, linkages between anti-communism and racism that had begun to appear in the Red scares of the 1930s reemerged more forcefully. For some black Americans, communism became more attractive, and for others, as I discuss in chapter 4, patriotism took center stage. The extent of the anti-communist fervor of the 1950s is well documented; the connection to black internationalism less so.

Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain traces this history of anti-internationalism to 1922 and the appearance of McKay at the Third International in Moscow. Chapter 1 examines McKay's Russian texts, *Negry v Amerike* (*Negroes in America*) and *Sudom Lincha* (*Trial by Lynching*)—for which his English-language manuscripts have been lost and the available English editions are posthumous translations back from the 1923 and 1925 Russian translations. I argue that these works provide key critical lenses through which to explore the specific ways in which McKay's nationalist and internationalist politics, his aesthetic and social aspirations,

shared common concerns. Rather than advocating a theory of black self-determination that Soviet bureaucrats eagerly incorporated into policy, McKay's work challenged Bolshevik positions on the issue of self-determination. Illustrating the interwoven dilemmas of sexual and racial disenfranchisement in the United States, McKay's work disputed the Soviet reduction of women's issues to those of class, highlighting the connectedness between the Negro and woman questions. Readings of Russian and English versions of McKay's participation in Moscow, including previously classified Comintern documents, map out ways McKay's function as a "stand-in African" set the stage for black visitors who followed. I investigate how McKay's embodiment of "Africa" began to disembody Africa—that is, how an idea of the representative "Negro" seemed to offer a more easily understood alternative to the racially imbued political instability of Africa. This mis-embodiment would reemerge forcefully with the appearance of Robeson in the Soviet media in the late 1950s, when cold war animosities would lead Soviet bureaucrats back to Africa.

Chapter 2 reclaims portions of Hughes's account of his trip to the Soviet Union that he removed from his memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*. I target the complex identificatory processes at work in Hughes's unanthologized writings about Uzbekistan, and how these configurations carry over into his better-known work from the 1930s. Marked by a preoccupation with the unveiling of the Muslim Uzbek woman, these writings exhibit how Hughes rephrased the emancipatory potential of "unveiling" through the prism of a different discourse of "the veil"—that of black American male consciousness. His Soviet work reflects the importance of the feminine to this remapping of subjectivity as well as the way Soviet institutional reconfiguration of identity on a public scale provided Hughes with a means of articulating a liberated racial selfhood on a more private scale. Such rephrasings of subjectivity reappear in Hughes's anthologized work from the 1930s, in particular the short stories he wrote following his return from Uzbekistan to Moscow, and collected in *The Ways of White Folks*.

The third chapter iterates how pressures resulting from political animosities between the United States and Soviet Union contributed to censorship of the work of Du Bois. While McKay and Hughes officially renounced their early ties to the Soviet Union, Du Bois and Robeson suffered for their refusal to do the same. The *Wall Street Journal's* comment that Du Bois's last years should be forgotten is a sentiment that has,