

“THE NEGRO QUESTION”: RED DREAMS OF BLACK LIBERATION

*Sing a song full of the strife that the dark past has
taught us.*

*Sing a song full of the hope Communism has
brought us.*

*Facing a Red! Red! Sun of a new day begun
Let us fight on till victory is won.*

Black Communist revision of the
“Negro National Anthem,” ca. 1932

We can spot 'em a mile away. They're at every political forum, demonstration, panel discussion, and cultural event, hawking their papers bearing names with *Socialist* or *Workers* or *International* in the titles, shouting people down, hogging the microphone. They sometimes come with black, Asian, and Latino comrades, but their whiteness and often their arrogance underscore their visibility in a room full of angry black folk. They come hard, ready to throw down the gauntlet to the bourgeois nationalists, inviting everyone to join the class struggle, all the while saving their worst invective for their adversaries on the Left. Once at the mic, they don't usually identify themselves until two-thirds

into their speech and the requests to “sit yo’ ass down” begin to escalate. But we always know who they are, we tolerate their presence for the most part, and some of us even buy their papers and pamphlets. I know I did and still do. My library is overflowing with texts published by International Publishers, Pathfinder Press, and assorted lesser-known revolutionary basement presses. Sometimes you can find as much about black struggles in the leftist sectarian newspapers and broadsides as in the Nation of Islam’s *The Final Call*—certainly much more than in *Ebony*, *Jet*, or *Essence*. Police killings of unarmed African Americans, conflicts in housing projects, Klan activity in North Carolina; you name it, you can find it in the *Revolutionary Worker* or the *Worker’s Vanguard*. They even put out the writings of great black intellectuals in the form of cheap pamphlets. Why go to Barnes and Noble when you can get nicely stapled Xeroxes of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X and Sojourner Truth for a buck?

They come to black political events to spread their respective positions and to recruit. And sometimes they succeed. During the mid-1980s, I gave two years of my life as a rank-and-file member of the Communist Workers’ Party (CWP), selling *Worker’s Viewpoint*, attending study groups, writing internal position papers, and helping organize demonstrations. The CWP was especially attractive because its most visible leaders were black and Asian American. And being a self-styled intellectual, I liked the fact that CWP members read . . . and read and read. I briefly joined one study group made up almost entirely of working people in South Central Los Angeles, many of whom had earned only a high school diploma and worked full-time. My comrades were far more advanced and rigorous than most of my professors at Cal State Long Beach. They patiently walked me through Mao and modern Chinese history; introduced me to radical Pan-Africanism; critiqued my undigested Afrocentrism; and schooled me on a whole host of issues, from police repression to the relationship between local plant closings and the movement of international capital.

Even if one knows absolutely nothing of the American Left and

its history, anyone with a political bone in her body recognizes its deep, unwavering interest in the plight of black people. We have a century of black opinion as to why: They're just using black people to promote their agenda, or they're agent provocateurs sent in by the FBI. The less conspiracy-prone chalk it up to alienated white youths rebelling against their parental culture. Then there were those who regarded some on the Left as genuine revolutionaries willing to grapple with issues that established Negro leaders tend to ignore. Committed black support for left-wing movements is hard to fathom after a half-century of cold war, in which the anti-Communist confessionals of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, George Padmore, Margaret Walker, and a host of others stood in for black opinion. Although most of these authors chastise the communists for *not being radical enough*, they are usually read through an interpretive frame that can see black people only as passive victims of communist conspiracy.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize about the American Left and its intentions because it has never been a singular, unified movement. Hundreds of sectarian parties have fought each other over the correct line on China or Albania, the "Woman Question," skilled versus unskilled workers, united front versus proletarian revolt, ad infinitum. Toward the top of the pyramid of political issues has been the ever-present "Negro Question." If there is one thing all the factions of the twentieth-century American Left share, it is the political idea that black people reside in the eye of the hurricane of class struggle. The American Left, after all, was born in a society where slavery and free labor coexisted, and only skin color and heritage determined who lived in bondage and who did not. This is why the nascent Left in the United States understood the problem posed by racial divisions as the Negro Question, for these African descendants stood at the fulcrum of the nation's racial identity and political economy.

All Marxist-identified groups proposed their own answers to the Negro Question, and the best of them realized that this was no subsidiary interrogation. As one might expect, the best answers generally came from the Negroes themselves, the very objects of

the question who even today are rarely given their due as radical theorists. On the one hand, their answers offered profound insights into the political economy and cultures of the United States and the West more generally—answers that could have pushed the American Left in entirely new directions. On the other hand, the very burden of racism, nourished in a capitalist economy built on the foundation of slavery and Jim Crow, weighed like a nightmare on the brains of every generation of white working people seeking emancipation. Remember that much of their identity was bound up with *not* being a “nigger,” a savage, an uncivilized “beast of burden” presumably easily controlled by their capitalist enemies. The white Left’s inability to understand, let alone answer, the Negro Question turned out to be its Achilles’ heel. The tragedy for America, perhaps, is that these committed revolutionaries set out to save the Negro when they needed black folk to save them.

Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.

Karl Marx, Capital

The Marxist Left was officially born in 1848 with the formation of the International Workingmen’s Association, or the First International. A product of the revolutions that rocked Europe that year, the ideals of the First International were carried into America by newspapers and German immigrants who had participated in the upheaval that compelled Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to write a lengthy pamphlet called *The Communist Manifesto*. We tend to picture the 1848 revolutions and the birth of American Marxism as the story of white men in the trenches, red flag unfurled in the name of bearded and proud skilled workers. But the “colored” world remained a haunting specter in 1848: The revolution in France resulted in the abolition of slavery in its colonies, forty-four years after African descendants threw them out of Haiti and ended French slavery and colonialism there by combat. The British had abolished slavery fourteen years earlier and were still

wrestling with their Negro Question: how to turn all this ex-property into willing and docile workers for Britannia. On home soil, the Negro stood at the center of U.S. politics. The American state had just taken northern Mexico by force in its quest to rule North America from coast to coast, and the burning question of the day was whether slavery would be allowed into the newly acquired Western territories.

Most of the newly arrived German Marxists knew they couldn't run away from slavery. And as natural as nigger hating was to Jacksonian democracy, the "48ers" had not been here long enough to absorb all the lessons of American whiteness. Their communist clubs, formed in 1857—the year the Supreme Court decided in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* that black people were not citizens of the United States—were among the few political associations in the country that required members to respect all people, regardless of race or sex, as equals. Besides, Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* recognized the color line and its role in maintaining colonialism. Even more remarkable was Marx's understanding of what the West's alleged civilizing mission was all about. In the August 8, 1853, issue of the New York *Daily Tribune*, Marx wryly pointed out, "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked."

That barbarism rested with the purveyors of "civilization" rather than their colonial subjects went uninterrogated by white socialists (though the idea was taken up by black radical intellectuals in the aftermath of fascism). In fact, very few members of the growing socialist movement in the United States were willing to support racial equality, especially after the Civil War destroyed the system of chattel slavery for good. White workers looked upon freed black labor as competition willing to accept lower wages and horrible working conditions. The Socialist Labor Party (SLP), formed after the collapse of the First International in 1872, decided to organize black workers in order to solve the problem of competition. But SLP leaders believed, as did their predecessors in the First International, that once the socialist revolution

came, all race problems would disappear. SLP leader Daniel DeLeon put it succinctly: “There was no such thing as a race or ‘Negro question’ . . . there was only a social, a labor question . . . so far as the Socialist and labor movements were concerned.”

It was an odd position to take, especially by the 1890s when lynching increased, racial segregation became law, and African-American citizens who worked so hard for the Republican Party in the days of Reconstruction were suddenly disfranchised. Of course, black people fought back, joining unions of farmers and workers, forming armed self-defense organizations, and building religious, fraternal, educational, and political institutions that ultimately became sources of power and inspiration for the stony road ahead. A handful found hope and possibility in an interracial socialist movement. In 1901, the Socialist Party of America, the crown jewel of the Second International, was launched after the demise of the SLP. The Second International’s social democratic politics proved more broad based and popular than the socialism of its predecessors, but its approach to the Negro Question remained unchanged: Racism was merely a feature of capitalism—kill the latter and the former would wither away.

The socialists limited the Negro Question largely to the black male proletariat, leaving the struggles of black woman out of the discourse altogether. Although August Bebel’s *Women under Socialism* provided a radical framework for understanding women’s oppression, the Woman Question was restricted to whites only. Socialists were silent on the disproportionate numbers of black women in the labor force, the racist character of the early birth control and suffrage movements, stereotypes of black women’s sexuality, or the ways in which race hindered women’s solidarity. In fact, the most prominent black woman radical of the late nineteenth century, Lucy Parsons, wrote eloquently about the oppression of women and the working class, but ignored race. Parsons was a member of the socialist-oriented Workingmen’s Party who was also attracted to anarchism for its emphasis on cooperative organization of production without profit, eliminating the state, and direct action. She published articles in the revolutionary socialist press about lynching and the Woman Question, but she

never put the stories together. Lynching, in her view, was merely a class question; a black man is lynched in Mississippi because “he is poorer as a class than his white wage-slave brother of the North.” Thus, following the classic socialist logic, racial violence would disappear once capitalism was overthrown. And the same went for women. In 1891 she published a series of articles on rape, divorce, and marriage for *Freedom: A Revolutionary Anarchist-Communist Monthly*, which argued that women’s oppression was merely a function of capitalism. Parsons believed that sexism, like racism, would disappear with the construction of a socialist society.

I do not want to take anything away from Parsons, for she was one of the brightest lights in the history of revolutionary socialism, but she operated strictly within the confines of nineteenth-century Western socialist thought. Outside these left circles, however, there were radical black women whose own analysis of America connected the dots between women’s oppression and the color line. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was not a socialist, but she linked lynching, rape, and the maintenance of the color line to the oppression of all women. A year after Parsons wrote her series in *Freedom*, Wells-Barnett published a major study of lynching that exposed how the myth of the black rapist allowed Southern white males to demand subordination and deference from white women in exchange for their “protection.” So-called chivalry, in other words, was about the protection of white women as property in order to maintain the purity of the race. According to the ideology of white supremacy, a white woman desiring a nonwhite man was inconceivable, so any such encounter was presumed to be rape. On the flip side, all sexual encounters between white men and black women were not only presumed to be consensual but initiated by the black woman. The virginal white woman and black rapist dialectic also produced the myth of the promiscuous black woman. By defending the racial integrity of black manhood (i.e., destroying the black-man-as-rapist myth), Wells-Barnett simultaneously affirmed the virtue of black womanhood and the independence of white womanhood.

By the early part of the twentieth century, a few independent black intellectuals began to gravitate toward the socialist movement and brought a distinctive radical analysis with them. The prodigious W. E. B. Du Bois spent a year (1911–12) in the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and had worked closely with white socialists who had joined him as founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910. Yet before his association with the SPA, Du Bois had helped found the radical, all-black Niagara Movement, and in that context began to analyze how race and class worked together to sustain capitalism, imperialism, and racism in the modern world. As early as 1906, Du Bois argued that the imposition of the color line on a world scale, whether in the form of Jim Crow or colonial rule, “transferred the reign of commercial privilege and extraordinary profit from the exploitation of the European working class to the exploitation of backward races under the political domination of Europe.” The “colored” laborer, therefore, was the key to socialism’s success, and even before joining the party Du Bois warned that Marx’s vision could not be realized without the black worker, and that the black worker would not come unless the socialists launched a full assault on racism. The racism of white workers, he argued, blinded them to their class interests; rather than see workers of color as allies, they treated them as enemies to be fought, feared, and Jim Crowed. Dissatisfied with the Socialists’ response and seeing some potential in Woodrow Wilson’s presidential campaign, Du Bois left the party.

Harlem Socialist Hubert Harrison went even further than Du Bois in his criticisms of the SPA. He not only insisted that his party make antiracism and the organization of black workers a top priority, but he also supported black nationalism and the development of autonomous black institutions. He formed the Colored Socialist Club in 1911 and remained a stalwart critic of the SPA’s position (or lack thereof) on the Negro Question until his expulsion in 1914. With the outbreak of World War I, the implications of colonialism and the global color line for the working-class movement became all the more apparent to both Harrison

and Du Bois. As socialists outside the socialist movement, they watched in horror as the white working class in Europe and the United States embraced nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. In Du Bois's words, they were "practically invited to share in this new exploitation, and particularly were flattered by popular appeals to their inherent superiority to 'Dagoes,' 'Chinks,' 'Japs,' and 'Niggers.'" Nevertheless, Du Bois believed that the fight to save democracy was so important that he called on black folk to "close ranks" in support of the war, despite its clear imperialist motives. Harrison was not interested in détente. Echoing Du Bois's characterization of World War I as a conflict over "the lands and destinies of the colored majority in Asia, Africa, and the islands of the sea," Harrison simultaneously opposed the war and promoted a worldwide rebellion against all the Western colonizing nations. By the war's end, rebellion was everywhere, even in Harlem.

Don't mind being called "Bolsheviki" by the same people who called you "nigger."

Unsigned comment in *The Crusader*, June 1920

The dream of international working-class solidarity crumbled on the battlefield, where the proletarians of Europe and America traded in their red flags for the flags of their respective nations. The exception was some of the peasants and workers in Russia, who were simply too poor and frustrated to fight for their ruling classes. Instead, they launched a revolution and backed Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, which eventually seized power in 1917 and pulled out of the "war to end all wars." The Bolsheviks established a Third International and gave birth to the worldwide Communist movement. For black folk looking for radical alternatives to American socialism, Lenin turned out to be something of a friend. Despite his distance from American soil, he took a special interest in black people, in part because most Russian workers and peasants were also divided and oppressed by nationality and ethnicity.

If the Third International, or the Comintern, proved more sympathetic and sensitive to the racial nature of American class struggle, it is largely because black folk made it so. The momentary crisis of “Western civilization” caused by the chaos of war, worker rebellions, anticolonial uprisings, postwar racial violence, and talk of “self-determination for oppressed nations” contributed to the dramatic explosion of the Garvey movement and a new generation of “New Negroes” advocating a radical fusion of socialism and “race politics.” In 1917, Socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen launched the *Messenger*, a new magazine dedicated to radical socialism and black freedom. Its essays and poetry graphically portrayed racist violence and black resistance. Randolph and Owen also published editorials supporting Irish nationalism, women’s suffrage, and the Russian Revolution, which they initially called “the greatest achievement of the twentieth century.”

A year later, a new organization arrived on the Left bloc calling themselves the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB). A secret underground organization founded by the Caribbean-born editor Cyril Briggs, the ABB published *The Crusader*—originally the organ of the nationalistic Hamitic League of the World. Its leaders might be best described as militant black-nationalist Marxists; they advocated socialism but the heart of their agenda was armed self-defense against lynching, universal suffrage, equal rights for blacks, and the immediate end to segregation. Some, like W. A. Domingo, worked for both the socialists and the Garvey movement. Although a few women such as Grace Campbell and Bertha de Basco held important posts, the ABB presented its membership as black Bolsheviks and manly redeemers of the race willing to defend their communities to the death. *The Crusader* was imbued with a martial spirit, thus echoing the Garveyite *Negro World* and its constant appeals to militarism and manhood redemption. Moreover, they criticized President Woodrow Wilson for not applying the concept of self-determination to Africa, and during the “red summer” of 1919 when angry white mobs attacked black communities in several cities, founder

Cyril Briggs demanded “government of the Negro, by the Negro and for the Negro.” The ABB was a unique experiment in black Marxist organization; ABB leaders had secretly joined the Workers (Communist) Party very soon after the Brotherhood was founded.

These New Negro radicals challenged traditional socialist logic by insisting that struggles for black rights were inherently revolutionary. But the newly formed (and sharply divided) American Communist movement wasn’t down with the program. Like the Socialists before them, the Workers Party initially believed that “the interests of the Negro worker are identical with those of the white” and that black nationalism was “a weapon of reaction for the defeat and further enslavement of both [blacks] and their white brother workers.” Comintern officials, however, sided with the other “brothers.” Even before the Bolshevik victory, Lenin had begun to think of a strategy for dealing with “national minorities” in the event of a successful socialist revolution in Russia—a multinational creation of czarist imperialism. He proposed a union of socialist republics that gave nations within this union the right to secede. No matter how this might have worked in practice, in theory Lenin was saying that all nations had a right to self-determination, and that the working class was not just a conglomeration of atomized proletarians but possessed national identities. After the war, Lenin expanded his theses to include the colonies, which he regarded as oppressed nations. In 1920, with the assistance of Indian Communist M. N. Roy, Lenin drafted his famous “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,” insisting that the “communist parties give direct support to the revolutionary movements among the dependent nations and those without equal rights (e.g., Ireland, and among American Negroes), and in the colonies.”

Lenin’s injunction shocked the U.S. Communist movement and invited America’s black Bolsheviks to speak with authority. After a half-century of being seen and not heard in national leadership circles, black radicals found a podium and an audience in the new headquarters of international Communism. One of the

most important figures to take advantage of the Soviet bully pulpit was Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born writer of the Harlem Renaissance whose poem “If We Must Die” became the unofficial anthem of the New Negro movement. Thanks to the groundbreaking scholarship of William Maxwell and Winston James, McKay’s role in the formation of Comintern policy has been recognized as larger than previously thought. He made his way to the Soviet Union in 1922, just in time to be an unofficial delegate to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern. The Soviets were so fascinated with Negroes that he and the Communists’ official black delegate, Otto Huiswoud, were treated like celebrities. When McKay addressed the Congress, he put the question of race front and center, criticizing the American Communist Party and the labor movement for their racism and warning that unless the Left challenged white supremacy, the ruling classes would continue to use disaffected black workers as a foil against the revolutionary movement. In the end, McKay’s point was clear: The Negro stood at the fulcrum of class struggle; there could be no successful working-class movement without black workers at the center. Otto Huiswoud also addressed the Congress, emphasizing the incredible racism black workers confronted back home in the South and the role that Garveyism played as a force against imperialism worldwide. The Comintern responded immediately, forming a Negro Commission and committing resources to recruiting black cadres and supporting black liberation on a global scale.

Comintern officials were so impressed with McKay’s speech that they asked him to expand it into a small book, which was published in Russia under the title *Negry v Amerike* (1923) and eventually translated as *The Negroes in America*. This little book profoundly shaped Comintern policy on the Negro Question, offering a revisionist approach to Marxism, the implications of which we have yet to fully comprehend. Drawing on his observations as well as the writings of other Harlem radicals, such as Hubert Harrison and W. A. Domingo, McKay argued that race and slavery were the heart and soul of the nation, repeating his point

that only a commitment to black freedom could ensure socialism's success in the United States. For McKay, a commitment to black freedom also meant support for self-organization and self-determination. Rather than attack black nationalist movements for not being "class conscious," McKay called on the Left to support them. Why? Because the overwhelming racism made it difficult for black folk to think like a class; instead, they saw the world through colored glasses. He wryly observed, "the Negro in America is not permitted for one minute to forget his color, his skin, his race."

Delving into the psychology of race, class, and sexuality, McKay's analysis went much further than even his new friends in the Comintern dared to go. In a chapter titled "Sex and Economics," he concluded that the viciousness of white racism, which cut across class lines, could be partially explained by the white proletariat's "unusual neurotic fascination with the naked body and sexual organs of Negroes." Although this idea was underdeveloped, McKay hit on something traditional Marxism was ill equipped to deal with: the role of sex in the racial economy of the nation. McKay even resuscitated Ida B. Wells-Barnett's analysis of lynching and chivalry, arguing that the myth of the black rapist oppressed not only the entire black community but white women as well: "The white man who parades his chivalrous views of a woman . . . says to a white woman, 'You are under my protection and I can not trust you not to have relations with a colored man.' Thus, the white man directly confesses the white woman to be weak, and immoral in sexual conduct in her relations with a Negro man." In the end, he placed much of the responsibility on feminism to challenge racism directly, to challenge the black rapist myth and to defend women's virtue if they chose to have relations with black men.

McKay turned out to be much too critical for the American Communists and they soon parted company. And no matter how many resolutions were passed in Moscow in 1922, American Communist leaders were reluctant to go along with the program and generally distrusted Marcus Garvey and his appeals to race

pride. They even foolishly attempted to take over the UNIA! When that didn't work, the Communists (now the CPUSA) founded their own black organizations—first, the short-lived American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) in 1925, and later the League of Struggle for Negro Rights in 1930, headed by none other than Langston Hughes. In 1928, once again as a result of black initiatives, the Comintern adopted its most radical position to date on the Negro Question. Promoted by Harry Haywood (née Haywood Hall), the Nebraska-born black Communist who had come through the ranks of the ABB, and South African Communist James LaGuma, the Comintern passed a resolution recognizing Negroes in the “black belt” counties of the American South as an oppressed nation. As a nation, like the Lithuanians or Georgians of the old Russian empire, they had a right to self-determination. They could secede if they wanted, perhaps even form a Negro Soviet Socialist Republic, but they were not encouraged to do so. The resolution, not surprisingly, met fierce opposition from white, and some black, party leaders, but for several black Communists it confirmed what they had long believed: African Americans had their own unique revolutionary tradition and their interests were not identical to those of white workers.

The Negro is nationalist to his heart and is perfectly right to be so.

C. L. R. James, “*Letter to Constance Webb*,” 1945

The new slogan did not persuade black Communists to attempt to seize Mississippi and secede from the United States, nor did it bring black folk to the Party in droves. Those who did join were attracted to the CPUSA's fight for the concrete economic needs of the unemployed and working poor, its militant opposition to racism, its vigorous courtroom battles on behalf of the “Scottsboro Boys” (nine young black men falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama), and its active support and promotion of black arts and culture. Nevertheless, “self-determination” did create an opening for African Americans to promote race politics

in spite of the Party's formal opposition to "Negro nationalism." In 1929 the Party launched the *Liberator* under the editorship of Cyril Briggs. Like the *Crusader* before it, the *Liberator* nurtured something of a black nationalist literary movement. Ironically, Stalin's mechanical definition of a nation, which embraced a "community of culture" as a central concept, reinforced the modern nationalist idea that the basis of nationhood was a coherent culture. Independently of Stalin, however, the proponents of Negritude were also searching for that essential Negro or African culture that could lay the basis for Pan-African identity. Stalin's notion of a community of culture merely provided a Marxist justification for black Communists to join the search for the roots of a national Negro culture. As William L. Patterson, the outstanding attorney and Harlem Renaissance supporter turned Communist, wrote in 1933, the African-American nation was bound by a common culture: "The 'spirituals,' the jazz, their religious practices, a growing literature, descriptive of their environment, all of these are forms of cultural expression. . . . Are these not the prerequisites for nationhood?"

The Central Committee of the CPUSA was not interested in Patterson's question, nor was it promoting nationhood for black people, or for anyone for that matter. By 1935, the self-determination slogan was abandoned in order to build a "popular front" against fascism. Even the Comintern bracketed the Negro Question and pushed its American cadre to build alliances with liberals and mainstream labor leaders. Yet the power of the idea lingered precisely in the cultural realm Patterson was addressing. In 1937, Richard Wright, then the Communist Party's black literary giant, published his infamous "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which he observed that "the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom." Even before Wright's proclamations, Communists of all colors promoted black folk culture as implicitly rebellious, if not the true expression of an oppressed nation.

During the Popular Front, the Party's view of black culture shifted even further, embracing a broad range of black art and

artists as not only inherently progressive but also profoundly American. Leftist critics, for example, had long promoted the idea that jazz represented the most profoundly democratizing culture the nation possessed—an argument we now associate with ex-Communist Ralph Ellison. Jazz permeated Communist Party events during the 1930s, and some of the first serious jazz critics got their start writing for the *Daily Worker* and other Communist publications. The Communist press became one of the biggest promoters of black theater, music, dance, and the plastic arts. As black artists began working for the federally funded Works Progress Administration in the late 1930s, a dynamic black woman named Louise Thompson became the Party’s critical liaison linking black popular culture and Harlem’s literati with Communist Popular Front politics. In 1938, for example, she and Langston Hughes organized the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, sponsored by the International Workers Order, which produced works by black playwrights. The Party’s high visibility in antiracist causes attracted more than a few bigwigs in the black entertainment world. Count Basie, W. C. Handy, Lena Horne, Andy Razaf, and Canada Lee performed at Communist-organized benefits, and the circle of black writers orbiting the Communist Left included Ralph Ellison, Sterling Brown, Chester Himes, Countee Cullen, Margaret Walker, Owen Dodson, Arna Bontemps, Frank Marshall Davis, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Dorothy West, the pioneering cartoonist Ollie Harrington, as well as the usual suspects, Hughes, McKay, and Wright.

One can certainly argue that the Communists fetishized black culture, but their reasons differed from the corporate entities who had taken Langston’s “blues and gone.” Black radicals forced the white Left to see and hear differently, and they and a few white rebels heard in the sounds and movements and writings the birth of a utopian future rising out of the abyss of racism and oppression. In this regard, no one played a more pivotal role in demonstrating the revolutionary potential of African-American expressive culture than Paul Robeson.

Son of a prominent minister, all-American athlete, honors

graduate of Rutgers University, star of stage and screen, and a brilliant concert singer to boot, Paul Robeson was on the road to becoming the richest, most famous Negro of the century. But in 1927 he and his wife, Eslanda Goode, moved to London and during their twelve-year sojourn were radicalized by their face-to-face confrontation with European fascism as well as by their meetings with British socialists and future leaders of the African, Caribbean, and Asian anticolonial movements. Robeson performed benefit concerts for British trade unions and learned firsthand of the wretched conditions of the English working class. He and Eslanda also toured the Soviet Union, whose people and history he came to admire even if he harbored private doubts about Stalin and his policies. The fact that the Soviet Union offered material support to anticolonial movements and backed democratically elected republican Spain against General Franco's fascist-backed armies further endeared Robeson to the Soviet Union and the Left more broadly.

This is only part of the story, for Robeson's radicalization cannot be summed up as simply a leftward migration into the orbit of international communism. As historian Sterling Stuckey convincingly argues, Robeson was drawn simultaneously toward a radical black cultural nationalism. A product of the American racial order, Robeson needed no political lessons about racism or the plight of his people back home. Nor did he need to be lectured on the resilient spirit of black people and the culture they had created to survive slavery and Jim Crow. What he did come to terms with in Europe was the deep cultural bonds between Africa and its diaspora. He and Eslanda enrolled in Ph.D. programs at the London School of Oriental Studies to study African culture (only Eslanda would complete her doctorate in anthropology). Robeson studied several African languages and planned to undertake a thorough study of West African folk song and folklore. As he wrote in a 1934 article in the London *Spectator*, his goal was to introduce the world to the beauty, power, and dignity of African and African-descended art. "I hope to be able to interpret this original and unpolluted [African] folk song to the West-

ern world and I am convinced that there lies a wealth of uncharted musical material in that source which I hope, one day, will evoke the response in English and American audiences which my Negro spirituals have done.”

He even understood himself to be “African,” both culturally and spiritually, and he saw in black cultural values the foundation for a new vision of a new society, one that could emancipate not only black people but the entire West. Indeed, Robeson’s cultural analysis became the basis for a radical revision of the Communist Party’s idea of self-determination.* Even as he became more deeply attached to the CPUSA, he supported an independent black radical movement grounded in the cultures and beliefs of the folk. As he wrote in his classic book, *Here I Stand* (1958),

The power of spirit that our people have is intangible, but it is a great force that must be unleashed in the struggles of today. A spirit of steadfast determination, exaltation in the face of trials—it is the very soul of our people that has been formed through all the long and weary years of our march toward freedom. . . . That spirit lives in our people’s songs—in the sublime grandeur of “Deep River,” in the driving power of “Jacob’s Ladder,” in the militancy of “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” and in the poignant beauty of all our spirituals.

That spirit, he insisted, was the key to the freedom of all humanity, particularly in the United States. Historically, black people had expanded democracy and rescued the United States from undemocratic forces, and black people had served as something of the moral conscience of the nation.

During the 1940s and 1950s, as the FBI, Senator Joe McCarthy, and various anti-Communist “witch hunters” dogged Robeson’s every step, he reminded his audiences of “the important role

* The story of the Party’s shifting positions is too complicated to go into here. It suffices to say that in 1946 and 1947, when the Party experienced its own internal crisis with the expulsion of General Secretary Earl Browder and his replacement with William Z. Foster, the “black belt” slogan was resurrected as a reassertion of the extreme left wing, but it was hardly promoted, and dropped out as quickly as it had been readopted.

which my people can and must play in helping to save America and the peoples of the world from annihilation and enslavement.” He told black labor leaders in Chicago: “In the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Negro soldiers who took up arms in the Union cause won, not only their own freedom—the freedom of the Negro people—but, by smashing the institution of slave labor, provided the basis for the development of trade unions of free working men in America.” In other words, black self-determination was not simply a matter of guaranteeing democratic rights or removing the barriers to black political and economic power, nor was it a matter of creating a nation wherever black people found themselves to be an oppressed majority. It was about promoting and supporting an independent black radical movement that could lead the way to a revitalized international working-class assault on racial capitalism. Of course, Robeson was simply refining a version of an ongoing idea promoted by the ABB, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, and others we’ve met. It was an idea echoed, too, by Robeson’s friend, the Trinidadian Marxist and radical Pan-Africanist C. L. R. James, despite the fact that he aligned himself with the Communist Party’s arch enemies, followers of Leon Trotsky. In 1948, James wrote,

This independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party. We say . . . that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights.

Even within the orbit of the Communist Party, Robeson found a few like-minded comrades who believed that an independent black movement was decisive for the success of a socialist revolu-

tion. Trinidadian-born Communist Claudia Jones took this idea further than everyone else, insisting that black women were a decisive group because they experienced capitalist oppression as Negroes, women, and workers, and thus their emancipation would result in the emancipation of all women and men. In her 1946 article, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,” she argued, “The Negro question in the United States is *prior* to, and not equal to, the woman question; that only to the extent that we fight all chauvinist expressions and actions as regards the Negro people and fight for full equality of the Negro people, can women as a whole advance their struggle for equal rights.” In other words, the overthrow of class and gender oppression depended on the abolition of racism. For the women’s movement to be successful, she insisted, antiracism must be at the forefront of its agenda and black women must play leadership roles.

Whereas for Claudia Jones the structural position of black people—black women in particular—in the political economy placed them in the vanguard of the revolution, for Paul Robeson it was their culture that gave the black movement its special insight and character. In many ways, Robeson drew on a very old biblical tradition of “choseness” that stretched from nineteenth-century black nationalists such as David Walker to W. E. B. Du Bois to his later contemporaries like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Black folk were the chosen people, the soul of the nation whose redemptive suffering would bring salvation. But Robeson’s talk of black spirit or even Negro spirituals was not necessarily rooted in the Bible. Rather, it came from his understanding of African culture, the peculiar history of enslavement in the modern world, and most importantly, a critique of Western civilization. In a 1936 article titled “Primitives,” Robeson took the Enlightenment tradition to task in an implicit attempt to explain the rise of fascism, which he saw as proof of “civilization’s” utter failure. “A blind groping after Rationality,” he mused, “resulted in an incalculable loss in pure Spirituality. Mankind placed a sudden dependence on the part of his mind that was brain, intellect, to the discountenance of that part that was sheer evolved instinct and intuition; we grasped at the shadow and lost the substance . . . and now we

are not altogether clear what the substance was.” The answer, he believed, was to make art and spirituality primary to social life, as it had been in the ancient world and as it continued to be in the folk cultures of Africa. He was convinced that American Negroes were in a unique position to make this happen, not only because they embodied many of the core cultural values of their ancestral homeland but because they represented the most self-conscious force living in the belly of the beast. They knew the West and its culture; they knew modernity and its limitations; their dreams of freedom could overturn a market-driven, warmongering rationality and give birth to a new humanity.

Again, Robeson was not alone in his critical assessment of Western civilization, especially in the aftermath of World War II. The horrors of Nazi genocide forced all thinking people, including black intellectuals all over the African diaspora, to take stock. As Cedric Robinson argued, a group of radical black intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, George Padmore, Ralph Bunche, Oliver Cox, and others, understood fascism not as some aberration from the march of progress, an unexpected right-wing turn, but a logical development of Western civilization itself. They viewed fascism as a blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted not only in capitalist political economy but in racist ideologies that were already in place at the dawn of modernity. Du Bois made some of the clearest statements to this effect: “I knew that Hitler and Mussolini were fighting communism, and using race prejudice to make some white people rich and all colored people poor. But it was not until later that I realized that the colonialism of Great Britain and France had exactly the same object and methods as the fascists and the Nazis were trying clearly to use.” In *The World and Africa* (1947), he writes: “There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”

In other words, the chickens had come home to roost. The Holocaust that resulted in the murder of six million Jews was merely the most vicious manifestation of Europe's colonial policy. Although Jews did not occupy the same position held by colonial subjects in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, Du Bois and Robeson recognized that this act of mass genocide was not a “white-on-white crime.” They understood anti-Semitism as a racist ideology and knew that it was embedded deep in the fabric of Western culture. Unfortunately, neither Du Bois nor Robeson nor anyone else with a continuing commitment to the Left had anything to say about Stalin's atrocities—the political assassinations, the gulags, the Soviet state's hidden war against political dissidents and Russian Jews. Although it is not clear who knew what before Khrushchev unveiled these crimes to the world in 1956, the silence that followed these revelations is one of the great tragedies in the history of the Communist movement.

The other great tragedy, for the black freedom movement in particular, was the silencing of radical leadership. Robeson, Du Bois, and Claudia Jones were among the many victims of state-sponsored anticommunist witch hunts. Jones was imprisoned in 1951 under the Smith Act, which essentially outlawed membership in the Communist Party. After serving four years, she was deported to England, where she spent the remaining ten years of her life as a political activist. The federal government revoked Du Bois's and Robeson's passports and the FBI tapped their telephones and dogged every step they took. Du Bois was arrested in 1951 for his involvement in the Peace Information Center and charged with treason and conspiracy, though the charges were subsequently dropped. Dr. Du Bois was deemed such a significant threat to national security that federal marshals handcuffed him; he was just a few days shy of his eighty-third birthday. Established black middle-class leadership also turned a cold shoulder to both men, criticizing Robeson in particular for suggesting that black people ought to struggle for peace rather than wage war on the Soviet Union. In an effort to offset Robeson's criticisms of U.S. foreign policy and discredit him, the House Un-

American Activities Committee (HUAC) brought out Jackie Robinson, the first black player in major league baseball, to testify against Robeson. Although Robeson spoke eloquently on behalf of civil liberties and African-American rights before HUAC, he was labeled a “Red” by the state, and the label stuck. This event marked the beginning of his downward descent; by the end of the 1950s, Robeson’s career had been pretty much destroyed. He had trouble securing bookings (especially during the period when his passport was revoked), fell into a deep depression, and eventually suffered a nervous breakdown.

Cold War repression did not stop the movement, however. Inside the belly of the beast, black radical leaders began working actively in support of anticolonial movements. Robeson, Du Bois, Alphaeus Hunton, Shirley Graham (soon to be Du Bois’s wife), William L. Patterson and Louise Thompson Patterson, writer-playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and others began actively backing anticolonial movements in Africa and the Caribbean. Du Bois and Robeson headed the Council on African Affairs to promote and support the African nationalist movement. They appealed to the UN to demand independence for the colonies, including South-West Africa, which had been placed under South Africa’s “trusteeship.” And they brought the international struggle home. In 1951, they submitted a petition to the UN, with support from the Civil Rights Congress—a left-leaning national civil-rights organization akin to the old International Labor Defense and led by William L. Patterson—charging the United States with genocide and violation of human rights. They cited, among other things, the continuation of racist terror in the South, segregation, joblessness, poverty, police violence, and disfranchisement. The petition did not get very far, however; American representatives used their influence to block the Human Rights Commission from even discussing it.*

*This was not the first such petition submitted to the UN. In 1946, as soon as the UN established its Commission on Human Rights, W. E. B. Du Bois, on behalf of the National Negro Congress, presented a petition on behalf of the entire black world seeking “relief from oppression.” It emphasized issues like poverty, schooling, housing

But the efforts of the Civil Rights Congress were just the beginning. After 1954, the Southern freedom movement rose with such force that it shocked white supremacists and liberals alike. The streets of Montgomery, Birmingham, New Orleans, and even Jackson, Mississippi, began to look like Johannesburg and Durban, South Africa. Nothing could stop these movements, not even the jailing and deportation of suspected Communists, the outlawing of the NAACP, or the general suspension of civil liberties. Nevertheless, it was clear to all that the next wave of black radicalism would not be the same. Decolonization and the Chinese Revolution meant that there were new kids on the historical bloc, new sources for political imagination, and new prospects for freedom.

conditions, high black mortality rates, and segregation, and it linked the conditions of African Americans with that of the colonized world. Less than a year later, the NAACP submitted its own petition. Du Bois was also central to this effort: submitted on behalf of fourteen million black people, the petition was endorsed by black organizations and leaders from around the world. The 155-page document titled “An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United States for Redress,” was a detailed list of grievances against the U.S. state. See Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48–58. See also William L. Patterson, *The Man Who Cried Genocide: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and United States Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 167–297; Hollis R. Lynch, *Black American Radicals and the Liberation of Africa: The Council on African Affairs, 1937–1955* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Center for Research in Africana Studies, 1978); and Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988).