

“Asiatic Black Man”: W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes in Soviet Asia, Part II—The Consolidation of Hughes’s Brown Afro-American Eurasianism in Central Asia

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*HJEAS***ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the concept of the “Asiatic Black Man” as mapped out by African American intellectuals from Langston Hughes’s perspective. Challenging the extant academic interpretation of Hughes’s Central Asian narrative as “Black Atlantic,” this essay proposes “Brown Afro-American Eurasianism” as a new theoretical framework for analyzing Hughes’s extraordinary adventures in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Through his Brown odyssey in the Uzbek SSR, witnessing Soviet progress in transforming the Turkestani gender patterns, Hughes perceived communism as an empowering ideology for African Americans to dismantle the power dynamics sustained by religious patriarchy. On the other hand, Turkmen SSR communicated the promising image of how a socialist nation state could be as modern as it was raceless to Hughes. Grounded in his impressions of these Central Asian union republics, Hughes conceived the vision of the “United Soviet States of America” as a revolutionary thesis to address the nation’s racial injustice. Despite Hughes carefully burying this intellectual past after his return to the US, McCarthyism brought it to the open. Nevertheless, Hughes’s role as the intellectual accessory to Joseph Stalin’s persecution of Uzbek literary figure Sanjar Siddiq remains a skeleton in the closet—a suspended case in the Afro-American-Eurasian encounter that this essay also seeks to reveal. As Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois share narrative themes in their discovery of Soviet Asia, it can also be argued that Afro-American Eurasianism testifies to a transfigured “double-consciousness” of the “Asiatic Black Man”—poetically inviting while politically fragile. (YZ)

KEYWORDS: Brown Afro-American Eurasianism, Asiatic Black Man, Langston Hughes, Soviet Asia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan



“Brown”—Hughes’s identity denominator with Soviet Central Asians and the emergence of a Brown Afro-American Eurasian narrative¹

De-Stalinization vouchsafed the Soviet vision of a soft world revolution, maximizing its cultural spheres of influence by captivating the Asiatic Black Men in the refined intricacy of the Eurasian world of literature and art. In the 1950s, the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee (SKSSAA) worked to reshape Central Asia’s history as the cultural synthesis between East and West. It also strategically employed regional intellectuals to revitalize the spirit of Bandung and to downplay the “European” nature of a Soviet apparatchik (Jansen 196, 202, 207). Spellbound by these efforts, sociologist-activist W. E. B. Du Bois’s participation in the Afro-Asian Writers Conference intellectually bolstered the Afro-American Eurasian connection in world culture. This was echoed by Paul Robeson’s inaugural concert at the Pakhtakor Central Stadium of Tashkent, celebrating Afro-Asian camaraderie and Soviet progress in Uzbekistan during the 1958 International Festival of Films of African and Asian Peoples (Bogelsack 261–62).

As the Soviets compromised their ideologically red elements, Eurasia turned Brown. Notably, Du Bois’s impression of Uzbekistan as racially inclusive and culturally non-Russian distinguished his renewed interest in Central Asia from his previous ruminations about Soviet Eurasian citizens: “Over seven million brunette and curly-haired folk of Asiatic descent live here speaking a language differing from the Russian, and inheriting an old culture” (*Autobiography* 40). As such, Du Bois’s phraseology of “brunette” prompted him to embrace “Brown” in the final years of his life—in reconciliation with his prior Black radicalism.

Intriguingly, Du Bois’s turn to “Brown” echoed profoundly with the poet Langston Hughes, who received an invitation in 1932 to work as a screenwriter in Moscow for a propaganda film about racial issues in the United States. Although the film project was eventually abandoned, Hughes spent months in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1933 and visited two Central Asian socialist republics (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan)—an experience he documented in *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, a monograph published in the USSR in 1934, as well as in his autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander*, originally published in 1956, making him the first known African American to visit Central Asia. Just as Du Bois’s “brunette” obscured the chill of Soviet Cold War cultural prolongation of world revolution by encapsulating the physical features of the African Americans and Uzbeks as “Asiatic,” Hughes’s work revealed how “Brown” could serve as a purposeful identity denominator for the Asiatic Black Men to wrap up in their Afro-

American Eurasian narrative while during the Soviet strategic retrenchment of “socialism in one country.”

David Chioni Moore in his paper “Local Color, Global ‘Color,’” reasons that Hughes’s extensive cultural connections with Africa, the African Caribbean, and Paris, where the *Négritude* movement was in its heyday, had formed a broad “Black Atlantic” narrative. Arguably, it was through the “Black Atlantic” lens that Hughes enthusiastically discovered the shared anti-racist spirit with “colored” people in Central and East Asia. However, it should be noted that Hughes kept a critical distance from the term “Black,” and the “Negro” in his book title carries a different connotation from the Du Boisian one. This might be attributed to Hughes’s complex ancestral background. His mixed European, African, and Native American heritage endowed him with brown skin and likely a cosmopolitan character. He recognized his “Negro” identity simply because at the moment “in the United States, the word ‘Negro’ is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins” (*Big Sea* 36, emphasis in the original).

Nevertheless, during his time in Africa, where colonial racial structures differed from American pigmentocracy, Hughes tried to convince locals that he was a “Negro” to draw a parallel between the Black struggle in the American South and that in Africa in an effort to forge solidarity between Africans and African Americans against the global white colonial order. Instead, he was met with laughter and treated by his African hosts as a “white man,” since foreign “colored” people were typically seen as agents of the white colonial government—and thus were considered as politically “white” (*Big Sea* 96).

This awkward moment in his transcontinental racial encounter compelled Hughes to realize that “in Africa, the word [“Negro”] is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*” (*Big Sea* 36, emphasis in the original). Consequently, he identified himself as a “brown” being—“You see, unfortunately, I am not black . . . I am brown” (36). His early enthusiasm for anything *African* and *Black*, zealously intertwined with his creative involvement in the Harlem Renaissance, quickly evolved into a quest for an alternative racial identity. Rather than exclusively aligning with Black identity, he sought a broader position based on a composite color, aiming to connect with “colored” people in different parts of the world and enact a solidary global South shaded by a subtle “Brown” hue, while maintaining a critical awareness of his roots.

Hughes certainly took an aesthetic delight in “Brown” and made it one of the leitmotifs in his work—with the poem “Fascination” as a notable

example: “And because her skin is the brown of an oak leaf in autumn, / but a softer color, / I want to kiss her” (*Collected Poems* 39). However, his appreciation of “Brown” failed to transform the perception of “colored Americans” as authentic Americans in the eyes of foreigners. When Hughes was invited to teach English in Toluca, Mexico, the inviter forgot to mention that he was an “*americano de color*, brown as a Mexican,” leading him to be ignored by his fellow teacher who assumed that Hughes—as an American—would be white (Hughes, *Big Sea* 81). This experience further placed Hughes within the Du Boisian “double-consciousness” as an “americano,” yet “de color.” Hughes’s awareness of being an “americano de color” validated an inexorable tension of identity. It fractured his emotional attachment to Americanism, while also revealing how his skin color could function as a potential conduit for global racial solidarity—connecting him with “colored” people in “Negro” America, Brown Latin America, and Black Africa alike.

Therefore, Hughes opted to leverage his brown physical appearance to redefine the term “Negro” in the simile of “an oak leaf in autumn” with febrile imagination of racial justice worldwide as the new frame of reference—in sharp contrast to the parochial silhouette of Black nationalism. Central Asia thus entered his field of vision as he rounded the periphery of the Soviet empire in connection with his musings about Russia. To him, the Soviets were ideologically red, but ethnically, they might be as brown as a “Negro.” In “Negroes in Moscow: In a Land Where There Is No Jim Crow” (1933), Hughes praised Alexander Pushkin as the “Pride of the Negroes,” not because the poet “was pretty well mixed with the blood of the Slavs and Tartars,” but because he “was dark enough to show, in hair and skin, traces of Africa,” and for his mother, who was “a beautiful mulatto” (65–66). By identifying a Russian poet with African roots, Hughes sought the “Brown” complexion to unite transatlantic distance and ideological differences and located his ideal hero, who could actualize the “truer self” with a subtle flair of living with mixed heritages and comfortably overcome the identity crisis. Not coincidentally, Pushkin appealed to Hughes as much as Joseph Stalin did to Du Bois.²

With regard to the Central Asians, Hughes no doubt viewed them as sharing the same skin color as American mixed-race people, Caribbean mulattoes, Pushkin, and himself, as Central Asians—such as the Uzbeks and Turkmens—were principally described as “brown” or “yellow-brown” in his account. Accordingly, instead of the “Black Atlantic” narrative, it should be argued that his emphasis on “brown” indeed shapes his composite version of the “Asiatic Black Man”—with the interflow of Asiatic yellow and African

black complexions coalescing in the formation of the “Brown Central Asian” and “Brown Negro” identities so that their naturally constructed physiognomic affinity could be politically anchored in their Afro-Asiatic solidarity to affirm their transracial determination against the shared yoke of racism. Moreover, as the color brown typically contains undertones of yellow, black, and red, Hughes’s intellectual disposition to socialism and communism might be equally suggested, albeit intentionally throttled later in *I Wonder As I Wander* to avoid the risk of being charged as a Communist. When Hughes—as a “Brown Negro”—“looks at Soviet Central Asia,” the Lacanian split between the vision and the gaze is mediated through a red Eurasian empire, contributing to the emergence of a Brown Afro–American Eurasian narrative.³

Uzbekistan unveiled—The genesis of a Brown odyssey and the atheist crusade against Oriental gender patterns

Despite Du Bois’s praise of the accomplishment of the Soviet autonomous republics, his observations were often misaligned with Soviet national delimitation and nation-building projects. Early on, he relied on pan-nationalistic labels—such as “Turks and Tartars”—to obscure the ethnic diversity of the Turkic peoples in his reflections. Later, his visit to the Uzbek SSR confirmed Uzbekistan’s role as a “Eurasian” bridge for Afro-Asian solidarity, yet his remarks on the Uzbeks remained sketchy, concerning only their physical appearance and cultural exoticism. Additionally, he overlooked the Soviets’ intention to modernize Central Asia by establishing socialist republics based on national and ethnic identities rather than racial, civilizational, or color-based ones.

By contrast, Hughes’s field trip experience closely aligned with the Soviet model of ethnic nationalism and its civic-administrative capacity-building efforts in the Central Asian socialist states. His journey provided an assemblage of his attentive observation of Soviet ethnonationalistic experiments and his impromptu indulgence in woolgathering about communistic racial justice—all within the comprehensive outlook of Brown Afro–American Eurasianism.

Hughes’s introduction to Central Asian elites in Moscow served as a prelude to his travels. By chance, he met the mayor of Bukhara, who was “as brown as I [Hughes] am” (*A Negro Looks* 7–8). The surprise of witnessing Brown power in a red regime prompted Hughes to wonder: “In the Soviet Union dark men are also the mayors of cities” (8). Even more striking was another piece of information provided by Kurbanov, an ethnic Uzbek and a

chairman of a Soviet city, that “Soviet Asia is a land of Before and After, and the Revolution is creating a new life that is changing the history of the East,” especially in the Soviet South—“Russian and native, Jew and gentile, white and brown, live and work together” (9).

With curiosity aroused, Hughes thus stated his motives for visiting Soviet Central Asia in Chapter 1 “Going South” of *A Negro Looks*: “It is in the [American] South today that we suffer the worst forms of racial persecution and economic exploitation—segregation, peonage, and lynching” (5), but a “South under the red flag” promised a contrasting configuration, triggering his purpose “to study the life of these people in the Soviet Union, and write a book about them for the dark races of the capitalist world” (6). Along with a “colored” group from the Mezhrabpomfilm studio, he took the Moscow–Tashkent Express southward, initiating a Brown odyssey into a faraway land shrouded in the echoes of the past, against the cerulean sky lit by the red star as a replacement for the Islamic crescent.

The absence of railroad racial segregation among the passengers and crew on the train, who were “Soviet citizens, Asiatic or European” (*I Wonder* 158), attested to an imminent, coherent Eurasian space as a miniature of the Soviet project to merge Europe and Asia into a single transracial landmass. What shaped this illimitable space was Hughes’s conversation with the crew members, which caused him to recognize the comparatively better working conditions in the USSR as well as the certitude that the Soviets “knew a great deal more about America than the average American knows about the Soviet Union” (*A Negro Looks* 10). The asymmetrical information flow between the two nations heightened his urgency to inform the American audience of the chiaroscuro of his perceived realities in the USSR and the US.

A familiar scene of high cotton caught Hughes’s eye as he looked out from the train: “In the autumn, if you step off the train almost anywhere in the fertile parts of Central Asia, you step into a cotton field, or into a city or town whose streets are filled with evidences of cotton nearby,” while “the same thing is true of the southern part of the United States” (*A Negro Looks* 12). Recalling his experience of visiting cotton plantations in Alabama two years before, he was indignant that even though the slavery system was formally abolished, the share-crop system, by underpaying Black labor, continued “getting free labour, white cotton, and culture” (14) and served as “a modern legal substitute slavery” (14–15). “How different are the cotton lands of Soviet Central Asia,” Hughes marveled with a tincture of Marxist historical materialism, “the beys are gone—the landlords done with forever” (15).

Concomitant with the demise of feudal landlords was the Soviet commitment to gender equality, as evident in the empowerment of women through education and employment that directly challenged the complementarity of the European capitalist mode of production and Asiatic backwardness: “A woman peasant sat on the edge of the cotton field talking out of a book . . . Something to shout in the face of the capitalist world’s colonial oppressors. Something to whisper over the borders of India and Persia” (*A Negro Looks* 16). Hughes recognized the dramatic advent of women in the labor force, as his interest in Uzbek and Turkmen plays, which portrayed “struggle against the counter-revolutionary forces,” led him to discover the tea houses, wherein traditional Uzbek folk dance and music remained ongoing. He noted that dancing used to be a male-only profession sponsored by the beys’ purchase of boy-dancers for entertainment, while female dancers—with the *ne plus ultra* of Tamara Khanum—sprang up after the revolution (40, 42).

Nevertheless, Hughes’s joyful reception of female engagement in theatrical arts did not obstruct his unvarnished acclamation for the boy-dancers, or *bachi*, who “danced as women [and] put on wigs and dresses and cultivated the delicate gestures of rhythmic pantomime,” satisfying male spectators’ scrutiny (“Boy Dancers” 36). Still found in contemporary Afghanistan, the *bachi* have sparked controversies not for homosexual implications, but because of the alleged promotion of pederasty and child abuse (Borile). However, as Jennifer Wilson contends in her “Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent,” such appreciation by Hughes was context-specific, amounting to a subtle critique of Soviet modernization in Central Asia, which deliberately suppressed homosexual elements in local traditions by condemning them as leftovers of Eastern backwardness. Hughes’s reference to the boy dancers hints at his support for a global queer visibility, aiming to decriminalize the queer desires censored both by Soviet authorities and African American communities, thereby cross-correlating Soviet internationalism and Harlem queer culture to identify an emerging translocal queer revolution (Wilson 643–46).

Hughes and his contemporary readers, however, could not have identified the “queerness” in the boy-dancers, either in its modern non-heteronormative understanding or the Harlem-specific gay sense. Rather, Hughes was clear in pointing out that “[t]o Western eyes nothing would have seemed unduly strange—except that the dancers with their long curls, smiling and beckoning with their eyes, were boys, not girls” (“Boy Dancers” 37). Still, his attention centered around the policy by which “[t]he Soviets forbid the

buying and selling of anybody, male or female,” as well as the acknowledgment couched in his plain remark on the universal accessibility of civic professionalism in Soviet Central Asia—“the art of dancing in public is no longer limited to men, either as participants or spectators” (49–50).

As Kate A. Baldwin argues, Hughes praised women’s participation in the traditionally “forbidden” professions as it functioned as a transformative revelation of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness gave confidence to “being ‘colored’ without being veiled” and to “being unveiled without being ‘white.’” It invited revolutionary outbursts for racial and gender emancipation, pushing beyond the usual boundaries of heterosexual desire and challenging Du Bois’s idea of “Negro consciousness” as the “life of the veil” (90). Indeed, the veiled Black life was soaked in the sentimentalism found in Hughes’s poem “Mississippi”:

Lying low, unpublicized,
Masked—with only Jaundiced eyes showing through the mask?
What sorrow, pity, pain,
That tears and blood
Still mix like rain
In Mississippi! (*Collected Poems* 452)

Nevertheless, Baldwin’s analysis, while emphasizing the emergence of gender and racial awareness, evades how the imagination of the Orient and religious norms psychoanalytically shaped Hughes’s strategy of transmuting the Soviet Central Asian context into the identity construction of political Brown Asianism.

In his *fait divers* “In an Emir’s Harem,” published in *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1934, Hughes—with unchecked inventiveness in imagining the Orient—conjured up the scene of an Emir “gazing at the warm feminine loveliness just across the pool” (12). From a perspective different from the Lacanian gaze, the Emir’s gaze fits sprucely with what Laura Mulvey calls the “voyeuristic-scopophilic” male gaze, wherein men derive pleasure from taking cloistered women as erotic objects, which underlies the male ego (843). The Emir’s houris, whose skin colors envisioned by Hughes to be ranging from “milk-white and fair” to “a little golden like the grapes in the arbor, or like peaches in the fall,” “brown as russet pears,” and “dark as chocolate” substantiated the cynosure of female objectification. As the Emir “sat in his great soft chair and looked at this luxury of a hundred pretty wives moving up and down the steps of the sun-shiny pool” until he “beckoned to one”

(“Emir’s Harem” 91), the egoistic kernel of Oriental despotism was confirmed through his exercise of whimsical detachment as well as his judging power in favoritism, thereby mirroring the white supremacist order that Hughes faced, in which white society’s selective promotion of “colored” agents reinforced the collusion between international colonialism and domestic pigmentocracy in veiling the subaltern voices.

While the Emir’s unveiling of harems served to perpetuate female subordination to the “voyeuristic-scopophilic” male gaze in domestic settings, the practice of veiling was mandatory for sustaining the public image of women, endorsed by the Islamic patriarchal order. In traditional Central Asian context, according to English female traveler Annette M. B. Meakin who traveled to Russian Turkestan in the early 1900s, veiling was associated with masculine preferences for feminine beauty, embodied in the “performed shyness” of women, when they were in seclusion or interacting with strangers. The intricate relationship between modesty, aesthetics, societal hierarchy, and Islamic patriarchy was conveyed through the degree of bashfulness—with a greater level of bashfulness indicating a woman’s higher social status (116–17). Therefore, “Mohammed’s daughter wore a black veil” (107), displaying demureness to reproduce docility.

As Hughes came from the US, where Black Islam—exemplified by the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam—was advocating an Islamic patriarchal ideology to restore the perceived Black masculinity lost to Black Christianity (Curtis), he was sensitive to the social consequences of religious reconstructions of gender, fearing the fall of America under a potential Black Emir’s policing gaze. Therefore, he celebrated that in Soviet Central Asia “the twisted turbans that once had a religious significance no longer mean anything” and that “women will stroll unveiled beneath the grape arbours where once they walked only in paranjas [traditional garments that cover the full body of women] guarded by eunuchs” (Hughes, *A Negro Looks* 25–26).

Despite Hughes’s contrasting mentions of the sexually impotent eunuchs, the assertive sexist Emir, the boy dancers in women’s clothing, as well as the unveiled Soviet Central Asian women, he illustrated how the old picture of castrated gender liminality and forced gender conformity was superseded by the Soviet confirmation of cisnormativity. While gender expansiveness was more or less tolerated, he persisted as an outsider to the altered Eurasian gender landscape by simply acknowledging equal gender rights, while leaving his sexuality connected to his discovery of the Brown aesthetics in the USSR. As Hughes was known for being “asexual, without

noticeable erotic feeling for either women or men” (Rampersad 20) and having “governed his sexual desires to an extent rare in a normal adult male” (69), his own sexual orientation quite fulfilled the syzygy of the Jungian archetypes of anima—the male unconscious yearning for values typically associated with femininity—such as beauty, goodness, and morals (Jung 37)—and animus—the personification of masculine thoughts in the female unconscious (371).

In this context, Hughes’s profound appreciation of both Tamara Khanum and Alexander Pushkin represented his projection of asexuality not on the confirmation or transcendence of the gendered realm of professional achievement, but rather on the search for a union of anima and animus in establishing the aesthetic sanctity of Brownness for communicating Eurasia’s eclectic charm to America. In this way, Hughes’s version of the “Asiatic Black Man” is a proposition of a human being as a receptacle of masculine and feminine aspects, regardless of whether they are a man with his anima manifest in his profession. Such is the boy dancer or Pushkin, a woman who could articulate her animus in a traditionally male *métier*, like Khanum, or an asexual “Brown” Hughes in defiance of the androcentric “voyeuristic-scopophilic” gaze and religious patriarchy.

After his Central Asian trip in 1935, unsurprisingly, Hughes titled his expedition note in *Travel*—“Farewell to Mahomet,” noting that “gradually veils came off and harem doors opened until today the majority are at least partially freed of the old male dominations of the past” (28). The formerly invisible “subaltern” voice, while restored with the advent of women taking on bachi dancing, had been promoted with the demise of religion—“Women gathering in a public tea house unveiled, drinking tea! By the head of the Prophet, NO!” (29). To be sure, “Farewell to Mahomet” was an onomastic reference to his poem “Goodbye Christ,” written in Russia in 1932:

“Jesus Lord God Jehova
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME— (*Collected Poems* 166).

This evokes his avowed association of atheism with communism. While Hughes’s asexual outlook somewhat mirrored his atheist stance, he associated red ideology with certain masculine traits to empower the proletariat as well

as himself with the intrepidity and determination to subdue religion, thus completing the “Asiatic Black Man” as the Brown “real guy.”

“South” in the USSR *versus* “South” in the US: Turkmenistan as the “colored” model of education, modernization, and nationhood

Cheering that “the great mosques of the once holy Bukhara are nearly empty of worshippers,” Hughes’s anti-religious inclination further led him to denounce religious elements in education, aligned with his observation of the declining popularity of madrasas (*A Negro Looks* 26). What replaced religious teachings was the Soviet education system that covered modern subjects and aimed to reduce illiteracy rates among the masses, irrespective of race, gender, and age (33). “Jewish, Uzbek and Russian children all went to the same schools” (*I Wonder* 152), thus Hughes echoed Du Bois’s earlier praise of the multiethnic education environment in Soviet Asia.

Hughes’s hope for education in bringing about positive change in the younger generation materialized in Turkmenistan, where he characterized the country as embodying “Youth and Learning” in Chapter 4 of *A Negro Looks*. According to him, “[w]ith the coming of the Soviets to Turkmenia, all forms of minority discriminations were abolished,” and students dedicated themselves to studying, rather than being exploited as free labor (*I Wonder* 152). “During the cotton gathering season,” Hughes was told, “children here in Soviet Asia stay in school,” which reminded him that “black children remain in the fields when cotton needs picking” (*A Negro Looks* 35).

Indeed, there existed a historical connection between cotton cultivation in Central Asia and the American South. As Russian historiography contends, the American Civil War resulted in a drastic reduction in cotton exports from the US to Europe, thereby hindering Russian industrial progress and prompting the Russian Empire to accelerate its colonial project in Central Asia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, where a variety of crops could be nourished by the Syr Darya and sustained by a favorable climate (Duxovnyj and de Shutter 114–7). Despite Russian Turkestan having been found by Eugene Schuyler, the first American to visit Central Asia, to be the trial site of American Sea Island cotton seeds (*Turkistan* 1 296), Russia’s introduction of the American upland variety to the region in the early 1880s (Pierce 164–65) ultimately contributed to Du Bois’s observation in 1958 that “[t]heir fields were growing tall, long-staple cotton, which an American Negro from Tuskegee first planted” (*Autobiography* 40). The presence of American cotton in Soviet Central Asia thus contrasted with

the absence of child labor there to induce Hughes to grieve over the lost educational opportunities of young African American cotton pickers.

While Schuyler celebrated the Russian Tsarist rule in freeing the locals from “the unbridled rule of fanatical despots” (*Turkistan* 2 388), Hughes further reckoned that the Soviets struck interracial peace in Central Asia, as stories about “feuds, and tribal wars, Tsarist oppression, and mass misery” all became history within less than twenty years (*A Negro Looks* 17). Hughes believed that “[n]ot Russification, but modernization” (“Farewell” 47) was instrumental to such a Soviet success in Central Asia. Hughes’s perspective, developed through his on-the-spot investigations, suggested that Soviet mechanization and irrigation, alongside the organization of kolkhoz and sovkhoz in transforming individualism into collectivism, marked the scientific management of cotton production in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (*A Negro Looks* 19).

In contrast, the Deep South of the US, the “Bible Belt,” as H. L. Mencken called it, was burdened with race riots and forced labor (*A Negro Looks* 27). Thus, Hughes contrived a wincing response to the role of religious education in hindering modernization. Springing from Karl Marx’s opinion that religion is “the opium of the people” (28), which also influenced Du Bois,⁴ he lambasted the church schools for African Americans, where “most of the presidents . . . are ministers, and a large part of the education is religious” (32), while the curriculum only inculcated Black students with “meekness and humbleness” (28). Furthermore, since “modern and scientific attitudes of study are discouraged” (32), the American South to Hughes would lose its future potential for economic development.

As such, the six decades between Schuyler’s and Hughes’s visits marked how Imperial Russia’s advancing cotton cultivation efforts in Central Asia had transitioned into the rapid transformation of the Asiatic South under Soviet modernization, leaving the US in stagnation; while Du Bois, a quarter-century afterward, expressed the same amazement for the blessed cotton as Hughes did in the Brown odyssey and crystallized the theme of cotton as a shared memory cue in the Afro-American Eurasian narrative.

Surely, Hughes’s account may have faintly conformed to reality since there is historical evidence that Soviet minorities were mobilized massively for the cotton harvest when the Soviet cotton economy was experiencing a labor shortage in the 1930s (Blackburn), while instances of unequal treatment in educational and cultural institutions were reported by the Turkmen frequently (Edgar 82). All this should raise suspicions about the Soviets’ adding a Potemkin façade to the local school visited by Hughes. Nevertheless,

it was not coincidental that he chose Turkmenistan as a model for Soviet education, modernization, and statehood because the Soviets dedicated substantial efforts to cultivating national consciousness and fostering a non-Russian statehood among the Turkmen population, who previously lacked common political institutions, a clearly defined territory, and a mass culture based on a unified national language (Edgar 2–3).

A glimpse into the Bolshevik approach to building nationhood could be found in Hughes's observation at a film institute in Ashgabad, according to which "[i]lliterate actors from the nomad tribes of the desert were being taught to read and write at the same time as they were being taught [by Russians] to act, to operate movie cameras, and to develop films," while in Hollywood "the union of motion-picture operators did not permit Negroes to operate projection machines" (*I Wonder* 135). Consequently, through the interethnic collaboration and distribution of cinematic projects, the Turkmen cultural identity was solidified, projecting internomadic integration into a coherent national awareness within the Soviet community of union republics. In contrast, Hollywood was not only advertizing stereotyped racial representations on screen, but also fading out African American exercise of film projection to reinforce segregationist ideologies.

However, despite Hughes's efforts to make Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian-born Jewish journalist and at the time a Communist member who traveled with him to Tashkent and Ashgabad, understand why he noticed these positive changes in Soviet Asia "with *Negro* eyes," the latter could not feel and experience the same thing in person. Educating the Turkmen in the Bolshevik language of nationhood, thus, meant two different things to Koestler and Hughes: "To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me [Hughes] it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (*I Wonder* 135).

Nothing could represent the microscale "colored land" better than the educational facilities where he witnessed the usage of both the Russian language and the Turkmen tongue in lower schools, the inclusive composition of "Turkmen, Russian, Tartar, and Tyurk nationalities" within the Commissariat of Education, and the representation of "[y]ellow, brown, white faces" in the student body (*A Negro Looks* 34, 38). Inspired by Ogul'gel'dy Dzhumaeva, a female Turkmen educator and Hero of Socialist Labor, "who learned to read after fifty and is now a member of the Party and the head of a Children's Garden" ("Farewell" 29) as a counterpart to Tamara Khanum, Hughes not only finalized his stroke of praise to the advancement of gender equality within the confluence of national consciousness and Soviet

identity, but also distinguished Turkmenistan as a nation of hope and prospect under the nurturing care of a dedicated gardener, who, by unveiling herself, unveiled the power of knowledge in demolishing the illusion of race. Therefore, witnessing a Russian boy and a Turkmen boy sharing playtime validated his belief in how speedily the Soviet government had abandoned racial segregation in education, propelling him to say that “I am glad that here, in the Soviet Union, all the ugly artificial barriers of race have been broken down” (*A Negro Looks* 18–19). No wonder Hughes identified “Moscow dental customs, the unveiling of the harem women in Turkestan, and the disappearance of the color line throughout Soviet Asia” as the three most unforgettable things in the USSR (*I Wonder* 233).

Moreover, Hughes’s confidence in the conducive role of Soviet education in promoting cross-cultural understandings of global struggles was strengthened by finding that “young people [were] asking intelligent and penetrating questions about happenings in France, Cuba, Mexico, and other countries” (*A Negro Looks* 35–36). Before he left for the US, Central Asian students “gave [Hughes] their revolutionary greetings to carry back to the proletarian youth in the United States who still live under capitalism, and to the Negro students caught in the tangled web of religious philanthropy and racial oppression” (38). Hughes thus concludes his Brown odyssey with the assertion that “new times demand new people” (49), expecting a new generation of African Americans to be armed with a global vision, which would enable them to effectively communicate domestic struggles abroad and to build international liaisons. This way a cross-racial solidarity could be established against the unholy quaternity of racism, colonialism, capitalism, and religion, whose “philanthropy” masked its spiritual control, making them the “opium of the people.”

As the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled racial segregation unconstitutional in US education, it is understandable why Hughes put the following words in *I Wonder* to link the later American progress with his distant recollections of a remote land: “In ten short years, Jim Crow was gone on trams, or anywhere else in Central Asia” (184). Similarly to the creation of “Soviet citizens,” which dialectically transcended the boundaries between the “Asiatic” and “European” and unified national statehood under a multiethnic union, Hughes envisioned that it was only when the distinction between the white and “colored” became blurred that the polemics of Black nationalism against white supremacy could be fully articulated within a shared “American” national identity that unites people of all races. This aspiration was voiced in Hughes’s 1938 poem “Let America Be

America Again”: “O, let America be America again / The land that never has been yet / And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free” (*Collected Poems* 191).

All that jazz: from the Brown odyssey to the United Soviet States of America

If the lyrics—“When hard luck overtakes you / Nothin’ for you to do. / Gather up yo’ fine clothes An’ sell ’em to de Jew”—in the poem “Hard Luck” (1926) (*Collected Poems* 82) demonstrated Hughes’s discontent with the Jewish pawnbrokers’ exploitation of Black hardship in cementing Judeo-Black broyges, he believed that education for all without discrimination in Central Asia would overcome interracial feuding. However, as communism “brought about such a change for the better in the status of Jews,” including the empowerment of Jewish students through the universal access to education in the Soviet Union, Hughes, inspired by Marxist–Leninist atheism, asked “why were not all Jews Communist Party members?” (*I Wonder* 152).

This question could have been raised in Moscow from the moment Hughes encountered Arthur Koestler, as the latter’s identity as a Jewish Communist intrigued him. Learning from a young Jewish reporter that the older generation of Jews “put religion above social, political, or industrial progress” (*I Wonder* 153), Hughes stated, “I am afraid I found myself then taking much the same position toward Asiatic Jews in relation to Party membership as many Russians in Moscow took toward Negroes in that regard” (152). The context for his statement was that during his stay in Moscow, almost everyone of the “twenty-two Negroes,” including Hughes, who had viewed Soviet propaganda “relative to the Negro’s hard lot in America,” “took for granted that all Negroes were, or eventually would be, Communist Party members,” yet only one of them claimed Party membership (140–41). Thus, a more pertinent question emerged: should racial and ethnic minorities become Communists first in order to participate in the battle against the intersectionality of the capitalist oppressive system?

Even so, a conflict between Hughes and the Soviet authorities loomed when it came to the politicization of jazz. As a pioneer in “jazz poetry,” Hughes believed that “Jazz seeps into words—spelled out words” (“Jazz as Communication” 369), regarding it as an audio medium to communicate “a montage of a dream deferred” (370). The syncopation of jazz further epitomizes “Negro” identity politics against the monotonous white life pattern, as he passionately expressed in the essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), “one of the inherent expressions of Negro

life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world” (35). To his chagrin, the Soviet government decried jazz as the *dernier cri* of bourgeois music and therefore failed to appreciate its implicit “deferred” dream of racial equality—channeled through the composite whole of jazz rhythms. Consequently, because he “did not believe political directives could be successfully applied to creative writing” (*I Wonder* 140), Hughes intimated to Koestler, “I gave as my reason for not joining the Party the fact jazz was officially taboo in Russia” (141).

As expected, Moscow’s political judgment on music ended up positively facilitating Hughes’s “Asiatic Black Man” moment, which took place in Central Asia where he noted that Uzbek folk musicians were as competent as African American jazz players in terms of performing the rhythmic variations that “white players somehow never master” (*A Negro Looks* 44). The dazzling Uzbek rhythms he referred to most likely fell within the classical Central Asian music genre *shashmaqām*, which borrows six (*shash*) matrices of Persian melodic modes (*maqām*) to sing out the praise of divine love in warranting universal spiritualism in life, though it was somewhat discouraged by the Soviets due to its heritage of “feudal aristocracy” (Bhattacharya 2142). Foregrounding the shared social repression of Central Asian music and jazz, both of which uphold complexities in their extemporarized musicality, Hughes’s defense of artistic freedom thus launched a two-front cultural counteroffensive. It aimed, on the one hand, at undermining white/Soviet critics’ judgment of the monotony/reactionariness of Oriental folk art and the vulgarities of jazz. On the other hand, it sought at mobilizing musical practice as a potential united front, merging the soulfully unpredictable rhythm of Black music with the Central Asian polyphony for the cosmopolitan harmony of Afro-American Eurasia—an imaginable euphonic future of a raceless world.

Although Hughes did not join the Communist Party and critiqued the Soviet state interference into the musical sphere, he still embraced the Soviet system as Soviet system as a viable and well-functioning form of governance. Upon Hughes’s return from the Brown odyssey, his sharp comparative analysis of Soviet Central Asia and the American South propelled him to conceive the vision of the United Soviet States of America (USSA)—declared lyrically as the US under Soviet government in his poem “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” (1934):

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.
 ...
 By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led
 Come together, fellow workers
 Black and white can all be red:
 Put one more S in the U.S.A. (*Collected Poems* 176–77)

Accordingly, what Hughes aspired for America was a scheme of communism-inspired governance not necessarily administered by the Communists, but shared by the people of all races, classes, and genders via their equal access to power. As such, adding an “S” to the USA and making it USSA would jazz up America’s social configuration and cultural heritage, extending a subtle glissando from the USSR’s Eurasian theme.

Lost in translation? The McCarthyist poetry trial, the cryptic poems of Hughes in Uzbekistan, and the extraordinary victimization of Sanjar Siddiq

Hughes’s poems written between 1932 and 1938 have long been regarded as “radical,” “disqualified as poetry,” or even “un-American,” due to his undernourished “self-referential” Black American identity, as charged by critics, which prompted the poet to shrink away from his own writing records in *The Big Sea* (1940) (Dawahare 21). Moreover, Hughes’s attempt to downplay his involvement in the proletarian poetry movement corresponded with his doctoring the narration of the Soviet adventures. As Letitia Guran points out, there are numerous alternations in Hughes’s retelling of his Soviet experiences in *I Wonder*, rendering the narrative less passionate about the Soviet cause, yet more factually neutral (51). David Chioni Moore further explains that Hughes’s *I Wonder* was written at the time when Jim Crow was fading into history while McCarthyism was prevailing in society. These seismic transformations in the American socio-political landscape urged Hughes to tone down his critique of the US and his admiration for the USSR, but his approbation of the Soviet endeavors in promoting racial and gender equality in Central Asia remained unabated, albeit more discreet (61).

While these interpretations are all plausible, it warrants further attention that *A Negro Looks* was published in the USSR, where Hughes might have been pressured to conform to the Soviet publishing codes, leaving his true feelings as elusive as they were nebulous. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in Hughes's writings, even before the completion of *I Wonder* in 1956, already pointed to his ambiguous political identity and led him to be summoned before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953.

Checking the McCarthy hearing transcripts against Hughes's intellectual background, a certain degree of truthfulness shines in his testimony. For example, Hughes claimed to have abandoned his pro-Soviet stance when he "began to see social progress accelerating itself more rapidly, Supreme Court decisions, FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Committee]" in the early 1940s (Senate 991). As his literary works demonstrated a tendency towards becoming less "radical" after 1938, the early 1940s might indeed have changed his previous hostility toward the US government. However, the poem "Lenin," originally published in *New Masses* (1946), indicated the resurgence of his interest in the post-WWII Soviet global expansion:

Lenin walks around the world.
The sun sets like a scar.
Between the darkness and the dawn
There rises a red star. (*Collected Poems* 318)

Nevertheless, "Lenin" (1946) was not employed as a piece of evidence during the cross-examination conducted by Roy Cohn, who served as McCarthy's chief counsel and prosecutor. Instead, he presented the poem "Ballads of Lenin" (1933) as circumstantial evidence to question Hughes's political beliefs, resulting in Hughes's mention of its fictionality to explain away any potential poetic abracadabra in calling forth world revolution: "That is a poem. One can not state one believes every word of a poem" (Senate 978).

Indeed, Hughes's sophistry had rolled in from the outset of the hearing when Cohn began to inquire into his intellectual history:

Mr. COHN. Have you ever been a believer in communism?
Mr. HUGHES. I have never been a believer in communism or a Communist party member.
Mr. COHN. Have you ever been a believer in socialism?

Mr. HUGHES. My feeling, sir, is that I have believed in the entire philosophies of the left at one period in my life, including socialism, communism, Trotskyism. All isms have influenced me one way or another, and I can not answer to any specific ism, because I am not familiar with the details of them and have not read their literature.

Mr. COHN. Are you not being a little modest?

Mr. HUGHES. No, sir. (Senate 976)

It might be true that Hughes did not read the relevant literature in detail, but his Soviet Central Asian experience deepened his understanding of the “philosophies” in relation to their applications within the Soviet system. Hughes therefore downplayed how his adventures affected his acceptance of socialism and communism, which constituted the foundation of his revolutionary poems. As Hughes only covered his life stories up to 1931 in *The Big Sea* and the Soviet publication *A Negro Looks*, which did not circulate broadly in the US, his activities in Soviet Central Asia remained obscure to most Americans until the post-trial publication of *I Wonder*, which reconstructed his odyssey with a more neutral tone. Thus, without the information about Hughes’s Soviet trip for reference, Cohn’s legalistic casuistry yielded to Hughes’s sophistry during the examination of evidence.

Seemingly, Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois was apprised of the relationship between anti-religious sentiments and Marxist themes in Hughes’s poems when he read the third stanza of “Goodbye Christ,” including “A real guy named Marx communism, Lenin Peasant, Stalin worker, me,” to suggest the poet’s possible connection with communism (Senate 981)—with additional questions seeking to establish if Hughes’s leftist thought had influenced the suspected Communist Paul Robeson, which Hughes denied (Senate 982).

Although Hughes might have had limited interactions with Robeson, his appreciation of Robeson’s songs as “truly racial” (“The Negro Artist” 34) as well as his expectation of Robeson hosting a concert in Moscow in the fall of 1933 (“Negroes in Moscow” 70) revealed that he was well aware of the singer’s political disposition. To be sure, Robeson did not come to Moscow in 1933, but he did visit the USSR at the invitation of Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein in December of the next year—to “study the Soviet national minority policy as it operates among the peoples of Central Asia” (qtd. in Duberman 186). Later in the spring of 1935, Robeson conveyed to the British newspaper *Observer* that “I am not interested in any European culture, not even the culture of Moscow—but I am interested in the culture of

Uzbekistan” (qtd. in Duberman 186). Robeson’s interests in Central Asia—and more specifically Uzbek culture—could not have been kindled unless he carefully read Hughes’s extensive publications concerning Soviet Central Asian policy and Uzbekistan in 1934. Evidently, Hughes and Robeson knew each other’s projects quite well, at least in the early 1930s.

Given the witch-hunting atmosphere steeped in McCarthyist hysteria, the suspected Hughes–Robeson connection could be perceived as a musico-literary cue for sedition. When Cohn asked, “You want to tell us you have never been a believer in anything except our form of government?” Hughes, again, “denied ever having believed in anything else” (Senate 977). Since Cohn’s interrogation took place with no prior knowledge of the USSR episode in Hughes’s life trajectory, the prosecutor could only quote the poem “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” to further question if Hughes had indeed desired the Soviet system. Hughes quickly seized the opportunity to reemphasize the poem’s fictional nature, while keeping the context of his comparison between the US South and the USSR South out of sight:

Mr. COHN. “Put one more ‘S’ in the USA to make it Soviet. The USA, when we take control, will be USSA then.”

Mr. HUGHES. Will you read me the whole poem?

Mr. COHN. I do not have the whole poem. Do you claim these words are out of context?

Mr. HUGHES. It is a portion of a poem.

Mr. COHN. Do you claim that these words distort the meaning?

Mr. HUGHES. That is a portion of a poem and a bar of music out of context does not give you the idea of the whole thing. (989)

However, the poem’s main idea was still conspicuous, compelling Cohn to explore the issue further:

Mr. COHN. At any time in your life did you desire to make the United States of America Soviet?

Mr. HUGHES. Not by violent means, sir.

Mr. COHN. By any means.

Mr. HUGHES. By the power of the ballot, I thought it might be a possibility at one time. (990)

Hughes was clearly demonstrating dishonesty, improvising a subterfuge to obscure his erstwhile pro-insurgent attitude, as the opening of his poem “Good Morning Revolution,” first published in *New Masses* (1932), reads:

“Good-morning, Revolution: / You’re the very best friend / I ever had” (*Collected Poems* 162). Cohn, knowing this poem, cited it to imply Hughes’s proclivity for “violent means” of revolution, only to end up finding the author defending himself again, saying that the revolution “means a change like the industrial revolution” and the publication of these seemingly pro-Soviet poems was serviceable to the American parade of “freedom of press” against the Communists (Senate 991, 993).

However, evidence of Hughes’s support for overthrowing the U.S. government by revolutionary means, in the spirit of the 1917 Russian Revolution, surfaced in 2002. It came in the form of six previously unknown poems that had only existed in a 1934 Uzbek translation of Hughes’s work titled *Langston Hjuṣ Ṣi’rləri* (“The Poems of Langston Hughes”) in pre-1934 Uzbek orthography (modern: *Langston Xjuṣ Ṣhe’rlari*). These poems were translated back into English by Muhabbat Bakaeva and Kevin Young and published in *Callaloo*. Moore believes that Hughes wrote those poems in Uzbekistan; and Uzbek literary figure Sanjar Siddiq, who traveled with him and unfortunately disappeared in the Great Purge, translated them to Uzbek (Hughes, Young and Bakaeva 1101).

An analysis of these poems demonstrates that Hughes, like Du Bois, regarded the Russian Revolution as a pivotal moment in world history and supported the world revolution sanguinely, as his “October” reads:

Then October
Came to clean
The world’s shoes,
To purify
The mercenary minds.
Look: here
Is a country
Where everyone shines,
Stomachs full
From their arms’ toil.
Under the Soviet sun,
The land keeps on
Growing and won’t quit
Till the Revolution
Stops the world’s turning. (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1107)

The title of the poem—“A Negro Speaks of War”—evokes Hughes’s more famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The “War” here most likely

refers to WWI, as in another poem, “After War,” Hughes mentions the post-WWI impact of the Bolshevik Revolution: “Above, / Only one flag remains, / Red / As life’s blood / . . . The red banner will ban all naivete / So the world’s workers can see” (1109). “A Negro Speaks of War” reflects the anti-war sentiments of African-Americans: “Now, I’m fed up / with all your wars— / I won’t go” (1105). It further hints at the revolutionary war as the only war worth fighting for, since its purpose was to end racism: “but if ever I do, / it’ll only be for freedom / for the Negro” (1105).

Apparently, the poem “Listen” was written to call Black proletarians’ attention to the revolution: “Listen, / You hungry, unemployed, / Lend your ear” (Hughes, Young and Bakaeva 1111). More cogently, Hughes attempted to convey to his Black fellows that Soviet Russians would stand as allies in their struggle for racial and economic equality in the poem “Ballad of the Bootblack”:

I said to the “boy” from Alabam
Do you know there’s a land
Called Russia, understand,
Where rich folks can’t
Make you starve, or worse? (1110)

Amid international and domestic skepticism surrounding the socialist revolution, Hughes wrote “To the Unbelievers”: “You don’t have to believe me, / But we are stronger” (1113). Unequivocally, in the Uzbek version of his poems, Hughes revealed his genuine respect for the first socialist state in the world, while his Soviet Central Asian odyssey only served to reinforce his belief in the final victory of socialism.

On the other side of the story, Siddiq was indeed the ideal translator for Hughes’s poems, at least for three reasons. First, Siddiq was familiar with different aspects of American literature. In his essay “Burung’i madaniyat qoldiqlari” (“The Remains of Ancient Civilization”), Siddiq introduced the American Indian lifestyle and civilization to the Uzbek audience, and he began to translate Hughes’s poems as early as in 1931 (Irzayev). Secondly, Siddiq was renowned for his translatorial expertise in not only the works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Lev Tolstoy, but also those of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin (Rahimjonov 79). He was thereby sensitive enough to capture the pregnant resonance of Hughes’s poetic themes in relation to his pro-Marxist and pro-revolutionary attitudes. Thirdly, Siddiq stuck to the method of word-for-word translation to ensure

the accuracy of the translated work, stating that “[t]ranslation is a complete copy of the work from another language” (qtd. in Xasanova 3). Consequently, Siddiq’s knowledge of America, his experience in translating revolutionary literature, and translatorial methodology all guaranteed that the Uzbek version of Hughes’s poems correspond exactly to his lost English ones in terms of content, style, sentiments, and intended meanings.

While Hughes was fortunate to survive the hearing as his far more radical poems remained undecipherable in Uzbek, Siddiq undertook the translation of Hughes’s poems right before Joseph Stalin launched the Great Purge in 1936, which drastically curtailed political, economic, and cultural freedoms throughout the USSR. From the 1920s to the early 1930s, the USSR vigorously advanced the policy of *korenizatsiia*, or “indigenization,” seeking to make the Soviet power appear “native,” “intimate,” “popular,” and “comprehensible” to non-Russian masses and to disarm the minorities’ anxieties associated with Russian rule through spreading publications and translated works in their native languages. Besides, they also promoted native cadres, who were familiar with the local sociocultural context, to administrative posts (Martin 12). This policy was duly observed in Hughes’s letter to American concert singer Noël Sullivan in 1933, where he commended the relatively liberal literary and artistic environment in which ethnic minorities could access high culture and translated literature easily:

This is the only place I’ve ever made enough to live on from writing. Poets and writers in the Soviet Union are highly regarded and paid awfully well; as a class, I judge, the best cared for literary people in the world . . . Usually ten days after a new book has appeared, not a copy can be found . . . And then come the translations into all the minorities’ languages. (*Selected Letters* 182)

Hughes later noted in *I Wonder* that he was glad that there was even an Uzbek translated version of *The Weary Blues* (159). Supposedly, Siddiq was also a translator here and the first thirty poems in *Langston Hjuṣ Şi’rləri* were taken from this volume (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1100).

Siddiq’s translation must have struck a chord in Uzbek society. His literal translation of Hughes’s works was indeed a response to the call of the cultural-ideological doctrine of socialist realism, which aimed to bring Marxism to the masses and inculcate the proletarians with optimism about class struggle through portrayals of the “heroic” working class in literature and art in the early 1930s (Kurennaya 24–25). As Lenin emphasized, the

capitalist exploitation of Central Asia epitomizes Russian imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism” (Xalfin 226, 427). Therefore, the circulation of *The Weary Blues*, concerning the Black workers’ struggle in the American South, could awaken Central Asians’ memories of the oppression of the Russian Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, when, in Hughes’s words—“they had been treated by the Russians as Negroes are treated in Mississippi” (*I Wonder* 159)—and helped to propagandize the superiority of the Soviet mode of production.

Central Asian people of all professions traditionally venerated poetry, and most people possessed some degree of poetic inclination (Thúry 6). To them, Hughes provided relatable source materials, while Siddiq’s translation rightly rendered his Brown literature “Asiatic.” The poem “Mason-Dixon Line,” translated by Siddiq and likely composed by Hughes after his visit to the Central Asian cotton fields, shows the dire conditions of Black cotton workers in the American South and could potentially elicit empathy among Central Asians who shared a similarly tragic plight under landlord exploitation:

over there stands Sir,
owner
of all you see before—
cane, cotton, corn.

And over here
backs of Negroes bend
to worn knees, picking,
hands dirtied,
empty. (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1103)

However, as Soviet collectivization failed to raise the output of cotton and resulted in famine in Uzbekistan in 1933, the same translated poem would not fulfill the Soviet propaganda purpose of fostering Afro-Asian solidarity against capitalism and imperialism. Instead, it caused Central Asians to be less ideologically “red” and to share their emotional “weary blueness” with “Negro” Americans. Subsequently, the Soviet authorities grew concerned that the sweeping dissatisfaction among minorities with the first Five-Year Plan could turn *korenizatsiia* into a force abetting ethnic separatism rather than encourage loyalty in the region. This led Stalin to radically shift the native-friendly policy to partial Russification in the early 1930s, and eventually to the Great Purge in 1936, with the firm belief that foreign

capitalist powers had been sending spies under the cover of “political refugees” and recruiting ethnic minorities for espionage (Harris 138).

Consequently, Siddiq fell victim to the red terror and was put on trial in Tashkent on August 31, 1937. His Uzbek works were found to eulogize Ottoman military commander and political leader Enver Pasha as a Pan-Turkic hero in the Basmachi Movement with the help of nationalist resistance leader Ibrahim Bek, against the blue-eyed Bolsheviks. On September 10, 1937, various translated works of Siddiq in the repertoire of the Hamza National Theater were disclosed to the public to suggest his foreign connections, resulting in his being labeled as the *xalq dushmani* (“enemy of the people”), which then led to his mysterious death in 1938—he was only rehabilitated by the USSR Supreme Court on 26 July, 1956 (Irzayev).

Curiously, Hughes never mentioned the name “S. SбDDбQ,” as appears on the cover of *Langston Hjuз Şi’rlari*, or “Sanjar Siddiq” in any of his works that touch upon the topic of Soviet Central Asia. The poet’s omission of the name could be a deliberate erasure, aiming at concealing his accidental victimization of his translator, as Hughes was accused by Cohn of supporting Stalinism in the late 1930s. Meanwhile, Arthur Koestler became disillusioned with communism and also accused Hughes of complicity: “You have signed statements to the effect that the purge trials in the Soviet Union were justified and sound and democratic. You have signed statements denying that the Soviet Union is totalitarian. You have defended the current leaders of the Communist party” (Senate 990). In this sense, Siddiq became not only a victim of Stalin, but also a casualty of the left-wing intellectual movement set off by American intellectuals—such as Hughes and Du Bois—who voluntarily betrayed their critical thought toward charismatic authority in exchange for endorsing totalitarian ideology, with its dangers intentionally glossed over. Well before Nikita Khrushchev’s rehabilitation policy, cynically speaking, the McCarthyist poetry trial had—by a stroke of serendipity—executed the delayed justice in Siddiq’s favor, about which the complete works of Hughes remain unapologetic.

Conclusion: Afro-American Eurasianism as a transfigured “double-consciousness” of an “Asiatic Black Man”

Langston Hughes traveled to Soviet Central Asia when Joseph Stalin temporarily suspended the project of world revolution to focus on “socialism in one country” and to promote Soviet nation-building projects in Central Asia. Through the emphasis on the complexion he shared with Soviet Central Asians, Hughes developed his “Brown” Afro-American Eurasian narrative,

linking the “unveiled” dance and music with Uzbekistan to amplify the emerging voice of the subaltern South. Besides, he associated youth, nationhood, and education with Turkmenistan to indicate the developmental future for “colored” people in the world and highlighted the Soviet commitment to unite Asian and European fault zones into a racially indistinct Eurasian landmass. This model of Soviet Central Asia marked a departure from the region’s history with the racist policies of Russian Turkestan and the despotic Emirate. The comparison of the USSR South and the US South further brought Hughes to sympathize with Stalin’s totalitarianism in persecuting ethnic intellectuals, including Sanjar Siddiq, in the years of red terror and led him to advocate for the United Soviet States of America as the Afro-American version of “socialism in one country.”

Unlike W. E. B. Du Bois, who welcomed the broader concept of Eurasia stretching along the west-east axis from Hungary to Manchuria as well as the north-south axis from Moscow to Yunnan, Hughes’s Afro-American Eurasianism homed in on Soviet Central Asia. Despite the publication of a purported interview with Hughes in Japanese newspaper *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, in which he praised Japan as “the destined savior of the darker races of the backward China where the armies of the Rising Sun were spreading culture,” during his transit trip from the USSR to the US, he never sympathized with Japanese imperialism, stating that “[i]n Japan, Asiatics did so [‘hurting and humiliating a group not one’s own’] to Koreans. In America, whites did so to Negroes” (*I Wonder* 275–76). Additionally, what set Central Asia apart from East Asia to Hughes was the region’s Brown liveliness, which could be interpreted in traditional folk music to echo with his spiritual attachment to the swing of jazz. Moscow’s cultural restrictions thus prevented him from acquiring Party membership. Nevertheless, Hughes did fantasize about the USSA as the USSR’s sister socialist republic.

As Du Bois’s postulation of “double-consciousness” had contributed to the archetype of the “Asiatic Black Men,” Hughes’s narrative transfigured the Eurasian experience of African Americans by zooming in Du Bois’s themes of critique of religion, secular education, modernization, socialism and communism, the search for a universal identity, as well as the narrative strategy to align themselves with Soviet Eurasia in containing or even revolutionizing the US, to articulate Afro-American Eurasianism through the nuances of “Brownness.” However radical these themes may appear, they permeate the intersectionality of the “Asiatic Black Man” identity fantasy, transform the Eurasian landmass into an echoing geopolitical corridor, wherein voices from the industrialized North, rural South, culturally exotic

Orient, and economically rational Occident enhance each other for contentions over the “color-line” problem and negotiate the ideology of Eurasianism as an intellectually, interracially, and transcontinentally shareable project.

Through the red-filtered, translucent mirror of Soviet Asia, the Eurasian experience of Afro-American intellectuals converted the region into a psycho-geographical medium that fostered the two new “un-reconciled strivings” between “an Asiatic Black Man” and “a leftist/socialist/Communist,” thus redirecting Jacques Lacan’s “formula of fantasy” with an uncertain direction: Du Bois/Hughes/Robeson $\diamond$ Soviet System/Communism $\rightarrow$ “Asiatic Black Man” oscillating between yellow/Brown Asia and red Moscow.⁵

While the intermezzo between Hughes’s Soviet Asia odyssey and the McCarthy era shelved his Brown Afro-American Eurasian narrative, the censure of Senator McCarthy and the rise of the civil rights movement provided him with the opportunity to revisit his past in *I Wonder* in 1956. Its narrative legacy was continued by Du Bois and Paul Robeson in Tashkent, Uzbek SSR in 1958, and came to fruition in Muhammad Ali’s conscious pronunciation of the “Asiatic Black Man” in 1966 as a fulmination against the Vietnam War.

The greatest irony is that Afro-American Eurasianism, as a transfigured “double-consciousness,” fulfilled the idealistic expectations of communist internationalism of closing the divide in identity crisis and racial conflicts yet created a new dilemma by making people aware of both the stretch of individual cosmopolitanism and the practical limitations of ideology. Consequently, the Afro-American Eurasian narrative eventually faded into obscurity in the wake of communism’s demise and shared the regrettable fate with those flowers kissed by the crisp fall breeze, as anticipated in Hughes’s “Autumn Thought” (1921): “Dry and withered, / Their [Flowers’] petals dance on the wind / Like little brown butterflies” (*Collected Poems* 600).

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Notes

1. This train of thought continues my previous work “‘Asiatic Black Man’: W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes in Soviet Asia Part I—The Shifting ‘Double-consciousness’ of Du Bois.” *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 134–38.
2. For Du Bois’s appreciation of Stalin, see “‘Asiatic Black Man’ Part I,” *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 126–27.
3. For the elaboration of the Lacanian split, see “‘Asiatic Black Man’ Part I,” *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 117–18.
4. See “‘Asiatic Black Man’ Part I,” *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 135.
5. For the explanation of the Lacanian “formula of fantasy,” see “‘Asiatic Black Man’ Part I,” *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 126–27.

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