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Democracy, Diaspora, and Disillusionment: Black Itinerancy and the Propaganda Wars

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Bachelor of Arts, Clark Atlanta University, 1999

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Abstract

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By Jessie LaFrance Dunbar

Democracy, Diaspora, and Disillusionment investigates the manner in which black writers contributed in a variety of ways to what I term propaganda wars by comparing the United States to Russia and Cuba. I trace the tensions between the newly democratic American government and Tsarist Russia, Communist Russia, and Socialist Cuba as well as the multiplicity of responses to these ideals resulting from three eras: the antebellum period, the First Red Scare, and the Second Red Scare. As a result of their largely unsuccessful attempts to establish national and political diasporic communities, these authors face full-on disillusionment in even the most “egalitarian” environs.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter	
1. Democracy v. Despotism: <i>Unintended Objectivities in the Narratives of Nancy Prince and Nicholas Said</i>	6
Marriage and Mobility: <i>Nancy Prince and the Geography of Containment</i>	16
Our Faith, Our Country, and Our People: <i>Nicholas Said and the Power of Cultural Capital</i>	33
2. “Black and White” and Read All Over: <i>the Moscow Movie, the American Press, and the Promise of a Political Diaspora</i>	52
3. Where Diaspora Meets Disillusionment: <i>Panther Politics in Castro’s Cuba</i>	81
Conclusion.....	117
REFERENCES.....	121

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, Diaspora, and Disillusionment: *Black Itinerancy and the Propaganda Wars*

This project focuses on implications of international travel for African and African American people during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argue that in writing comparatively about the United States the subjects of this exegesis, whether highly or lesser political figures, contribute in a variety of ways to propaganda wars between the United States and Russia and subsequently the United States and Cuba. To be clear, the term ‘propaganda wars’ describes political campaigns of defamation – directed at Russia and Cuba on the parts of the white American press as well as disillusioned black writers – and praise launched in the United States.

The study considers race, gender, and communist politics central to both the overall comprehension of the propaganda wars between the newly democratic American government and Tsarist Russia, Communist Russia, and Socialist Cuba as well as the multiplicity of media responses to these issues during three eras: the antebellum period (1789-1860), the First Red Scare (1919-20), and the Second Red Scare (1947-57). Entire monographs have been written on the subject of black propagandist literature in general, but very few scholars have given much attention to the relationships between African American revolutionaries and two of their major influences: Russia and Cuba.

To understand the contributions of the writers I have chosen, it is important to summarize the periods and some of the trends the texts reveal. The first section deals with the antebellum period in the Americas. In an effort to distinguish itself from the oppressive English monarchy, the nascent American government was determined to exalt the ideals of democracy. However, the United States government received tremendous criticisms from other nations for the inherent hypocrisy between laying claim to human beings as property and democratic ideals. Russians’ progressive and outspoken position on the subject of African enslavement caught the attention of various people of African descent seeking more egalitarian environs.

The first chapter emphasizes what I call ‘unintended objectivities’ in the narratives of Nancy Prince and Nicholas Said. Though they have no overt political agendas in the composition of their narratives, Prince’s and Said’s depictions of and contrasts between Russia and the U.S. – where opportunity, education, and culture are concerned – read as advertisements to the black community of the potentials for financial success and racial acceptance in Russia that are unavailable to them in America. This outcome is largely unintentional on the part of Prince – who means to characterize St. Petersburg as a city overrun with sinners, and Said – who intends to portray the American South as far more welcoming to people of African descent than rumors would suggest. I use the term objectivity specifically because in the Russia segments of their texts both authors seem to be reporting on external realities to the degree that, with few exceptions, they divest themselves of any racial subjectivity throughout their treatments of Russian culture. Conversely, the American sections of the narratives focus extensively on race and inequality.

Chapter two explores one of many African American responses to the failed democratic project – namely Communist sympathizing and the pursuit of a political diaspora. The first Red Scare informs the experiences of Louise Thompson Patterson, Langston Hughes, and other members of the Moscow film group as it coincides with the overthrow of the provisional, Duma-run government by Bolshevik revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks were generally viewed as an extremist group and had very little popular support when they began serious efforts to overthrow the government in April 1917. By October, the Bolsheviks’ popular base was much larger; though still a minority within the country as a whole, they had built up a majority of support within Petrograd and other urban centers. After October, the Bolsheviks realized that they could not maintain power in an election-based system without sharing power with other parties and compromising their principles. As a result, they formally abandoned the democratic process in January 1918 and declared themselves the representatives of a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Shortly after the end of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the first Red Scare took hold in the United States. A nationwide fear of communists, socialists, and anarchists gripped the

nation. Innocent people were imprisoned for expressing their views, civil liberties were ignored, and many Americans feared that a Bolshevik-style revolution was at hand. During the war, a fervent patriotism was prevalent in the country, spurred by propagandist George Creel, chairman of the United States Committee on Public Information. While American boys were fighting the "Huns" abroad, many Americans fought them at home. Anyone who defied U.S. ideals was suspect. It was out of this patriotism that the Red Scare took hold.

In this climate Patterson and Hughes along with roughly eighteen other African Americans travelled to Moscow to film *Chernye i belye* or *Black and White*. Though the filming was to take place in Russia, the movie itself was set in the contemporary American South. Had it not been cancelled two months after the group arrived in Moscow, the film would have exposed Jim Crow practices to the world, and would portray African Americans realistically rather than stereotypically. The second chapter does much to explain African Americans' attraction to communism and socialism as well as foregrounding the anti-Russian/anti-communist campaign championed by American journalists. Where the first chapter argues for the bankruptcy of American democracy so far as people of African descent are concerned, this chapter advances the discussion to consider the possibilities of a political diasporic community. To be sure, many African Americans wanted full inclusion into American society. After centuries of rejection many began to consider the merits of developing a "nation" of political, often communist, allies. A number of the Moscow film sojourners belong to this group of hopefuls.

The final propaganda war, which I take up in the third chapter of my dissertation, builds on the previous chapters inasmuch as it provides an analysis of one possible, but frequent, outcome of the pursuit of a political diasporic community. Chapter three is situated within the context of the Second Red Scare which occurred after World War II – coinciding with fear of communist espionage as a consequence of a Soviet Eastern Europe. Exacerbating communist fear in America was the growing membership of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), and American officials' confessions of spying for the Soviet Union. Simultaneously Fulgencio Batista, head of the Cuban

government, had begun transforming Cuba into a society that was more palatable to the U.S. The existence of Cuban Communism threatened Batista's relationship with the American government. In 1955, Batista organized the Bureau of Repression of Communist Activities. Incensed by the possibility of the imperialist American government having a foothold in Cuban politics, a group of young idealists, led by the unapologetically anti-American Fidel Castro, overthrew the existing Cuban government. Black American revolutionaries, especially the Black Panthers, found an ally and role model in Castro, and forged what they assumed to be a symbiotic political relationship. Over time, however, multiple members of the Panther Party as well as Fidel Castro himself were left feeling disillusioned as a result of a mutual misunderstanding between the two camps. The crux of this discussion is my argument that national and racial nuances problematize these otherwise common-sense alliances. Specific to this chapter, the centrality of race to the Panthers' agenda is discounted by Castro just as Castro's insistence on nationhood over racial identification in Cuba is dismissed by certain members of the Black Panthers.

I read these texts through Stuart Hall's renowned talk, "Race, the Floating Signifier," which advances the argument that race "operates more like a language than a biology," that skin color is a marker or "signifier," which carries meaning in a given culture. Hall's observations provide a lens through which any racialized subject might be examined, but they resonate especially with the texts of black cosmopolites. My work is also in conversation with Paul Gilroy's 1993 monograph, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy suggests that the experience of exile "whether enforced or chosen, temporary or permanent" is generally associated with "a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes ... 'race' itself."¹ What he terms "the Black Atlantic" is defined "through this desire to transcend ... the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."² While Gilroy establishes a useful language for my exploration of a new nationhood, I do not believe that said pursuit reflects a desire to transcend the structures of race or nationality. In fact, I

³ Dvoichenko-Markov, Eufrosina, "The American Philosophical Society and Early-Russian-American Relations," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94.6, 6 Dec. 1950, 549.

³ Dvoichenko-Markov, Eufrosina, "The American Philosophical Society and Early-Russian-American Relations," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94.6, 6 Dec. 1950, 549.

find that blackness and “American-ness” are fundamental (and understood to be so) to the worldviews of the subjects of my work.

For two reasons I employ the language of economy in my conclusion. First, it is impossible to discuss socialism or communism without engaging Marx, and class struggle necessitates a discussion of economics. Secondly, it is my contention that African American people were recognized by the leaders of these countries as commodities who could further their national propagandas. Russia and Cuba understood African American people to be products (of their environments), which they could import to their countries and simultaneously export their own political messages.

Democracy v. Despotism:

Unintended Objectivities in the Narratives of Nancy Prince and Nicholas Said

Benjamin Franklin's name appeared in Russian periodicals in 1752 in connection with his discovery of electricity.³ Though a cooperative intellectual exchange was the basis for early contacts between the two countries, it was politics – specifically anti-imperialist sentiment – that would complicate the relationship between Russia and America. Eufrosina Dvoichenko-Markov's important archival work on the American Philosophical Society (APS) and Early Russian-American Relations outlines the developing relationship between Russia and America through correspondence between Russian tsars and members of the American Philosophical Society.

Peter the Great ruled jointly with his brother Ivan from 1682 until Ivan's death in 1696. Without the limitations of a cooperative governing, Peter was able to begin an aggressive system of reform from 1696 until 1725 when he died of a severe urinary tract infection.⁴ Peter⁵ expanded Russian territory and ushered in a more modern type of monarchical rule. He looked to Western Europe for a working model of autocracy, and found that a Grand Monarchy – one with no reliance on traditional councils or national assemblies – would permit him to both secure absolute power and encourage enlightenment thinking among his subjects.⁶

³ Dvoichenko-Markov, Eufrosina, "The American Philosophical Society and Early-Russian-American Relations," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94.6, 6 Dec. 1950, 549.

⁴ John Hughes, *The seizures of Peter Alexeevich. Epilepsy & Behavior* (10:1). 181–182.

⁵⁵ According to historian Allison Blakely, Peter the Great was instrumental in increasing the African presence in Russia. "He hired at least one black servant, one sailor, and an artist among several hundred foreign workers he took back to Russia... It would have been consistent with Peter's general practice to deliberately seek out Negroes for his service... it was in one such group of prospective court servants that Abram Hannibal, the maternal great-grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, was brought to the tsar from Amsterdam." In addition to his direct hand in importing black servants to his court, Peter facilitated the immigration of blacks to Russia when he moved the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg as a "window into Europe." This window provided a "main channel of access into Russia that Negroes could use once they learned of opportunities there. Allison Blakely, "Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought, (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1986): 13-16.

⁶ According to historian Michael Karpovich, "In the course of the eighteenth century the Russian autocracy became thoroughly westernized. It was now a Grand Monarchy of the same type which had arisen in Western Europe during the first centuries of the modern period. It stood in particularly close relationship to the German monarchies of the

His 1698 journey to Western Europe is said to have influenced his decision to open his country to English and French ideas. During his trip, Peter visited the Royal Society in England, which “was the focus of the entire scientific world.”⁷ In 1717 he continued his observation of learned European societies, arriving in Paris to be greeted by the French Assembly of Science and ultimately elected a member. Immediately upon his return to Russia Peter ordered that a similar academy of science be organized. In February 1721 the tsar funded a research trip for Johann Daniel Schumacher, advisor and future secretary of the Russian academy, to visit and model the scientific societies in Paris, London, and Berlin Thus the Russian Academy of Sciences, founded upon “several of the best scientific bodies abroad, very soon achieved the enviable position of ranking as one of the highest among the very Academies which had helped bring it into being.”⁸

Just as Franklin piqued the interest of the Russian intelligentsia in 1752, so would he be responsible for American curiosity toward Russian thinkers. Franklin founded the APS in 1743. Although it was not until 1771 that the APS thought it prudent to establish formal connections with “the most important learned societies of Europe,” APS members began corresponding with the head of the Russian Academy as early as 1765.⁹ According to the Society’s minutes, of February 22, 1771 a list of scientific societies was reported in order of importance and The Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg was fifth on the list.

The Russian fascination with America shifted, especially amongst a growing class of liberals, from intellectual inquiries to political as a result of the American Revolutionary War. Catherine the Great, who ascended the throne in 1762, greatly admired Peter’s westernization project and was determined to continue modernizing Russia throughout her reign. Unlike Peter, however, Catherine was

Hapsburgs and the Hohenzolerns...Its ideal was a ‘regulated state’ – an essentially western conception – and it liked to attribute to itself a civilizing mission within the boundaries of the Empire. Michael Karpovich, *Imperial Russia 1801-1917*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1932): 8.

⁷ Dvoichenko-Markov, 550.

⁸ As Riasanovsky notes, the academy ordered by Peter came into existence shortly after Peter’s death. Riasanovsky, 551.

⁹ Dvoichenko-Markov, 550. Ezra Stiles, rector of Yale College, wrote to renowned Russian scientist, Michael Lomonosov, concerning mercury and “thermometrical observations.”

forced to approach Russo-American exchange with trepidation. Benjamin Franklin, who had been so instrumental in establishing a milieu of cooperation during Peter's reign, came to represent danger under Catherine's regime.

Russian liberals were becoming increasingly bold at the influence of American revolutionary ideals. For example, Nikolay Ivanovich Novikov, generally heralded as the pioneer of Russian journalism, published an article in *Supplement to the Moscow News* (1784) providing a brief sketch of the life of George Washington. The controversial article closed with the following observation:

Rome had its Camillus, Greece had its Leonidas, Sweden – its Gustav, England – its Russel and Sidney. These glorious heroes cannot compare with Washington. For he established a Republic which of course will be the asylum of liberty for those fleeing from European decadence and abuses.¹⁰

Catherine had humored Novikov in his early career, going so far as to create her own weekly magazine, entitled *Vsyakaya Vsyachina*, which oftentimes responded to Novikov's satirical articles on Russian social customs. By the time Alexander Radishchev, a contemporary and friend of Novikov, published *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) – which openly quoted the “anti-royal inscription on one of the French portraits of Benjamin Franklin – ”¹¹the French Revolution had broken out (1789), and Catherine began to deem this type of rhetoric treasonable. As she witnessed the decade-long collapse of Absolute monarchy in France, Catherine's penalties became increasingly severe. Novikov was sentenced to life imprisonment in Shisselberg and Radishchev was exiled to Siberia.¹²

Her feelings toward revolution notwithstanding, Catherine recognized the necessity of maintaining amiable relations with colonies that sought independence from Great Britain. Historian Daniel P. Murphy observes some of the ironies inherent in the development of Catherine's 1780 Act of Armed Neutrality:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 554. The inscription, in translation reads: He snatched the lightning from the hands of the gods and the scepter from the hands of the tyrants.

¹² Raffaella Faggionato, *A Rosicrucian Utopia in Eighteenth-Century Russia : the Masonic Circle of N.I. Novikov*, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands : Springer, 2005).

...it was the British government that first tried to involve Catherine in the American war...the British turned to Catherine as a potential purveyor of mercenaries, hoping to hire a number of her battle-tested regiments. Catherine refused to sell her soldiers... When France and Spain went to war with Britain, they became avid consumers of Russian naval stores...The British used their naval power to try to halt the flow of these vital resources to their enemies. British warships stopped and searched merchantmen flying the flags of neutral countries, seizing goods they deemed contraband. This British arrogation of maritime authority injured the pride as well as the pocketbooks of the neutral states... Catherine resented British interference with Russian trade, and interest and policy coincided as she seized on an opportunity to extend Russian influence in Europe.¹³

Though Catherine refused to trade with American revolutionaries, the Act of Armed Neutrality encouraged the American government with its outline of the rights of free trade between neutral nations and those at war with Great Britain. Coincidentally Catherine entrusted the task of drafting the act to Franz Epinus, a German natural philosopher who “belonged to that group of foreign scientists, who were invited by the Russian Academy of Science to pursue their research in Russia and train Russian scholars in Western- European methods.”¹⁴ Epinus was well-known amongst members of the APS, especially Benjamin Franklin who had begun corresponding with Epinus regarding his work on electricity and magnetism in 1758.

Despite Franklin’s problematic political influence in Russia, Catherine could not ignore American intellectual contributions to the Russian Enlightenment.¹⁵ So, when the French scholar, Court de Gébélin asserted that all languages had a common origin, the empress set out to position Slavic languages within the spectrum of linguistic development. As there were no diplomatic relations between Russia and America, Catherine reached out to French and American Revolutionary War General Gilbert du Motier,



¹³ Daniel P. Murphy, *The Everything American Revolution Book: From the Boston Massacre to the Campaign at Yorktown* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2008): 175-188.

¹⁴ Dvoichenko-Markov, 551-2.

¹⁵ Of note is the fact that Princess Catherine Dashkov, close friend of Catherine the Great, was appointed Director of the Academy of Sciences and became founder and Director of a special philological academy called *Rossiskaya Akademiya*, proposed the induction of Franklin into the Russian Academy the very year that the French Revolution had begun. In a sort of recondite quid pro quo, Franklin extended to Dashkov admission into the APS in April of 1789, making her the first female member of the Society.

Marquis de Lafayette. The General solicited the assistance of both Washington and Franklin, both of whom provided information concerning American Indian dialects.¹⁶

The next time this type of collaborative intellectual exercise would occur between Russia and America the implications would be far more political. When her son, Paul I, succeeds Catherine (despite the widely accepted rumor that she had every intention of passing him over in favor of Paul's eldest son, Catherine's grandson, Alexander), the Russian nobility exacts a successful plot to assassinate and replace Paul with Alexander I. According to *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* (1904), Alexander I solicits Franklin's assistance in "drawing up a Constitution for the Russian people."¹⁷ So, it is no surprise that American politicians and Russian citizens alike erroneously anticipate that tsarist Russia will become a republic when Alexander ascends the throne in 1801.

Much critical attention has been paid to the complex and enigmatic  Alexander I – most of which focuses on the manner in which his childhood circumstance impacted and informed the character of his twenty-four year rule.¹⁸ To be clear, Catherine the Great's open hostility toward Alexander's father, Paul I, forced young Alexander to hone his abilities to maneuver successfully between his father and grandmother.¹⁹ Thrust to the throne after the murder of his father, Alexander and his actions are inconsistent, contradictory, and apparently at times even duplicitous. He is at the helm of Russia during its historic defeat of Napoleon. The victory in 1812 is a pivotal moment in the formation of modern Russian national identity. 

¹⁶ Ibid., 560.

¹⁷ Ibid., 561.

¹⁸ Of course the childhood to adulthood continuums were central to the research of Alexander's character and the contradictions between his rhetoric and his reign. Within larger fields of study, Alexander I is most widely known for his defeat of Napoleon.

¹⁹ The rift between Catherine and her son began in 1774 with Paul's drafting of *Reflections on the State in General*. Among other things Paul suggested a complete reform of Russia's military, one of his key points being the employment of the military solely for the purposes of defense and a renunciation of wars of aggression. Catherine read Paul's "credo" as a veiled criticism of her policies and refused him a seat on the Imperial Council. See Iurii Alekseevich Sorokin, "Paul I," *The Emperors and Empresses of Russia: Rediscovering the Romanovs* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996): 184-5.

While Peter the Great was undoubtedly responsible for opening Russia to the western world, Alexander appears to have had a hand in beginning the propaganda war between Russia and America. After the sudden death of Alexander I in 1825 the American press began questioning the rumors of imminent revolution. In an article entitled “The Political Condition of Russia,” *The Christian Watchman* Reports:

Undoubtedly much more has been made of what are called ‘the conspiracies’ in Russia, than fact will authorize. It has too long been the policy of its ruling powers to suppress the investigation of civil and religious freedom; and the apprehension from such a discussion of principles has been the most sharp-sighted and suspicious, in all those governments which have been the most absolute and tyrannical. Russia is one of these despotisms; and the dread of revolution, which had undoubtedly perplexed the mind of the deceased Alexander, has recently, even in the commencement of his administration, excited the terrors and vexed the head of Nicholas, but just feeling the weight of his crown and the cares of empire. He seems, however, to be pursuing a course, which will be unpropitious to the tranquility of his reign. His endeavors to suppress political discussion and the spread of religious knowledge will probably increase the desire to examine and to know; and it may not be at a very distant day...²⁰

Thomas Jefferson had been in close contact with Alexander during his reign, suggesting – at the request of Alexander himself – several texts for the purpose of understanding American politics.²¹ Alexander had even gone so far as to request Jefferson’s assistance with drawing up a constitution for the Russian people.²² F. M. La Harpe, a swiss republican had been brought to Russia for the sole purpose of serving as young Alexander’s tutor, which led the Russian people to believe that the emperor would be a liberal ruler. Prince A. A. Czartoryski, a member of the Russian aristocracy recalls Alexander espousing some rather radical views during a secret meeting. Czartoryski recalls Alexander saying that he:

Hates despotism...[and] loves liberty alone, to which all people have identical rights, that he had been following the French Revolution with keen interest, that, while he condemned the Revolution’s horrible excesses, he wished the Republic success and

²⁰“Political Condition of Russia,” *Christian Watchman*, Sep 15, 1826: 166.

²¹ According to a missive to Dr. Joseph Priestly in the *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Jefferson suggested *Propositions Respecting the Foundations of Civil Government*, *Sketches of the Principles of Government*, and *Federalist*. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Ford Edition, 1897 : 179.

²² Eufrosina Dvoichenko-Markov. “The American Philisophical Society and Early Russian-American Relations,” *Proceedings of the American Philisophical Society*, 94.6 (Dec 22, 1950): 561.

rejoiced in it, ...that he wished to see republics everywhere and acknowledged this form of government to be the only one consistent with the rights of humanity, ...that a hereditary monarchy was an unjust and absurd institution, and that supreme power ought not be conferred on the basis of the accident of birth but by the vote of the people, who would know how to elect the person most capable of governing a state.²³

There remained a large gap between “his words and his deeds, his demagogic declarations and his actual policies...[which] may be explained by the indubitable influence of the contradictory policies of Catherine II’s ‘enlightened absolutism,’ where fashionable liberal and enlightened ideas accorded well with reactionary, absolutist feudal practice.”²⁴ Alexander was anything but a reformer. Despite his comments and gestures to the contrary, Alexander fell in line with the one policy that both Catherine and Paul could agree upon: the necessity of the absolute empowerment of the monarchy.

If Alexander intended to mislead the American intelligentsia and his Russian subjects into believing his liberal rhetoric, Nicholas I felt no compunction to espouse his support for anything that did not place the royal family at the paramount position within the Russian hierarchy. Public opinion both within and outside of Russia reflected a drastically different categorization of the two emperors, though their actual policies were not so different.

After his accession to the throne, Nicholas turned Russia into a police state wherein everyone was subject to a panoptic gaze. Educational institutions shifted from promoting cooperative and enlightened systems of exchange to maintaining “the existing order and ...stamp[ing] out all liberal encroachments upon it.”²⁵ Nicholas had expressed a desire to continue to foster Russia’s relationship with America, in keeping with the sentiments of his late brother Alexander, but James Buchanan, the American Ambassador to Russia during Nicholas’ rule, believed that the Russians “know but little of our country and probably desire to know still less, as they are afraid of the contamination of liberty.”²⁶ Nicholas’ brand of propaganda differed from his brother’s inasmuch as he encouraged his subjects to

²³ V. A. Fedorov, “Alexander I,” *The Emperors and Empresses of Russia: Rediscovering the Romanovs* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996): 219-20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁵ Dvoichenko-Markov, 574.

²⁶ *The Works of James Buchanan* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1908): 197.

express a fierce nationalistic pride, rejecting ideals and thoughts outside of Russia. In his memoir Buchanan recounts an interaction between his guide, Nicholas Gretch, and some orphaned Russian schoolgirls – an interaction which strongly reflected Nicholas’ policies:

Mr. Gretch made a little address in Russian to one of the female classes...He informed them that I was the minister of the United States, a great and powerful republic. That the people there were very well educated and well informed; but that every person had to labor. That their government was a good one; but no paternal emperor existed there, who would become the father of orphans and educate them at his own expense. He concluded by impressing upon their minds how grateful they ought to be to the emperor, and how much a monarchical government ought, on this account, to be preferred to a republic.²⁷

In Nicholas’ defense, most of his policies resulted from the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 which began with a number of soldiers belonging to the Russian guard who refused to take the oath of allegiance to Nicholas, preferring to support his older brother Constantine instead. Constantine had renounced his right to the throne when Alexander died; however, the rebels refused to accept the renunciation. Within the first hours of his reign, Nicholas was charged with the duty of putting down the insurrection. Nancy Prince, who arrived in Russia at the end of Alexander’s reign, witnessed the changing of the guard and vividly recounts the event in her narrative:

Constantine was then king of Poland, he was next heir to the throne, and was, unanimously voted by the people, but refused and resigned the crown in favor of his brother Nicholas. The day appointed the people were ordered to assemble as usual, at the ringing of the bells; they rejected Nicholas; a sign was given by the leaders that was well understood, and the people great and small rushed to the square and cried with one voice for Constantine. The emperor with his prime minister, and city governor, rode into the midst of them, entreating them to retire, without avail; they were obliged to order the cannons fired upon the mob; it was not known when they discharged them that the emperor and his ministers were in the crowd. He was wonderfully preserved, while both his friends and their horses were killed. There was a general seizing of all classes, who were taken into custody. The scene cannot be described; the bodies of the killed and mangled were cast into the river, and the snow and ice were stained with the blood of human victims; as they were obliged to drive the cannon to and for in the midst of the crowd, the bones of those wounded, who might have been cured, were crushed. The cannon are very large, drawn by eight horses, trained for the purpose. The scene was awful ...²⁸

Her presence in St. Petersburg during such an important historical moment positions Prince in a unique and profitable position as a travel writer. Her lengthy description of the failed Decembrist plot is not

²⁷ Ibid., 356.


²⁸ Prince, 31.

overwrought with contextual detail, which suggests that her American readers have an expressed interest in and basic knowledge of the proceedings of the Russian imperial court.

Indeed, a different image of the events surrounding the revolt was published in a March, 1830 edition of *The Albion*, an “American Journal of News, Politics and Literature.” In this sarcastic treatment of events Nicholas does no entreating nor is there any obligation to fire upon the crowd. Rather, Nicholas’ ascension to the throne is described as a “fatal day,” which occurred to the “utter exclusion” of Constantine. The rebels are not described as insurgents so much as the manner of their deaths is detailed: “many lost their lives, many were condemned to lose their heads, and some hundreds retired to the resort of the best society in Russia – Siberia.” The overall purpose of the article, according to the author is to give some “insight into the easy manner of disposing of some of the Czar’s subject [sic], and the difficulty of finding out what becomes of your friends, when once the Police and the Government are kind enough to take them into their paternal keeping.”²⁹

Transitioning from observations of Russia’s military to examples of the country’s overall backwardness, the author goes on to observe that

“however brave the soldiers may be, some of the heads of the various departments are equally deficient in brains ... With all the increasing power of the Russians, in the way of arms, they show little inclination to improve in comforts. In the beginning of 1828, a gentleman was dispatched from [America] on a speculation, which was to convey water to the tops of houses, and to give Russia an idea of cleanliness. The whole concern fell to the ground; and the only answer given was, that in the event of the plan being carried into execution, they knew not how to employ the slaves now used to convey water. Neither would the Government lend any assistance, either by word or money, to light the city by gas. Some years ago an attempt was made, but by mismanagement the gasometer blew up, and this quite discouraged farther attempts.”³⁰

Neither Prince, Nicholas Said, nor any of the American ambassadors to Russia during the nineteenth century noted the type of backward, barren landscape that the anonymous author of this piece sets forth. The reality that Prince experienced greater freedom and opportunity in a country that was characterized by a rigid social  tem and despotic government casts more doubt on the American democratic project than it does on tsarist Russia.

²⁹ *The Albion*, Mar 27, 1830: 8, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

There can be little doubt that American news sources reflected the sentiments of its highest ranking members.³¹ Mitchell Stephens' article, "History of Newspapers," situates the conflicted role of pre-revolutionary periodicals within the now long-standing traditions of news reporting when he says:

American newspapers in the years leading up to the American Revolution represented something the world had never before seen: a press committed to challenging, even overthrowing, governmental authorities. This remains an unusual and difficult position for newspapers to take. Unlike pamphlets or broadsides, newspapers must appear regularly. Their publishers cannot hide from authorities, and, as proprietors of an ongoing business, they usually have a stake in the stability of the community and therefore in preserving the power of authorities. This tends to make newspapers conservative forces, more likely to try to unify the members of a community than to try to incite them to anti-authoritarian violence. One explanation for the uncharacteristic role the papers played before the American Revolution is that they were in fact unifying and supporting a community -- a new community that was forming within the British Empire, of Americans. These newspapers were in a sense loyal to the authorities -- the new authorities who had appeared on the continent: the Sons of Liberty. Most historians agree that the American Revolution would not have happened when it did without the efforts of these colonial newspapers.

Stephens is correct. The new community of authorities included men such as James Buchanan, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams – all of whom had communicated with and formulated opinions about the Russian royal families. Certainly their categorization of Nicholas' policies as propagandist and equally anti-American and Pro-Russian would have carried weight amongst a curious American populace.

American perceptions of Russia take a drastic turn for the worst when Nicholas I takes the throne after Alexander dies in 1825.

The relationship between Russia and America was tenuous for some time preceding the cold war. On the heels of the French Revolution, Russian monarchs became increasingly uncomfortable with the possibility of democracy spreading to Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the American government enjoyed the luxury of passing judgment on Russian imperialism without feeling the threat that provoked Nicholas I's reactionary governing. American hubris, however, led the US government to feel a false sense of security,

³¹ I cannot reference even half the articles which reflect this tone of American superiority to Russia. *The Globe*, later called *The Washington Globe*, tended to be in perfect alignment with the opinions of the executive branch of the American government and has similar articles. Multiple black news sources iterate a similar anti-Russian sentiment, though black writers tended to focus more on the disgrace of serfdom and monarchy in general.

for the narratives of Nancy Prince and Nicholas Said underscore the type of restlessness that prompted the European revolutions. Whether consciously or not, both authors interrogate the dialectic thesis of democracy while representing Russia as a place where black people could enjoy opportunity and bounty.

Marriage and Mobility: *Nancy Prince and the Geography of Containment*

In 1790 the Russian social critic, Alexander Radishchev published his controversial book *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*. Not among the most radical of his ideas was the notion that “The Europeans, having laid waste to America... these malicious preachers of meekness and love of mankind, added to their cold-blooded murder the purchase of slaves.” Deprived of their homes and families, Radishchev observes, the “unfortunate victims” of the Niger and Senegal were “moved to lands unfamiliar to them to till the fields of America under a heavy iron yoke” (Blakely 29). It is one of the earliest known publicly expressed opinions on the subject of the African slave trade in Russian history. Though Russia was “highly conspicuous” for its lack of involvement in the slave trade, largely because it had no vital stake in that particular mode of commerce, its progressive and outspoken position on the subject is what caught the attention of multiple African Americans seeking a more egalitarian environment. Nancy Prince and Nicholas Said were two such emigrants. Prince’s *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* not only extends important research on “the Black Atlantic” to include the experiences of black people in the Far East, it also provides a nuanced comparison between issues of race and gender in imperial Russia and the democratic United States.

The Russian government’s lack of involvement in the African slave trade was hardly a reflection of its moral opposition to enslavement. With this absolute power, the government had solidified a rigid social organization. Atop the social ladder was the Russian nobility, largely comprised of ex-military men and the “old feudal aristocracy.”³² Exempt from “personal taxation, compulsory military service,

³² Karpovich., 9.

and...corporal punishment”³³ nobility also enjoyed the exclusive right to own serfs – which is precisely the reason that imperial Russia had no stake in the African slave trade. As with slavery, the institution of serfdom eventually created a codependent relationship between peasant and landlord. By their very existence, serfs perpetuated the economic and social authority of the noble class while economic fluctuations encroached on what little independence the peasant class maintained, thereby increasing their dependence on the land owners.³⁴ Moreover, “peasants were the largest group of taxpayers in the country and they alone were able to furnish the labor which was necessary for cultivating the lands of the ‘military service men.’”³⁵ Fearful of migration, the autocratic government established laws to force peasants to literally remain on the soil they tilled. That seemingly minor detail, in fact, was the subject of much discourse amongst American abolitionists as well as being a major disparity between Russian serfdom and American slavery.

Another major difference between the two institutions was Peter the Great’s ‘Table of Ranks,’ which ordered nobility according to the office they held rather than their inheritance of position at birth. In theory, the ranking system permitted peasants to

rise to official rank, and, by the fact of his becoming an officer, he became *dvorianin* (noble)...Those who served the Sovereign were thus divided into three departments, the Army, the State, and the Court...There were fourteen classes, or degrees of official rank (*chin*), corresponding, in every department, like the rungs on a triple ladder. The list was headed by a Field-Marshal on the Military, and a Chancellor on the Civil side; immediately below these two, we find a General, beside a Privy Councillor, and so it goes on till we come to a Standard-Bearer and a Departmental Registrar, at the bottom. The same order of precedence was extended to families of officials – the wife shared her husband’s rank, and the daughter of a first-class official, so long as she remained unmarried, held the same rank as the wife of one of the fourth class.³⁶

In practice movement from the lower class to the gentry proved far more difficult than the table suggested it would be. Merit was not always recognized for the purposes of promotion, and, according to author of

³³ Ibid., 9.

³⁴ There was a significantly less “important” middle class between the peasants and noble classes. By the end of the 1700s peasants comprised 94.5% of the population, the middle class 3.5%, the nobility and the clergy each constituted 1% of the population. Ibid., 12.

³⁵ Ibid., 11

³⁶ K. Waliszewski, *Peter the Great*, London: William Heinemann, 1898: 452.

Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia, Orlando Figge, the eighteenth century was largely characterized by revolt against the service ethic, and on a larger scale revolt against the rigid social hierarchy that had resulted from the ranking system.³⁷ It is important to note that upward mobility after Peter's 1722 Table of Ranks was difficult, but not impossible. Hannibal was a shining example of the possibilities available to members of the peasant class, for he entered Peter's employ as a servant or serf and climbed to the position of General – thereby shifting his status from peasant to nobleman.

Alexander I – the emperor incumbent when Prince arrives in St. Petersburg – recognized the need to abolish serfdom. However, his inheritance of the throne resulted from the assassination of his father, Paul I, whose policies were largely unpopular amongst the noble class. The very real threat of falling into disfavor with nobles by relieving them of low cost labor tempered Alexander's willingness to exact change. By 1823, when Prince and her new husband arrive, Alexander and the Empress Consort, Elizabeth, are suffering from life threatening ailments. So, addressing issues of class inequality was hardly a matter Alexander wished to contend with.³⁸

Though her narrative proves instructive on the subjects of Russian politics and culture in general, Prince is decidedly less interested in the lot of Russian serfs, who she describes as “slaves” subject to extreme degradation. She is far more concerned with the oppression of American slaves. Unlike American slaves, serfs are “not suffered to separate families or sell them off the soil.”³⁹ In fact, in the opening paragraph of her autobiography Prince pays homage to her grandfather who was “stolen from Africa” and who, despite his enslavement, “fought for liberty.” Prince's subtle comparison between serfdom and enslavement underscores a greater concern with forced migration resulting from racial prejudice – a point that will be explored later in this exegesis. The opening paragraph also emphasizes the fact that Prince's life and travels are inextricably linked to a very particular genealogical narrative.

³⁷ Orlando Figge, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002: 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-19

³⁹ Nancy Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, Boston : The Author, 1856: 38

The contiguity of her narrative to that of her enslaved grandfather's is quite apparent as she shifts from a preoccupation with his literal bondage to a thematic discourse on the confinements of blackness, womanhood, and poverty in antebellum society. As a freeborn black woman Prince's freedom quest, though physically trying, is largely a psychological venture.⁴⁰ Time and again, Prince's psychological growth is obstructed by her physical surroundings and challenges. When her stepfather dies, her "young and inexperienced" mother suffers a mental breakdown which forces the barely adolescent Prince to rise to the position of matriarch and primary wage-earner for her family. She nearly succumbs to the harshness of the only work for which she is presumed to be suited: domestic, slave-like labor.

"Sabbath evening," Prince reports, "I had to prepare for the wash; soap the clothes and put them into the steamer, set the kettle of water to boiling, and then close in the steam, and let the pipe from the boiler into the steem [sic] box that held the clothes. At two o'clock, on the morning of Monday, the bell was rung for me to get up... they said I was too slow, and the washing was not done well; I had to leave the tub to tend the door and wait on the family, and was not spoken kind to, at that."⁴¹

This moment in the text serves both to unveil the hypocrisy of Northern whites, who were so often praised in slave narratives for their kindness and progressive mindsets, and to debunk the myth that people of African descent are "built" for hard labor. For Prince, there is a notable delineation between servant and slave. Refusing to be taken for the latter, she quits her "sanctimonious" employers and returns home to her unraveling family.

Her family is clearly the greatest source of distress for Prince. Far from subtle, her emotional and psychological need to create distance between her narrative and those of the women in her family speaks to Prince's desire for advancement through self-improvement. Her mother is presented as a foil to Prince's character, specifically because she represents certain stereotypes of blackness and womanhood

⁴⁰ According to Susan Bowers, Toni Morrison, "the process must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the psychological trauma created by their brutality. The physical escapes ... create the patterns for their psychological escapes: archetypal journeys of courage, descents into almost certain death, and rebirths into beauty and freedom." "Beloved and the New Apocalypse," *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, David Middleton, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

⁴¹ Prince, 7.

that Prince deemed morally unacceptable. For example, her mother's marries five times in hopes of achieving financial support from her spouses. The mother of eight, "her labors [are engaged] excessively in biological reproduction" and not at all in wage labor.⁴² Prince marries once yet supports herself; she bears no offspring, but labors excessively to house and educate orphans and ex-slaves. In sharp contrast to her mother, youth, inexperience, and poverty do not paralyze Prince. On the contrary, in childhood she vows that "when [she was] large enough [she] would go away" to escape the various forms of gendered bondage in her community.

But escape was not particularly easy for poor black girls. In her *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, the historian Stephanie Camp observes that "in different periods and in various parts of the South [slave] women consistently made up a small minority of those who ran away to permanent freedom..."⁴³ For women, family responsibilities and gender norms imposed a secondary level of captivity within the construct of what Camp terms geographies of containment, or the temporal and spatial practices of restraint employed by the dominant class. "The geography of containment," Camp suggests, "was somewhat more elastic for men than it was for women, in large measure because the work that provided opportunities to leave the plantation was generally reserved for men." Thus, bondswomen did not receive passes, and were rarely, if ever, permitted to "learn the lay of the land, roads, and waterways."⁴⁴

These restrictions extended far beyond the realm of chattel slavery in the southern part of the United States, however. For instance, Prince's younger brother George successfully follows in the path of his father and grandfather, taking to the sea at a young age to help Nancy support the family. But when Prince's mother marries for the fourth time, both Prince and her brother are fearful that the union might produce more children. George is so disappointed that he "shipped again to return no more," thereby

⁴² Cheryl Fish, *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives : Antebellum Explorations* (Florida : U P of Florida, 2004), 39.

⁴³ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

leaving Nancy alone to provide for her mother, her siblings, and her indolent stepfather. Camp's observations on passes carried by slave men translate quite well within the context of Prince's narrative. George receives a social "pass," which enables him to travel freely and to abandon his familial responsibilities. Even Prince, who suffers for it, does not fault her brother for his departure. Rather, she seems to envy him.

To be sure, Prince's opportunity to take to the sea was virtually non-existent due to the rules of feminine propriety to which she subscribed. Cheryl Fish, a leading authority on women's travel narratives, posits that "women who traveled or worked outside the home were associated with sexuality."⁴⁵ The dangers associated with traveling unprotected as an African American woman in a society where blackness is a marker for servitude, and where women could be subjected to physical violation must have factored into Prince's decision to wed and depart with a well-respected, if much older, seaman and member of the Russian palace guard, Nero Prince.⁴⁶

If physical escape is meant to foreshadow that of the psychological, Prince's detailing of the conditions under which her brother departs is telling. Though she does not condemn George for his abandonment, she certainly does not present his as an "archetypal journey of courage," so much as an act of self interest. Her sea voyage, however, is an act of self-preservation, daring, and resistance. The early part of her narrative evidences Prince's reverence toward the seafaring men in her family, and that she, in fact, has no female role models. Between the lines of the text is a discernable desire to achieve masculine mobility without compromising feminine respectability. Nero Prince provides precisely the opportunity she seeks. It is no surprise, then, that she textually replaces any semblance of courtship and romanticism with the following emotionless statement of facts: "September 1, 1823, Mr. Prince arrived from Russia. February 15, 1824, we were married. April 14, we embarked on board the Romulous ... bound for

⁴⁵ Fish, 37.

⁴⁶ Charles Wesley's study on the Prince Hall Masonic Society reports that Nero Prince "was a black cook who sailed to Russia in 1810 and remained as a butler for a noble family." It seems by 1824 he had caught the eye of Alexander and been invited to serve as a member of the palace guard. Charles H. Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington: United Supreme Council, Southern Jurisdiction, Prince Hall Affiliation, 1977), 20-23.

Russia” (15). What is stunning is the manner in which she phrases her decision to depart, Prince had “made up her mind to leave her country.” An interesting use of metonymy, she conflates the dysfunction of her family with the failures of American society as a whole. Prince underscores the bankruptcy of American egalitarianism when she arrives in Russia as her narrative shifts abruptly from a story of suffering and scarcity to one of success and bounty.

It is at this pivotal moment that Prince’s text becomes a travel narrative. Unlike her white female counterparts, however, Prince is not able to travel because she is middle class. Rather, she becomes middle class because she travels. When she arrives in St. Petersburg, she is welcomed as a member of court, and is presented with all the pomp and circumstance worthy of a courtier. She writes:

The usual salutation by the guards was performed. As we passed through the beautiful hall, a door was opened by two colored men in official dress. The Emperor Alexander ...stepped forward with great politeness and condescension, and welcomed me ... he then accompanied us to the Empress Elizabeth; she ... received me in the same manner the Emperor had. They presented me with a watch, &c. It was customary in those days, when one married, belonging to the court, to present them with gifts according to their standard; there was no prejudice against people of color...⁴⁷

Prince goes on to unknowingly corroborate the various scholarly assertions that black people were considered as ornamental as they were useful in Russian society. In total, twenty black men occupied the same position her husband held at court; “when one dies,” Prince observes, “the number is immediately made up. Mr. Prince filled the place of one that had died” (18). Though her final remark concerning the absence of race prejudice is a bit naïve, it is no less understandable given the differences between her life in Russia and New England.

For Prince, domesticity within the context of Russian society is the veritable antithesis of its American counterpart. In St. Petersburg, she starts a profitable business as seamstress; takes in child boarders, and employs a servant, a journeywoman, and her own apprentices (26, 39). Prince’s new brand of domesticity extends far beyond the confines of the private sphere as she refigures the ideal of womanhood to include travel and public ventures. She emphasizes her work and charity as a defense

⁴⁷ Prince, 18.

against assumptions about her character resulting from her “masculine” abandonment of domestic obligations at home. Russia presents her with the opportunity not to be idle or even to abandon all things domestic, but to have her talents recognized for their exceptional qualities. Had New Englanders recognized her assets and paid her accordingly for the work she had done, she might have been able to remain with, and even save her family. Her defensiveness elucidates her careful choice of words when she asserts that she was leaving her country, and not her family.⁴⁸

In addition to the financial boon she experiences in Russia, Prince also locates the female role models that she lacked at home. During her time in St. Petersburg, Prince witnesses the rule of two separate regimes: Alexander and the empress Elizabeth, and Nicholas and the empress Alexandra.⁴⁹ Prince is most vociferous about the tsarina Alexandra whom she notes “carries power and dignity in her countenance, and is well adapted to her station” (28). Alexandra calls into relief many of the tensions which Prince notes between the public and private spheres, between feminine fragility and masculine power.

While Russian women experienced limitations to their freedoms, many noblewomen learned to walk the fine line between the private and public spheres. Regardless of their station, Russian women were required to secure their husbands’ or fathers’ permission to work or travel.⁵⁰ The patriarchal assumption that women “exercised a moral and civilizing influence on society” permitted women to carve a place for themselves in public roles. Individual charity was considered to be within the realm of domesticity.⁵¹ To be clear, charity extended well beyond monetary donations to the poor:

⁴⁹ Princess Charlotte of Prussia, renamed Alexandra after she became Orthodox.

⁵⁰ Unlike American women, however, Russian women were able to maintain ownership of property no matter their marital status. Adele Lindenmeyr, “Public Life, Private Virtues: Women in Russian Charity, 1762-1914,” *Signs* 18.3 (Spring 1993): 567.

⁵¹ Wendy Rosslyn, “Benevolent Ladies and Their Exertions for the Good of Humankind: V.A. Repnina, S.S. Meshcherskaia, and the Origins of Female Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 18.7 (Jan 2006): 53.

To devout women Russian Orthodoxy offered a special model of female piety: the woman who devoted her life and fortune to helping others. Such women, especially if they came from the upper ranks of society, won a special place in the culture of Russian charity from which men were almost entirely excluded. Their selfless love of their neighbor was measured not by the amounts they gave away but, rather, by the physical care and comfort they dispensed in personal visits to the poor.⁵²

In her narrative, Prince observes this model through the actions of Empress Alexandra. Though the empress entertains “late amusements,” of which Prince does not approve, she “would be out at an early hour in the morning, visiting the abodes of the distressed, dressed in as common apparel as anyone here, either walking, or riding in a common sleigh” (Prince 28). In her analysis of the *Life and Travels*, Fish observes that “In the case of Empress Alexandra, Prince is willing to make an exception to her usual association of amusement with sin” (44). Earlier in the narrative Prince provides examples of the types of amusement that her religion would not allow; “there are various amusements of which I did not partake, which caused them much disappointment.” Though she emigrates to Russia specifically because American racism does not permit the full inclusion of African Americans into the fold of the commonwealth, when faced with the choice between full inclusion into Russian society or building her identity as a self-improving black woman, Prince opts for the latter. Author of “Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50,” Fredrick Coopers observes that the “characteristic rhetoric of early 19th century reformers ... stressed that the ‘elevation’ of the race depended on the ‘self-improvement’ of the individual. Blacks must educate themselves and their children and learn skills that would be “useful” to society. They must make themselves hard-working and practical, abstemious and God-fearing, obedient to law and self-respecting, frugal and upright.”⁵³ Thus righteousness is central to Prince’s individual agenda for self improvement and her larger concern with elevating the black race.

⁵² Lindenmeyr, 563.

⁵³ Fredrick Cooper, “Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50,” *American Quarterly*, 24, No. 5 (Dec., 1972): 604-05.

"My religion," she explains "did not allow of dancing or dice playing."⁵⁴ It is difficult to determine whether or not Prince is using sarcasm when she remarks that her Russian guests indulged her because they also were very strict in their religion. Subsequently she states that the grace of God, not a mutual religious respect between Prince and her Russian associates, helped her stand her ground.⁵⁵

Her feelings about the Orthodox Church notwithstanding, Prince's admiration of Alexandra appears to be quite sincere. In fact, she goes on to suggest that Alexandra achieves the lofty standards set forth by the biblical King Lemuel in Proverbs 31:15, 20, and 21: "She riseth while it is yet night and giveth meat to her household and a portion to her maidens, she stretcheth out her hands yet to the poor, she reacheth out her hands to the needy; she is not afraid of snow for all her household are clothed in scarlet."⁵⁶

Despite her comments about Elizabeth's condescension and Alexandra's late amusements, sources outside Prince's narrative suggest that both empresses had an impact upon Prince's psychological empowerment. She arrived in Russia at a pivotal moment in Russian women's history. There had been a succession of female rulers during the eighteenth century⁵⁷ -- a fact which forced the Russian populace to accept women as public and powerful figures. What is more, Catherine the Great institutionalized Russian female education when she founded and funded Smolnyi, the first secular school for the daughters of Russian nobility in 1764.

Unlike Catherine, the Empress Maria Feodorovna, second wife of Paul I, refused to step beyond the confines of acceptable modes of domesticity. According to Natalia Pushkareva, author of *Women in Russian History*, contemporaries of Maria observed that in comparison to Catherine "her glory does not

⁵⁴ Prince, 22.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Prince 33.

⁵⁷ Grand Duchess Anna Leopoldovna ruled from 1740-1741. Empress Elizabeth ruled from 1741-1762. After the assassination of her husband, *Peter III*, Catherine the Great ascended the throne and reigned from 1762-1796. Paul I married Maria Feodorovna and ruled from 1796-1801. Feodorovna was responsible for the match between her son Emperor Alexander I. Thus, he married the Empress Elizabeth and ruled from 1801-1825. Alexander's brother, Nicholas I inherited the crown subsequent to Alexander's death. He and the Empress Alexandra reigned from 1825-1855.

glitter with brilliant heroic actions.”⁵⁸ Maria took charge of education. She donated huge sums to the Smolnyi Institute, and asserted that “It is not good that women should acquire too broad a knowledge. Children should be reared with good morals to lead a household, to supervise servants, and to observe frugality in expenditures.”⁵⁹ Conservative as her views may have been, Maria’s dedication to providing schools for females was a progressive venture for its time. She felt that noble women should learn French, dancing, and etiquette. Middle class women should receive a practical education which would enable them to become teachers and governesses. And in 1797 she extended the privilege of education to orphan girls when she founded the Mariinskii, which was much like the Smolnyi for Russian nobility. In many ways, Maria set the standard of what a Russian empress should contribute to her country and the regime. A devoted wife and mother of ten, Maria espoused a “maternal concern for the lower classes, especially mothers and children, and complemented the paternalism of the emperor.”⁶⁰

Elizabeth, the empress who greeted Nancy and Nero Prince upon their arrival at court, was far more reserved than her mother-in-law. She left the limelight to Maria and adopted modesty and restraint as her chosen mode of conduct. Still, Elizabeth made a great contribution to the advancement of Russian women in 1812 when she founded the Women’s Patriotic Society -- Russia’s first women’s organization. Its purpose was to perform charitable work for the victims of the French invasion that had occurred that same year. This public service coupled with the school she erected for the children of soldiers slain in battle served to redeem Elizabeth for her lack of maternal influence within her own family.⁶¹ In keeping with the feminine ideal of the Russian Orthodoxy, Elizabeth donated 800,000 of her million ruble annual income to charity. At age forty-seven, Elizabeth died and bequeathed her estate to the Women’s Patriotic Society. With the money, the Patriotic Society sponsored a school for girls with the mandate to

⁵⁸ Pushkarevna does not cite the source of this information. Natalia Pushkarevna, *Women in Russian History from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 188.

⁵⁹ Quoted from Puskarevna (page 188) who quotes from *La Philosophie des femmes* or the Philosophy of Women. No page number is provided.

⁶⁰ See Lindenmeyer 570.

⁶¹ Until the last years of her marriage to Alexander, Elizabeth’s relationship with her husband was categorized by virtual estrangement. Moreover, her two daughters died when they were a year old, which is in stark contrast to the loving and fruitful marriage Maria enjoyed.

Teach the students to be good wives, solicitous mothers, and exemplary mentors for their children, and to teach them the skills they need to be able to provide for themselves and their families by means of their own hard work.

To this end, the subjects taught are: (a) morality, based on Divine law; (b) the essential sciences; (c) useful needlework skills; and (d) fundamentals of home management and housekeeping.⁶²

The “female society”⁶³ Prince had joined was undoubtedly Elizabeth’s Women’s Patriotic organization. Prince makes passing remarks about these organizations, but never overtly credits the empresses for their efforts. She notes, “sailors’ and soldiers’ boys enter the corp at the age of seven, and are educated for that purpose” and “girls ... are instructed in all the branches of female education.” Both of these institutions had been initiated by Elizabeth, who wanted to educate the children of soldiers slain in battle and to teach girls a trade. When Alexandra ascends to the position of Empress Consort in 1825 she builds on Elizabeth’s project; she founds schools for daughters of all ranks, and creates a system of orphanages.⁶⁴ Alexandra extended the privilege to “children of all classes” and founded several orphanages.⁶⁵

These are peculiar omissions considering the fact that most of the activities in which she engages, both while in St. Petersburg and upon her return to America, either involve or parallel the Russian empresses’ projects. An observant and self-conscious woman, Prince announces herself to be a successful business woman, engaged in domestic work in order to both establish and maintain her reputation as a respectable black woman:

My time was taken up in domestic affairs; I took two children to board, the third week after commencing house-keeping, and increased their numbers. The baby linen making and childrens' garments were in great demand. I started a business in these articles and took a journeywoman and apprentices.... We had service twice every Sabbath, and evening prayer meetings, also a female society, so that I was occupied at all times.⁶⁶

⁶² Robin Bisha, et al, *Russian Women 1698-1917: Experience and Expression, An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2002): 181.

⁶³ Prince, 39.

⁶⁴ Pushkareva, 191.

⁶⁵ Prince 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

It is not beyond reason to assume that Prince availed herself of the course offerings provided by the WPS, for she makes no mention of her needlework until she arrives in St. Petersburg. What can be deduced from this segment of the narrative is that she learns quickly and, like Alexandra, is “well adapted to her station.”⁶⁷ Within six months of her arrival, Prince learns the common language, a mix of Slavonian and Polish, as well as modern Greek and French – the languages of nobility – “so as to be able to attend to [her] business.”⁶⁸ It is no mere coincidence that Prince is an active member of a Society which not only encourages women to retain the ability to support themselves, but provides vocational courses as well. In fact, Alexandra “inquired of me respecting my business, and gave me much encouragement by purchasing of me garments for herself and children, handsomely wrought in French and English styles, and many of the nobility also followed her example.”⁶⁹

This moment in the text is instructive for another reason. For the most part, Prince observes the requisite dispassion in her observations of imperial Russia; however, this and other events in the text betray her feelings as an outsider. Only when she arrives at court does Prince reference herself and her husband as members of an elite class of Russian nobility. Even then, she seems unmoved by the gifts presented by the tsar and tsarina. She receives a “watch &c.,” which was “customary.” All subsequent events dealing with nobility are presented so as to suggest that she is in but not of the group. There is close to no information about Nero Prince’s duties except that she and her husband reside outside of court, and each morning Nero Prince takes “his station in the halls, for the purpose of opening the doors...when the Emperor and Empress pass.”⁷⁰ One might even perceive that without her income, Prince and her husband would not be so well off.⁷¹

Yet her distance from the Russian nobility does not appear to be a circumstance of race, but rather of religion. Throughout the rest of her narrative race prejudice is emphasized, but Prince seems to

⁶⁷ Prince, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

⁷¹ After relating the noblewomen’s interest in her garments, Prince states, “it was to me a great blessing that we had the means of grace afforded us.” Prince, 39.

believe wholeheartedly that Russia does not suffer from such issues. Certainly, Prince came in contact with other black people in Russia, but she makes direct mention of only one. When she and her husband arrive in St. Petersburg they take

lodgings with a Mrs. Robinson, a native of our country, who was Patience Mott, of Providence, who left here in the year 1813, in the family of Alexander Gabriel, the man who was taken for Mr. Prince. There I spent six weeks very pleasantly, visiting and receiving friends, in the manner of the country.⁷²

Presumably Prince is alluding to the fact that upon his death, Alexander Gabriel was replaced by her husband, Nero. That said, her first interaction in St. Petersburg was likely spent with black Americans who had been in Russia for ten years. Though her Boston audience was largely comprised of black freemen and white abolitionists – all of whom were concerned with race – Prince does not deem that piece of information relevant.

Conversely, Prince removes the lens of dispassion where the subject of religion is concerned. She is infuriated when the ” Bishop finding his religion was in danger sent a petition to the Emperor that all who were found distributing Bibles and Tracts should be punished severely.”⁷³ Having herself distributed some bibles to the impoverished, Prince takes the imprisonment of the “righteous” personally. She goes on to convey further insight into other activities that may fall under the umbrella of unchristian amusements: “two devoted young men were banished; thus the righteous were punished, while evil practices were not forbidden, for there the sin of licentiousness is very common.”⁷⁴

Indeed adultery was fairly common amongst Russian nobility. Elizabeth and Alexander both took lovers, and Nicholas was rumored to have fathered a child outside of his marriage. It can be argued, however, that licentiousness is equally common within Prince’s family. After all, she rescues her older sister from a brothel, and her mother has children, for whom she cannot provide, with multiple men. Thus, it is difficult to discern whether Prince is merely attempting to strike a comfortable distance from the ill-reputed Gardner women, if she is positioning her protestant religiosity in stark contrast to that of the

⁷² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Orthodox church, or both. Unlike Western Europe, Russia had experienced no Reformation, so the context Prince sketches may be particularly complex. Interestingly, on the heels of relating the details of the banishment, Prince's attention abruptly turns back to America. Following her observation of licentiousness in Russia, Prince remarks, "I have mentioned that the climate did not agree with me...."⁷⁵ Though she goes on to discuss the affect that the cold weather has had on her health, the coupling of these two events is remarkably similar to the rhetorical strategy she uses when she decides to leave America. Her sister runs away from home, her insane mother strikes out after her, and Prince marries Nero and moves to Russia. When the climate gets to be too overwhelming, Prince leaves.

Yet the impact of the Russian Orthodox model of femininity on Prince is never so palpable as when she returns to America in 1832. In Massachusetts she secures a "board of seven females" to oversee the establishment and maintenance of an orphanage for children who "on account of color [were] shut out from all the asylums for poor children."⁷⁶ When the funding for her orphanage runs out Prince joins another women's organization – the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. A member of William Lloyd Garrison's "camp," the widowed Nancy Prince publishes multiple notices and advertisements in Garrison's *Liberator* promoting lectures "on the manners and customs of Russia," her sewing business, and eventually requesting the financial support of the "benevolent and liberal," so that she might "establish a manual labor school for orphans and outcasts at Kingston, Jamaica."⁷⁷

That Prince attempts to replicate the lifestyle she enjoyed in Russia when she returns to the US suggests that her experience in St. Petersburg was, in many ways, preferable to her life in America – though Prince is largely unaware of her contribution to the propaganda war between Russia and America. At this historical moment Russia's recognition as a major world power represents a threat to the democratic project. Tsarist Russia held one of the largest empires in the world, and had achieved notable wealth without having taken part in the African slave trade. Russian scholars and artists were achieving national recognition – including Pushkin who boasted African ancestry. Furthermore, the Russian empire

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Prince., 47.

⁷⁷ *Liberator*, 11.49, 1841, December 3

was governed by an unyielding monarchical rule. As a result, American officials and, by extension, the American media developed a fascination with and repugnance for Russia. Narratives and talks such as those composed by Prince emphasized the hypocrisy inherent in America's claim to democracy as well as the necessity of civilizing people of African descent while American news sources were maligning Russia's enslavement of people belonging to the civilized white race.

There is no mistaking Prince's nationalistic pride even in the face of countless proofs that she was incapable of achieving her true potential in America. However, there is no doubt that the highlight of her sixty year life span occurred during her nine year emigration to Russia. Each time she returns to Massachusetts, Prince is met with resistance, both financial and social.

Having experienced the boundless opportunities available to her as a middle class woman in a society where there was no notable prejudice against her because of her race, Prince refuses to be contained when she returns to the States. Despite the difficulty of the task, Prince is determined to maintain her middle class status, rather than labor in the homes of middle class white families. At once, her black consciousness, feminist proclivities, and Protestant ideologies, coalesce with her newfound middle class virtues, underscoring the profundity of her psychological growth and subsequent disillusionment.

That Prince attempts to replicate the lifestyle she enjoyed in Russia when she returns to the US is indicative of the fact that she is not, as Paul Gilroy asserts in his *Black Atlantic*, attempting to escape "the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes ...race' itself." On the contrary, Prince is an unmistakable nationalist. As she writes about Russia, Prince positions herself carefully as observer rather than participant or even participant-observer in imperial Russia. Preservation of her reputation relies equally upon her distance from the Russian way of life and her proximity to the ideals espoused in the American constitution. Although her seeming lack of concern for Russian serfs belies the devout Protestant identity she constructs in the narrative, it underscores her identification not with all oppressed people but rather oppressed black people. Prince does not wish to escape the boundaries of her

race and nationality – she hopes to alter them in such a way that the goals of American democracy apply to black people.

The political implications of her narrative quite possibly escaped Prince whose primary purpose in writing the book was to garner enough income to support herself when the severity of her disability rendered her unable to work. Prince's intervention was likely unintentional, but the Russia she describes is more progressive in its approach to women, who achieve unimaginable levels of power when compared to American women. Conceptually life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was far more attainable for a black person welcomed at Russian court than it was for American blacks who were hardly a consideration when the Declaration of Independence and the constitution were composed. In many ways Prince's depiction of American hypocrisy is akin to the same properties that scholars note in their examination of Alexander I's contradictory nature. Yet the narrative of Nicholas Said, an African-born ex-slave who migrates to and eventually settles in the South, complicates the unfavorable view of post-revolutionary America while corroborating Prince's depiction of St. Petersburg as a city where people of African descent may enjoy bounty, success, and – in the case of Said's autobiographical account – excess.

“Our Faith, Our Country, and Our People”⁷⁸: *Nicholas Said and the Power of Cultural Capital*

It is only fitting that the publication history of *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said* be as interesting as the life of the author himself. Originally published in the October 1867 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, Nicholas Said’s ex-slave/ travel/ conversion narrative provides a ten-page snap shot of the remarkable life and travels of the Bornou native. The narrative is introduced by a brief and requisite statement of authenticity issued by an anonymous editor who refers to himself only as “the writer.” Having been regaled by accounts of Said’s history while the narrator served in “one of our colored regiments,” the editor encouraged Said to record his narrative. Certainly Said’s recollection, which boasts extensive travel on five continents, particularly sated the curiosity of his readers on the “mystery which surrounds, notwithstanding recent explorations, the country of his birth.”⁷⁹

In 1984 Allan D. Austin exhumed and reprinted the abbreviated account in his collection entitled *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Source Book*.⁸⁰ Ten years later he revised the monograph chapter and republished the narrative with additional documentation corroborating Said’s recollection of events. Still, by 1994 Austin bemoaned the recently disproved assumption that “Nicholas Said was not prevailed upon to produce a full-length book.”⁸¹ Six years passed before Precious Rasheeda Muhammad rediscovered the Shotwell & Co. Publishers’ 1873 manuscript to which the unknown editor referred in the *Atlantic Monthly* edition.⁸²

While Austin and Muhammad remark, at length, on Said’s superior intellect and congeniality, I am struck by the fact that Said – a man who was enslaved in Africa and liberated in Russia – should opt to go to America of his own volition, fight in the Civil War (during which time he was encouraged to publish his autobiography), and settle in the South for the rest of his life despite warnings from his

⁷⁸ In 1833 the regime of Nicholas I adopted the slogan ‘Our Faith, Our Country, and Our People.’ Dvoichenko-Markov, 574.

⁷⁹ *Atlantic Monthly* 20.120 (Oct 1867): 485.

⁸⁰ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Source Book* (New York: Garland, 1984): chapter 10.

⁸¹ Allan D. Austin, “Mohammed Ali Ben Said: Travels on Five Continents,” *Contributions in Black Studies: Vol 12.15* (1994): 135.

⁸² The editor acknowledges that the brief article was taken from a longer manuscript.

African American associates. As is the case with the scholarly criticism of Nancy Prince's *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, the draw for this particular narrative has been the author's Muslim religious affiliation. Good work has been and continues to be done to this end. This intervention, however, seeks to examine Said's developing race consciousness resulting from his travels. Of profound importance is the fact that the earlier edition of Said's autobiography is not merely an excerpt of Said's book-length narrative. Rather, each text complements the other providing a more holistic understanding of Said's reception as a black man in various countries.

Born circa 1831, Said is the thirteenth of his mother's nineteen children, and member of a privileged class due to his father's position as a general in the Bornou army and his mother's station as the daughter of a tribal chief. At the age of fourteen or fifteen, members of the Kindill tribe kidnap and take him into slavery. Said is sold to Abd-El-Kader – a half African half Arab man. The third chapter of his account is largely dedicated to “crossing the desert,” or the long walk across the Sahara. As his autobiography was published in America, the likeliest comparison would be between the treatment of bondsmen in Africa and those in America. In her monograph entitled *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Master of the Sudan*, Historian Eve M. Troutt Powell observes:

The nature of the slavery lived by black men and women in Egypt in the nineteenth century is rarely if ever discussed without being compared to the searing experiences of African slaves in the United States and the Caribbean. From all accounts, it is clear that African slaves in Egypt did not suffer the brutality that so characterized the treatment of blacks in the American South. There was no similar plantation culture in which nuclear families were torn apart or in which slaves were subjected to horrifying physical abuse. Although the experience of being captured and the treks of slave caravans on the Forty Days' Road (*darb al-arba'in*) were notoriously difficult for recently enslaved Sudanese, once in Egypt their experiences did tend to be milder than those of American slaves.⁸³

⁸³ Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Master of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003):141. Said's recollection of the walk across the Sahara is in line with Powell's observation: What with hunger, thirst, bleeding feet, and intolerable heat, we suffered intensely, and I was often upon the point of fainting by the wayside. We were not allowed to ride, and the sandals of raw camel's hide, furnished us by our master, did not last long enough to do us a particle of good. We had scarcely any food to eat, and were only allowed three pints of water, each, per day.... we found ourselves in the midst of the great Sahara. This ocean of scorching sand has been so often described by more graphic writers than myself, that I will not attempt to paint it in words. Indeed, a perfect picture in words, or on canvass, is impossible. Sahara must be seen and *felt* to be realized. All along our route we found great numbers of carcasses, human carcasses, completely *dried up* by the

Powell's observations about the relative mildness of African slavery holds true. Upon the introduction of his new master, Said admits that Abd-El-Kader's "ferocious" countenance was enough to instill fear in him, but time would reveal that "he was not quite the monster he seemed."⁸⁴ Although Abd-El-Kader strikes Said repeatedly the beatings are not for the myriad of offenses for which American slaves were beaten, but for refusing to eat.⁸⁵ When he is shamefully abused by Abd-El-Kader's Arab servant, Said is able to reason with his master in a way that would not have been fathomable to American bondsmen and women.⁸⁶ In pleading his case Said tells Kader that he is unaccustomed to such harsh physical labor as he is the son of military aristocracy. Upon hearing Said's father's name, Kader offers to return him to his village, but Said declines as he dreads the notion of re-crossing the Sahara.⁸⁷ At his request Kader sells Said to a Turk, "who [he] had heard were very good masters."⁸⁸

Abdy Aga is a young officer in the Turkish army who purchases Said as a gift for his father, Hadji Daoud.⁸⁹ Daoud takes possession of Said, but sells him when most of his worldly possessions are lost in a fire. Said is then sold to another Turkish officer who gifts him to his younger brother, Yousouf Kavass. Both, according to Said, were generous and kind masters allowing Said plenty of leisure time and fine clothing. When he is sold again to Fuad Pacha, Minister of the Interior for the Ottoman Empire, Said is taken to Constantinople, where Pacha presents Said to his brother-in-law, Reschid, as a gift.

scorching rays of the ever unclouded sun. The heat is so great that flesh becomes as *dry* as bone, before it can be dissolved. Here are found no hyenas, no vultures to prey upon the dead, and the traders never bury any one who falls in the desert. The bodies lie until inhumed by the parching sand storms, or until pulverized. It is said that the traders leave these dead bodies exposed to frighten their caravans of slaves into faster walking. Nicholas Said, *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, A Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* (Memphis: Shotwell & Co. Publishers, 1873): 50-52.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Note that the *Atlantic Monthly* (AM) version of the narrative does not mention the beating Said receives from Hassan, the servant, but in the book-length version he relays that he is sent to his master's farm to transfer water from the well to the irrigating trough. Hasaan not only beats him but forces Said to do all the work. "Between my limited food," Said asserts, "...and the abuse of Hassan, I had a miserable time of it." Said, *Autobiography*: 54.

⁸⁷ The AM version is without the detail of Said's refusal to return home.

⁸⁸ Said, *Autobiography*: 55.

⁸⁹ Note that Daoud takes Said to Mecca, but will not permit him to go to the gravesite of Mohammed because Said did not come of his own free will. Austin provides a salient treatment of Said's devotion to Islam in *African Muslims*.

Like Said, Reschid Pacha is Muslim, but engages in behaviors that Said finds peculiar. Pacha “associates intimately with the Christians, shook hands with them, ate, drank champagne and visited their theatres, and acted in such a way as to excite my fears that he was not truly Islam.”⁹⁰ That Pacha does not observe the tenets of Islam worries Said for a couple of reasons. First, his request to be transferred to a Turk was likely influenced by the fact that he and his master would share and observe the same religious beliefs. Secondly, upon his transfer to Reschid Pacha, Said begins to wonder if “it was [his] fate to pass from hand to hand with never a sure and definite resting place.”⁹¹ As Said understands it, a Mohammed slave is not to be sold out of the empire.⁹² His fears are warranted. As Pacha does not observe Mohammed law, he surreptitiously sells Said to Prince Mentchikoff, Minister Plenipotentiary of Russia.

Although he is a very astute observer, and quite adept at using sarcasm to convey his feelings on certain subjects, Said seems genuinely unaware of the peculiarity of Mentchikoff’s “great fancy to [Said] the first time he saw [him].”⁹³ Apparently Mentchikoff would not allow Reschid Pacha “any rest until [Said] was transferred to his possession.”⁹⁴ While Said is unaware of Russian policy on African enslavement, Mentchikoff is undoubtedly aware that Said would be of no monetary value to him. However, as a black servant, Said represents a certain cultural capital amongst Russian nobles. Peter the Great’s “conscious imitation of certain Western techniques and styles include the importation of black servants for his court, a practice continued by all his successors.” By the time Said arrives in Russia members of the gentry have adopted this “fad” as well, “these black-skinned men and women as rare and exotic, yet useful as well as ornamental.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Said, *Autobiography* 123.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 121-22

⁹² *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 124

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Albert Parry, Foreword, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington D. C: Howard University Press, 1986): xii.

The attraction was mutual. Black people found tsarist Russia to be a place where they could enjoy a “prosperous life that was singularly devoid of humiliation and discrimination because of their color.”⁹⁶ Said seized every opportunity to improve his condition and, whether knowingly or not, he capitalized on the nobility’s fascination with his visage and customs. For example, when they arrive in St. Petersburg, Mentchikoff advises Said that he is free, but suggests that he remain with the Mentchikoff family so that he might avail himself of an education. Mentchikoff even promises to provide Said enough money to return to Bornou when he turns twenty-five. Though it is a tempting offer, Said decides to seek employment elsewhere, and finds it no hard task to make the change despite his lack of an exploitable trade.

While in the service of his new employer, Prince Nicholas Troubetzkoy, Said’s life is altered in two very important ways. First Troubetzkoy insists on converting Said from Islam to the Orthodox religion. After sustaining multiple beatings at the hands of his employer for resisting conversion, Said’s “prejudices gave way.”⁹⁷ On November 12, 1855 Said is baptized; he abandons the name ‘Mohammed Ali Ben’ and accepts the Russian Orthodox name, Nicholas. This is one moment in the narrative wherein the two versions together provide more insight into the author’s true feelings about his forced conversion.

In the book length version of his narrative (*Narrative*), Said conveys his displeasure with the hours long confession he has to endure the following day, remarking lightheartedly: “As the marble was harder than my knees, I was in perfect agony during the greater portion of the time, and became so enraged with the *papa*, that I fear I committed more sins during that space of time than I had done in days before.”⁹⁸ The condensed version of the text (*Native*), however, presents a much more sober image of his dismay with regard to the conversion. He is careful to affirm Troubetzkoy for his kindness before intimating that he “cannot help thinking that the way I was baptized was not right, for I think that I ought

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Said *Narrative* 145

⁹⁸ Ibid.

to have known perfectly well the nature of the thing beforehand.”⁹⁹ Said goes on to say that his conversion “was a good intention the Prince had toward my moral welfare.”¹⁰⁰ It is glaringly obvious that Said is making a valiant gesture toward diplomacy with this final comment concerning Troubetzkoy’s good intentions. Certainly Said had the opportunity and language skill to indicate that the ends justified the means, but he intentionally avoids indicating that, long term, Christianity served him better than Islam. Instead he begins to relay the secular benefits he reaps for having made the conversion. In the *Narrative* Said writes:

When I had become a confirmed Christian, the Prince presented me with a solid gold cross, and a chain of the same metal to suspend it around my neck by, in the prevailing Russian fashion; and, as he had never allowed me to associate with the rest of his domestics, I began to consider myself quite a superior being.¹⁰¹

In *Native* he writes:

After I was baptized [Troubetzkoy] was very kind to me, and he bought me a solid gold cross to wear on my breast, after the Russian fashion. I was the Prince's personal servant, going always in the carriage with him.¹⁰²

These statements evidence Said’s embracing of a higher worldly station rather than a concern with spiritual progress. Though it is difficult to determine the specific actions on the part of Troubetzkoy which Said deems “kind,” there is something unsettling about the fact that Said textually replaces “kindness” in *Native* with superiority in *Narrative*. There is also some irony in Said’s recognition of the gold cross as part of the Russian fashion when his position as a black servant is also part of the Russian fashion. The author’s enchantment with jewelry signals a moral shift for Said as well. After his conversion, he embraces excess, “drinking too much, and spending [his] money foolishly.”¹⁰³ Due to the textual proximity of Said’s conversion and his shift from temperance to immoderation it appears that there is a causal relationship between his Christian faith and his fascination with the secular.

⁹⁹ Said *Native* 492.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Said *Narrative* 146.

¹⁰² Said *Native* 492.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 493.

Said's conversion stands in sharp contrast to the American adaptation of conversion narratives which, according to author of *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* Patricia Caldwell, was "a testimony of personal religious experience...spoken or read aloud to the entire congregation of a gathered church before admission as evidence of the applicant's visible sainthood."¹⁰⁴ Although Said is engaging with this literary tradition, his purpose is not to petition for sainthood. Rather he is engaged in parodic stylization.¹⁰⁵ The tensions that exist between the represented and representing discourses are clear in his narrative even if Said's intentions (or rather his awareness of the simultaneity of his own stylized and parodic utterances) are not. Said was not lobbying for sainthood any more than he was suggesting that his conversion to Christianity had anything to do with righteousness on the part of the abusive proselytizing Troubetzkoy, or with a divine calling on the part of Said himself. In fact, Said says much less about acts of religiosity after his acceptance of the Christian faith than he does in the early part of the narrative when he adheres to the Mohammedan faith. Thus, when he laments the manner in which he is baptized and argues that he should have known the nature of the "thing" beforehand, Said is likely drawing connections between existing discourses on conversion and colonization.

The second important event to occur while Said is employed with Troubetzkoy is that he decides to return to his native country, but opts instead to immigrate to the U.S.. In reading the two accounts of his life side by side, it is evident that in the midst of his European tour Said is struck by the precarious

¹⁰⁴Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1983): 1

¹⁰⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin's observations on the relationship between represented and representing discourses in parodic literature generate a productive reading of Said's narrative: In another type of internally dialogized interillumination of languages, *the intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse*; they fight against them, they depict a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather using it as an expose' to destroy the represented language. This is the nature of parodic stylization ... Such a parodic stylization can create an image of language and a world corresponding to it only on condition that the stylization not function as a gross and superficial destruction of the other's language, as it happens in rhetorical parody...*Between stylization and parody, as between two extremes, are distributed the most varied forms for languages to mutually illuminate each other and direct hybrids*, forms that are themselves determined by the most varied interactions between languages, the most varied wills to language and to speech, that encounter one another within the limits of a single utterance...In world literature, there are probably many works whose parodic nature has not even been suspected. In world literature in general there are probably very few words that are uttered unconditionally, purely single voiced. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 363-4. My emphasis

position of Sudan and is determined to help modernize his native country. In *Narrative*, Said opens Chapter XIII with something of a non-sequitor – he describes an article he read about Sudan:

While in Rome, I one day saw in the *Giornale di Roma* an article respecting the invasion of Soudan by Said, Pacha of Egypt. The article said that the subjugation of Soudan had been very difficult. I never have heard anything about that matter since, and moreover doubt its veracity. May it never happen that my dear country should ever be under Egyptian despotism.¹⁰⁶

Up to that point there is no discussion concerning the colonization of his homeland. He does not follow up his remarks with any transition; Said merely goes about the task of describing his travels and the errands associated with his cosmopolitan endeavors. His expression of this longing is equally disjointed in *Native*. Immediately after confessing his proclivity for heavy drinking, Said turns his attention to a chance encounter with a fellow African man. He writes:

Here also I saw, for the first time since leaving Africa, a countryman. He was named Mirza, and was born about thirty-five miles from Kooka, my native place. He was considerably older than I, and had been away from Africa some fifteen years.¹⁰⁷

Once again, he shifts from his longing for his “native place” back to the emotionless nomenclature of people and venues he encounters in Europe. Reading one version of Said’s narrative without the other might lead one to believe that Said’s homesickness is sudden and largely unprovoked. Close readings of both texts, however, reveal that Said has multiple chance encounters that remind him of home and the precarious political position of Sudan. Eventually, in both accounts, Said expresses his desire to return to Africa, though the *Narrative* is far less revealing than *Native*.

In the extended version of his life story (*Narrative*), Said is quite succinct in relaying his decision to quit Troubetskoy and return to Africa. He has “an irresistible desire to visit Africa.”¹⁰⁸ According to *Native*, however, Said had no intention on just visiting. In *Native*, Said is rather transparent about his long

¹⁰⁶ Said *Narrative* 180

¹⁰⁷ Said *Native* 493.

¹⁰⁸ *Narrative* 186. He goes on to say that he agreed to take leave of Troubetzkoy for a year with the understanding that he would return after the year passed.

term plans to improve the condition of his fellow countrymen and stave off European colonization. In this poignant expression of disappointment and hope, Said takes issues of race head on:

About this time I began to think of the condition of Africa, my native country, how European encroachments might be stopped, and her nationalities united. I thought how powerful the United States had become since 1776, and I wondered if I were capable of persuading the kings of Soodan to send several hundred boys to learn the arts and sciences existing in civilized countries. I thought that I would willingly sacrifice my life, if need be, in realizing my dreams. I cried many times at the ignorance of my people, exposed to foreign ambition, who, however good warriors they might be, could not contend against superior weapons and tactics in the field. I prayed earnestly to be enabled to do some good to my race. The Prince could not but see that I was very sober, but I never told him my thoughts.¹⁰⁹

This paragraph is as perplexing as it is foreboding. Said wishes to stop European encroachments, but he claims to embrace Christianity – one of the primary tools wielded by Europeans to colonize the “uncivilized” nations of Africa. Said’s preoccupation hearkens back to his earlier discourse on forced conversion, only this time Said’s fear of literal colonization marks a shift in the author’s race consciousness.

During his tenure with Troubetskoy, issues of race are referenced with little indication that Said recognizes the forces at play. For example, Said travels to Georgia with Troubetzkoy to visit his brother-in-law, a general, who had “been wounded by the Circassians under Schamyl.” By all accounts the war to which Said is referring is the Caucasian War during which Russia carried out an agenda of ethnic cleansing – an act which the Georgian Parliament voted to recognize in May 2011.¹¹⁰ In August 1856, *The New York Times* published an article, “Horrible Traffic in Circassian Women – Infanticide in Turkey,” describing the enslavement of Circassian women:

Perceiving that when the Russians shall have reoccupied the coast of the Caucasus this traffic in white slaves will be over, the Circassian dealers have redoubled their efforts ever since the commencement of the peace conferences to introduce into Turkey the

¹⁰⁹ *Native* 494.

¹¹⁰ The Georgian resolution says that the Russian empire planned and carried out the ethnic cleansing of Circassians, ultimately displacing 90 percent of them. It also says that czarist Russia artificially spread hunger and disease with the goal of annihilating the Circassians, and that it then resettled other ethnic groups in their land. Ellen Barry, *New York Times*, 21 May 2011: A5.

greatest possible number of women while the opportunity of doing so lasted....never, perhaps, at any former period, was white human flesh so cheap as it is at this moment ...In former times a “good middling” Circassian girl was thought very cheap at £100, but at the present moment the same description of goods may be had for £5.¹¹¹

Certainly versed on the subject of enslavement, it is unlikely that Said was oblivious to the flooding the slave market with Circassian people. As the article notes, Russia’s goal in the Caucasus was domination, not slave trade, so Russian domination was viewed as a threat to human traffickers. Perhaps, like Prince, Said chose not to focus on the topic of subjugation on the whole, but to target issues of oppression in the black community. That Said departs Europe for America when he takes leave of his employer supports such an interpretation.

With his new employer, De Sanddrost I. J. Rochussen, Said embarks on what promises to be a year-long bridal tour of the West Indies and America as well as journey of racial awakening. According to the protracted version of his narrative Said’s “fondness for travel asserted its supremacy,” and he decides to accept Rochussen’s offer.¹¹² A slight but important difference, Said indicates in *Atlantic Monthly* that he “had read much about these countries, and my desire to see them caused me to consent.”¹¹³ Given his concern with improving the condition of his fellow African peoples, it is more likely that the information he gleaned about American slavery and Haitian liberation informed his decision far more than his love for travel. After all, with Troubetzkoy Said had traveled extensively, and there was no reason to believe that he and his former employer were bound to settle in one place any time in the near future.¹¹⁴

Native closes with Said’s decision to depart with Rochussen, and *Narrative* picks up with both the story line and Said’s concern for the black race. Upon arriving in Nassau, Said is virtually overcome with joy at the sight of “a great many liberated Africans,” hailing from coast of Guinea, Mandigoes, Nangoes,

¹¹¹ *New York Daily Times*, 6 Aug 1856: 6.

¹¹² *Narrative* 187.

¹¹³ *Native* 494.

¹¹⁴ Troubetzkoy had been desirous of leaving Russia for some time, but was not permitted under Nicholas I regime to travel abroad. When Nicholas dies and Alexander II lifts the ban on travel amongst nobility, Troubetzkoy is determined, it seems, to enjoy his newfound freedom to travel.

Kissi, Dahomey, Amatifous, and Kromantis.¹¹⁵ Said's subsequent disappointment with the language barrier between him and his fellow countrymen in the Bahamas in many ways foreshadows the pride and subsequent disappointment he feels when he arrives in Haiti:

I found myself exceedingly delighted at finding myself in the country where the heroes of the "Haytien Independence" contended with the armies of Napoleon the Great. I had always admired the exploits of Toussaint, L'Ouverture, Dessalines, Christophe, and other negro leaders, whose heroism and military talent are an honor to the African race.¹¹⁶

In spite of the rich history that exists in Haiti, Said finds that race prejudice – that is mulatto prejudices against what Said terms “the pure negro” – prevents the country from prospering. Said laments, “No wonder the whites of different countries maintain that the negro is incapable of self-government.”¹¹⁷ Thus he returns to a preoccupation with the long term effects of colonization on peoples of African descent.

While the earlier part of his narrative serves to describe architecture and culture in different countries, the latter part serves largely as a comparative study of the reception of people of African descent in Europe, America and the West Indies. For instance, Said observes that Northern and Southern whites treat blacks more humanely than Haitian mulattoes treat their darker-skinned countrymen. Still, when he arrives in America, Said realizes that work is not nearly as easy to secure when one lacks a trade and, in the case of black male workers, strength. Having been abandoned by his employer in Niagara Falls, Said is directed to go to “Detroit, Michigan, or Buffalo, New York, where there were a great number of colored people; and where I could get into employment easier than to remain in Canada.”¹¹⁸ In Buffalo he takes a position as a deck hand and discovers that he is not suited to such onerous manual labor.

From this point on, Said experiences a series of happy accidents and chance meetings which permit him not only to navigate some of the most racially divided towns in America, but to flourish in

¹¹⁵ *Narrative* 189.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

them. First he encounters Rev. Geo. Duffield who happens to remember Said from Constantinople. He gets the first of several social “passes” that provide him entry into the homes of the most esteemed black and white families. He “recuperates in Detroit for six months, taking jobs teaching black children French. Though providing a service to his “people” in Detroit, Said feels called upon to go south “where I could be of great use to my benighted people in the capacity of a teacher.”¹¹⁹

Undoubtedly utilizing the names of the families with whom he had become acquainted in Detroit as social currency, Said arrives in Charleston South Carolina and, once again, becomes acquainted with the colored “nobility” in the city. In rapid succession, Said takes a tour of the South. He settles briefly in Georgia, where he found it impossible to make a living giving talks on Africa and its resources. Despite the warnings he receives from black Southerners, Said travels to Alabama convinced that “it was not possible that such a state of affairs could exist in Alabama, besides that, there were good and bad in all countries.”¹²⁰ Though he is, in fact, well received in Alabama, Said’s naiveté comes to the fore here. The manner of his reception in America is largely influenced by his status as a foreign traveler, but he feels so connected to black people of all nationalities that he fails to see a discernible difference between his treatment and that of America-born blacks. Like the conversion segment of his narrative, Said’s presentation of the American South points to the use of parodic stylization. This time, however, Said engages with and attempts to problematize the American slave narrative with its representations of white Southerners as intolerant racists.

Said enjoys the friendship of blacks, whites, northerners, and southerners because he receives multiple letters of from respected white people introducing him as a “remarkable” and “unthreatening” native of Central Africa. The following letter written to Colonel Oates of Abbeville by a Mr. M. Smith of Columbia, South Carolina is typical of the type of introduction said receives on his travels:

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 202.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 206.

The bearer, Nicholas Said, who is without a shadow of a doubt, a native African, and whose ostensible object in travelling through this country, is to obtain subscribers to his Autobiography, lectured here to-day. And I am glad to say, gave entire satisfaction to his audience, which was composed of a goodly number of white and black people. He is, by far, the most intelligent, and the best educated man of the African race, with whom I have ever conversed, etc.

Any attention paid to Mr. Said will be thankfully received.

Yours, most truly,

I am, Colonel, M. SMITH.

Just as Prince is oblivious to the inherent prejudice that results from black fetishism she experiences in Russia, so Said is unaware of the not-so-subtle racism that underlies the statement that he is intelligent and well educated for an African man. Of greater importance, however, is the fact that, as in Russia, Said is not “connected” to American soil affords him certain privileges unavailable to black Americans. Smith deems it necessary to indicate that Said is African, that he is in America of his own volition, and that he is merely passing through. It is unlikely that any of the black men Said mentions by name¹²¹ were afforded letters of reference by the white subscribers Said encounters. Thus Said’s narrative introduces a third stratum within the hierarchy of spatial mobility for blacks in America. While black women within the contexts of Prince’s narrative and Campb’s monograph experience suffocating limitations on their motility, relative to Said black American men “did not know what freedom was owing to the oppression of the whites under which they were situated.”¹²²

Similarly, Said makes a passing observation that few black people in Alabama availed themselves of the educational services he offered through a school he opened with the assistance of another white benefactor. “But alas,” Said laments, “though painful to say, it is sadly true that my people here appreciate but slightly the benefits of education.”¹²³ Though he proclaims that his “ardent desire” is to surround himself with the most “ignorant of my race” in order to educate and uplift them, it is Said

¹²¹ “Wright, Langston, Randolph, Bozeman, Ransier, and a host of other less notable Northern colored men who came there for political purposes.” *Ibid.*, 202

¹²² *Ibid.*, 205

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 212.

himself who appears a bit ignorant of his surroundings.¹²⁴ The cautionary tales Said hears from the citizens of South Carolina regarding the Ku Klux Klan's terrorizing activities in Alabama might prove instructive here. The poor enrollment to his school was likely the result of fear, not a cultural devotion to ignorance. None of the details of Said's life serve to segregate the author from American blacks so well as his implicit assertion that he is an exemplar of the black race, not an example of what blacks could do with the types of resources and opportunities he has had.

A more forgiving reading of this segment might position Said as a cunning politician who is as keenly aware of the difficulties black people face in America as he is of the fact that he would be committing social and therefore economic suicide by taking white people to task for race prejudice in America. The extent of his naiveté or cunning regarding this subject is impossible to know. What is evident is that at some point after the narrative ends Said recognizes that it is no easy task to educate a people who are not truly free to learn. In the American Civil War, Said finds the perfect cause for his longstanding desire to "render [himself] useful to his race."¹²⁵ His narrative closes with no detail of his war experience as a Union soldier, but the following missive corroborates many of the claims Said makes of his own education in addition to solidifying his reputation as an amiable and respectable man:

NICHOLAS SAIB [sic] is the name of a sergeant in the 55th Massachusetts volunteers, whose curious and even romantic history is one of much interest. He is an intelligent looking negro, perfectly black, modest and gentlemanly in his bearing, and remarkable alike for his experience and his culture. As we understood his story, as he told it in a brief interview, he is a native of Central Africa, born in the neighborhood of Timbuctoo. In some way he was inveigled into slavery to a party of Arabs, and found his way first to Egypt and from thence to Turkey. After awhile he reached St. Petersburg, was converted to Christianity and baptized as a member of the Greek church, dropping the name of Mohammed and taking that of Nicholas. He is now a Protestant he says emphatically. From St. Petersburg he went to Germany and entered the service of a "Hollander" with whom he came to this country and settled in Detroit. He enlisted "because all his folks seemed to be doing so."

Saib speaks five languages, and can read and write three or four of them. His French is quite Parisian and his Italian correct. He gives an entertaining description of his native region, the employment of its inhabitants, and their manners and customs. They are

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 212.

generally Mohammedans. Were it not for his color and position, Saib would pass anywhere for a person of no small acquisitions. As it is no one can see or talk with him, without being most favorably impressed with his deportment and intelligence. He is one, but not the only one of the "persons of African descent" in camp at Readville, whose acquisitions and behavior go far to dispel ignorant and vulgar prejudices against the colored race.¹²⁶

The author of this letter emphasizes one possible political ramification resulting from general consumption of a life story as remarkable as Said's. By his very existence, Said dispels the myth that blacks are genetically inferior, generally uncivilized, and built for hard labor. It may also have eradicated some of the prejudices that existed amongst those freemen and women who wrote in to black newspapers disparaging Russia for its monarchical system of government and for its unforgiveable enslavement of its own people. In reference to Russia, however, Said's ability to "pass anywhere for a person of no small acquisitions" is undoubtedly the result of the lingual and cultural lessons afforded Said by the prince. In no other country does Said experience the social and monetary bounty that he does in Russia.

Like Prince, Said is able to focus primarily on customs rather than race in the Russian segment of his narrative. Moreover, Prince's return and Said's emigration to the U.S. mark the entry of both authors into the abolitionist community. Certainly their comparative bounty in Russia was noted by some members of their audience. Although there is no evidence that Prince's or Said's narratives were used in this capacity, their comparisons between the Russian and American cultures of prejudice would have posited America in a shameful position inasmuch as an imperial enserfing nation permitted foreign blacks more freedom than America allowed its African American citizens.

Yet there is some connection between Prince's and Said's alien status and their favorable receptions. Stuart Hall's theory on the floating signification of race coupled with Mary Douglas's observations on matter out of place, when applied to these two narratives, yield interesting readings of "other-ness." According to Hall, race "operates more like a language than a biology," and skin color is a marker or "signifier," which carries meaning in a given culture. What that particular marker connotes is never fixed; it varies with the context. Yet the classification itself is not the problem. Fetishistic as it may

¹²⁶ The missive is part of the Holloway Family Papers collection which are housed in the Massachusetts Historical Society. I quote from Allan D. Austin's "Mohammed Ali Ben Said: Travels on Five Continents," 131.

have been, blackness within the context of tsarist Russia connoted beauty.¹²⁷ The problem arises, according to Hall, when classification is used as a system of distributing and withholding power. Within various spaces in American society, Prince's classification as a black American woman rendered the multilingual, well-travelled, culturally enriched businesswoman financially impoverished.

Hall's theory does not address what occurs when existing classifications within a given culture encounter an "alien" class. The privileges that Prince relishes in Russia as a result of her alien status mirror those that Said enjoys in America where his alien status affords him opportunities unavailable to Prince within that same American context. As a foreigner to America the presumptions of black American behavior and identity are not heaped upon Said. That is, white Americans found Said's lingual abilities, for example, to be pleasantly unpredictable at the same time that their classification of black Americans was predicated on the myth that people of African descent were genetically incapable of such achievements. Said benefitted from American ignorance of the cultural and intellectual particularities of African tribes (thereby making him the sole purveyor of information on the subject). He was not immediately subject to the generative and prolific nature of American classification system. Neither his

¹²⁷ Note that I employ the 'beauty' adjective here in keeping with Allison Blakely's observations of the ornamental usefulness of black people in the context of tsarist Russia. It is important to note that beauty as applied to Prince and Said was viewed differently than Russians would view the "Circassian beauty" (a type associated with white skin and dark hair) trope. Rather than typing as "beautiful," in the "classic" sense, Russians in Prince's and Said's time would view African/African-American black difference as a strikingly special rarity. I am taking some liberty with connections between the concepts of beauty and "strikingly special rarity," though I do not believe such connections are at all unreasonable. The striking appearance and special rarity of diamonds, for example, places them in a particular, though not quintessential category of beauty. I use the term beauty with a responsible awareness of the following views of Russian cultural scholar, Juliet Apkarian:

Pushkin himself had conflicted feelings about his ancestry. As Pushkin writes in his story of his African ancestor, there is an isolation but, paradoxically, possibly also a special "solace" (Pushkin's term in his story) in the solitude of being so different. In a country like Imperial Russia where serfs were the same race as their owners and where Africans and African Americans were unusual occurrences on Russians' experienced color spectrum (the Russian word for "black" /chorny also means "dark" and is used to describe the darker skinned ethnic groups of the empire), the American paradigm for race and enslavement becomes radically shifted. Service in elite households—as Prince's husband and Said did—was considered vastly superior in status to that of the serfs, the overwhelming majority who—in contrast to Prince and Said-- were illiterate and uneducated. Indeed, the knowledge of English and other European languages was highly valued in Russian society.

blackness nor his literacy inspire fear in most of the white Americans Said encounters. Because he is not a part of the “order” of American society – a fact and a distance which he establishes and reestablishes with each retelling of the stories of his birth, primary socialization, and travels – the characteristics he exhibits that are normally reserved as descriptors for white Americans do not amount to the disturbing phenomenon which social anthropologist Mary Douglas terms ‘matter out of place.’¹²⁸

This concept – matter out of place – explicates Prince’s Russian and Said’s American experiences. While they are ‘in’ but not ‘of’ Russian society they have no definite classification, so there is no need to protect boundaries by marshaling them into their appropriate positions based on physiognomy. Under these circumstances nationality supersedes the importance of biology. Hall uses the simile of dirt from a garden appearing in a bedroom to illustrate the point Douglas makes in her *Purity and Danger*, “What you do with dirt in a bedroom is you cleanse it, you sweep it out; you restore the order, you police the boundaries.” Neither Prince nor Said elicit this type of reaction from white because neither of them threatened the stability of societal striations. Foreign blacks had not come to have an accepted and polarized symbolic signification.

Pushing Hall’s metaphor a bit further Said and Prince could be likened to flowers picked from a garden and placed in a bedroom. To begin, the manner in which the flower came to be are of little or no consequence to the person who picks them. Neither their existence nor their presence (or lack thereof) causes alarm when encountered outside of a garden because they have no real impact on the purpose or function of a bedroom. However, if the bed is removed, the function of that room comes into question and the established order of the home is in jeopardy.

Naturally associated with “outside” in the same way that dirt is, flowers (unlike dirt) cannot be used to detract from the good reputation or positionality of a homeowner – represented in this exploration by white, high-ranking members of society – in the manner that dirt would. The diametric opposite of dirty is clean, but the flower – represented in this context by Prince and Said – has no opposite. Though it is associated with beauty, as Prince and Said are in Russia, the flower is not a singular or defining

¹²⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, New York : Routledge, 2002.


representation of beauty (in the way that Circassians had been in Russia and subsequently in America). Prince's and Said's Russian receptions (as well as Said's reception in parts of America) are so contingent upon superficial criteria they could never be mistakenly placed in Douglas's category of purity with the noble, landowning, white class of society. In the absence of that extremity of favorable possibility the pendulum of Prince's and Said's characterization could never swing to Douglas' other extremity of categorical disfavor: danger.

In the early part of the twentieth century, however, the "mark of blackness" within the context of Russian society takes on a different meaning. By 1932 when Langston Hughes and the "Black and White" film group sailed to Moscow, Russia's imperial facade had been shattered and replaced by Bolshevik revolutionaries. The "fashion" of importing black workers had no place in a society that was now run by the working class. The new governance appealed to a growing black intellectual radical populace which had abandoned hope in the institution of American democracy. Half a century had passed without the fulfillment of Reconstruction promises. If American iniquities were to be redressed, a total rejection of the dialectical thesis of Democracy needed to occur. It appeared, to many, that the Bolsheviks had instituted precisely the type of change in Russia that could eradicate the race and class problems in the United States.

Meanwhile, Russia was watched closely and judged harshly by American critics. As a result, the propaganda wars between the two countries intensified. American newspapers carried frequent stories about the pitiable state Post-Revolutionary Russia. In addition to their awareness of the harsh criticism they suffered at the hands of the American press, Russians were equally aware of the harsh conditions under which African American people lived. In the midst of this more blatant friction, Russian socialists found a new use for black people. Rather than answer the American denigrations directly, Russia opened its doors to the masses of disenfranchised black Americans with the hopes that they could establish both a political diasporic community and encourage African Americans to filter Russian propagandist messages through the American press. Though conceptually brilliant, the plan backfired. Certain members of the Moscow film group would leave Russia feeling less like the flower and more like Douglas's matter out of

place. The pendulum would swing from pure admiration, which so many members of the film group held for Russian revolutionaries, to categorical disfavor. As a result, the pioneers of communist government were in danger of contributing to, rather than undermining the campaign of negative press run by the American media.

“Black and White” and Read All Over: *the Moscow Movie, the American Press, and the Promise of a Political Diaspora*

While many African American people were aware of the Bolshevik Revolution few, appear to have conceptualized ways in which the failed 1825 Decembrist Revolt prefigured the 1917 uprising. Nancy Prince’s treatment of the Decembrists, while fascinating, focuses more closely on human casualties than on the call for change. What Prince describes as the people crying “with one voice for Constantine” succinctly captures the major rallying call of the event without addressing  complex politics behind the Revolt.¹²⁹ Recent studies reflect the revolutionary intentions of the small group of liberals who comprised the Decembrist party. Their desire, contrary to Prince’s understanding of the party, was to institute a Russian constitution, though they were unable to decide unanimously on the type of constitutional government they wished to institute. Their aspirations ranged from a conservative constitutional monarchy to the public distribution of land. That the Revolt took place after the untimely death of Tsar Alexander I and previous to Nicholas’ accession to the throne was more a decision based on opportunism than affection or support for Constantine.¹³⁰ The confusion caused by Constantine’s renunciation of the throne (by virtue of his marriage to a Polish woman not of royal blood) and Nicholas’ initial pledge of allegiance to Constantine motivated the ill prepared group to make its bid for power. Ultimately the uprising was put down, but the spirit of the movement lingered, simmering beneath variously oppressive and (comparatively) lenient monarchical rule.

Among the more reform-minded monarchs was Alexander II, whose conservative education and obedience to his iron-willed, anti-liberal father Nicholas I, could not have prepared his subjects for the reforms he would institute under his regime. Alexander’s prudence and intellect moved him to end the anachronistic institution of serfdom. According to official records indicate that between 550 and 1,467

¹²⁹ Nancy Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (Boston : The Author, 1856), 31.

¹³⁰ See Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 319-322. Riasanovsky’s is a monograph which engages with a multitude of important histories of Russia making it one of the more comprehensive texts of its kind. For that reason, I use Riasanovsky extensively for context.

peasant uprisings occurred during the nineteenth century alone.¹³¹ The frequency and increased severity of the revolts was more than enough to secure the attentions of the ruling class.

Russian thinkers from various backgrounds and with differing agendas frequently agreed on the moral, social, and political deficits of such an institution.¹³² Alexander Pushkin, great grandson Peter the Great's Abyssinian General Hannibal, had written poetry as well as a novel entitled, *The Captain's Daughter* (1836) emphasizing the need for the abolition of serfdom. Ivan Turgenev's 1852 collection of stories, *Sportsman's Sketches*, depicts serfs as rounded, "unforgettable" characters.¹³³ In sharp contrast to the American abolition of slaves, Riasonovsky observes, "virtually no one defended that institution."¹³⁴ Thus, Alexander thought it best to "abolish serfdom from above rather than wait until it began to abolish itself from below."¹³⁵ Something of a Reconstruction contract was drawn up addressing the needs of the land owners, who required remuneration for their loss of labor and/or land, and liberated serfs, whose legal position in the Russian hierarchy had to be negotiated. Though the emancipation reform failed to sufficiently provide for the needs of the serfs (they received 18% less land than had they had been permitted to till for themselves prior to the reform), one of the long term results of their abolition was "a major decline in the gentry."¹³⁶ On February 19, 1861—four years prior to the abolition of American slavery – Alexander II signed the emancipation manifesto liberating the serfs.

Other reforms that earned Alexander II the title of "Tsar-Liberator" included introduction of a system of elected provincial and district assemblies (*zemstvo*) The people were afforded representation based on land ownership. Because these assemblies were comprised of members elected by their peers

¹³¹ Ibid., 369-70.

¹³² Nicholas I had essentially rejected the advancements associated with Peter's and Catherine's Enlightenment thinking and returned to the ideals of the old regime, essentially "freezing" Russia in time while Western Europe transformed. There was pressure to keep up with changing times, but Nicholas' loss in the Crimean War – a loss which historians acknowledge was in many ways related to "the poor physical condition and listlessness of the recruits and in the general economic and technological backwardness of the country," also evidenced the need to abolish serfdom. Ibid., 326, 370.


¹³³ Ibid., 370.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 371.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 373

regardless of class, peasants as well as the gentry had representation.. The legal system also underwent transformation. The judiciary became an independent branch and the tenor of maneuvers of justice became more public and far less secretive and bureaucratic. Finally, obligation of military service was “extended from the lower classes alone to all Russians, while at the same time the length of active service was drastically reduced – from twenty-five years in the beginning of Alexander II’s reign to six after the reform of 18747 – and a military reserve was organized.”¹³⁷

Though Alexander’s reforms had many supporters amongst Russian liberals, of course, the emperor and his successors drew criticism from the Russian gentry who, with the institution of many of these policies, were losing their grip on power and prominence within society.. But Alexander’s reforms did not keep pace with expectation by many for more rapid and extensive change. In some ways the reformation of Russian government frustrated liberals and peasants who hoped for a complete overhaul of the old system simultaneously inciting indignation amongst the noble classes. The fury of his subjects catalyzed in the development of a revolutionary society called “Will of the People” – which had broken off from the 1876 “Land and Freedom” Society. Its members “believed that, because of the highly centralized nature of the Russian state, select assassinations of key figures could strategically serve the goals for change, as well as provide the requisite political instruction for an educated society and the masses.”¹³⁸ Both men and women served on the Executive Committee, and together they decided that Alexander II’s post 1866 reactionary governance over his increasingly rebellious subjects had to end.¹³⁹ Multiple attempts on his life during the 1860s and 1870s prompted Alexander II to institute more moderate policies, embracing the possibility of additional reform. Just as he was mulling over a proposal which called for greater representation of the Russian people in Russian government, Alexander was slain. 

¹³⁷ Ibid., 377.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 384

¹³⁹ Note that in 1866 a student, Dmitrii Karakozov, attempted to assassinate Alexander II. Many historians view that as the pivotal moment in which the emperor shifted from regime built on a platform of reformation to one that focused on establishment of the status quo. Ibid., 380.


Alexander II's assassination and concerns about increasing radicalism of the population had a strong impact on his successors Alexander III and Nicholas II. Instead of picking up on Alexander II's openness to additional reform at the time of his death in 1881, there was a move to reassert order and the firm hand of autocracy. The reigns of Russia's last two emperors recalled the policies of their ancestor Nicholas I inasmuch as xenophobia and the painful (and often violent) process of Russification were concerned. Still, Alexander II's early policies precipitated industrial and economic reforms that Alexander II and Nicholas II could not impede. Capitalism grew in prominence and the growing population of disenfranchised workers of Russia began to organize.¹⁴⁰

Marxism attracted many of the proletariat. The Social Democratic (SD) appeared in 1898, sixteen years after Russian intellectuals organized the Emancipation of Labor Group. By 1903 the SD had split into two separate parties: the Menshevik (minority) and the Bolshevik (majority) parties. The few supporters Nicholas II had amongst workers turned on him after what has come to be known as "Bloody Sunday" – an historical moment on January 22, 1905 when the Russian police killed approximately one hundred thirty workers demonstrating at the capital. The annihilation led to "a decisive break between the tsar and those numerous workers who had remained loyal to him."¹⁴¹ Increased pressure from the Russian populace forced Nicholas II to repeal some of his more conservative legislation, but his attempts were in vain. His March 1905 declaration that a "consultative assembly would be convoked as well as his decision to repeal laws against ethnic minorities was met with "new stikes, mass peasant uprising...active opposition and revolutionary movements among national minorities, and even occasional rebellions in the armed forces..."¹⁴² The revolutionary tide culminated in October when a general strike occurred from October 20th to October 30th 1905. The intentions of the Russian people were made clear: Russians seemed to act with a single will, as they made perfectly plain their unshakable determination to end

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 404-05.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 407.

¹⁴² Ibid.

autocracy.”¹⁴³ It was during this period that the workers in St. Petersburg created a council, or *soviet* in order to direct the strike. Nicholas II conceded to certain demands, and soon after his “October Manifesto” the empire of the Romanovs became constitutional monarchy. 

The constitutional monarchy saw the organization of four Dumas – the first two of which were dissolved inside of three months as a result of impasses between the government and the representative assembly. In June, 1907, Nicholas II disregarded the constitution and drastically altered electoral law in order to establish a Duma that would cooperate with his conservative government. Peasant representatives were cut in huge number while “the landed gentry were assured 50 per cent of the seats in the Duma.”¹⁴⁴ With these changes in place, the Third and Fourth Dumas remained intact for the duration of their five year terms, but that “stability” came at a huge price.¹⁴⁵ Nicholas II and his Third and Fourth Dumas were clearly devoted to the interests of the landed gentry despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Russia’s population was comprised of peasants. Revolution was imminent, and it came swiftly.

When bread and coal shortages occurred in 1917, riots broke out in the capital (renamed Petrograd during World War I as St. Petersburg with its Dutch ending sounded too Germanic) on February 23. The military was sent to stamp out the incendiary revolts, but the battalions “fraternized with them instead.”¹⁴⁶ Nicholas II’s absence from the capital left the government with no leadership prompting the officials who remained to go into hiding. In need of guidance, the citizens of Petrograd turned to the Duma. By March a provisional government was established with Octoberist and socialist leaders of the Duma taking high-ranking positions. Thus the “Progressive Bloc” had established control of the assembly. Though the United States and other democratic countries fully supported the Provisional

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 411-412

¹⁴⁵ The Fourth Duma, which was assembled in 1912, was cut short by a few months as a result of the revolution of 1917. Perhaps the most notable minister of imperial Russia was Peter Stolypin. Stolypin was the architect of the government’s legislative program and aimed to pacify and reform Russia. His politics were extreme Right, and many of his policies harkened back to the pre-reform days. He “acted as a nationalist and a Russifactor.” He was fatally shot on September 14, 1911 by a police agent who was thought to be associated with a revolutionary group. Ibid., 412-415.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 455.

Government, internally it had a rival for power, namely the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The Duma, in fact, had to consult with the new Soviet as it established the Provisional Government. In part the necessity of consultation between the Duma and the new Soviet led to the undoing of the Provisional Government. But there were other problems as well:

It had little in the way of an effective administrative apparatus, the tsarist police in particular having largely gone into hiding...It refused to recognize the catastrophic condition of the country and misjudged the mood of the people. Thus...it continued the [World] war, believing that the Russians, like the French at the time of the great French Revolution, would fight better than ever because they were finally free men.¹⁴⁷

The frustrations of the Russian people were only exacerbated by the Government's inability to address issues of crucial significance. Fully aware that their elected positions were owed entirely to Nicholas' unconstitutional electoral reforms and that their new positions as high officials occurred by chance, members of the Duma felt an especial urge to establish a fully democratic constituent assembly. Unfortunately for the future of the Provisional Government, the Duma leaders failed to act quickly enough, preferring to defer important decisions until the constituent assembly had been established.¹⁴⁸

Refusing to passively accept the paralysis of the Progressive Bloc, other Russian leaders mobilized. Soviets formed all over Russia and enjoyed a large and immediate following. By September 13th the Bolsheviks had "captured a majority in the Petrograd Soviet...and in the Moscow Soviet a week later."¹⁴⁹ With the Bolsheviks on the rise, their leader Vladimir Lenin came out of hiding¹⁵⁰ and urged them to seize power. With the assistance of Leon Trotsky (whose organizational skills and intellect served the party and Lenin well), the Bolshevik Revolution succeeded on October 25, 1917.¹⁵¹ Soviet Russia emerged from the rubble of the imperial structure.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 457.


¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 460.

¹⁵⁰ During what has come to be known as The July Days (July 16th-18th), "radical soldiers, sailors, and mobs, together with the Bolsheviks, tried to seize power in Petrograd." Lenin, leader of the Petrograd Bolsheviks, was of the opinion that the uprising was premature, so he fled to Finland to avoid incarceration. Ibid., 459.

¹⁵¹ This date reflects Russia's then-used Julian calendar. By the current Gregorian calendar the date would be November 7, 1917.

Vladimir Lenin had taken the Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels three step sequence of change postulate – that is that a given condition (thesis) would eventually be opposed within itself (antithesis), creating a tension that would establish a new condition (synthesis) . This dialectical dynamic and other aspects of Marxist thought were adjusted by Lenin to meet needs of Russia and, to an extent, the changing world at large. Among the most significant of his contributions was Lenin’s redressing of Marx and Engels “neglect of the peasants in their teachings.”¹⁵² Rather than viewing the peasant class as actors in the revolution Marxists tended to relegate them “as petty proprietors to the bourgeois camp.”¹⁵³ Lenin, however, concluded that poor (and eventually middle) peasants could be central to the establishment of a new order. Lenin’s other notable updates to and expansions of Marxism “account[ed] for such recent developments as intense colonial rivalry, international crises, and finally the First World War.”¹⁵⁴ Capitalism when allowed to run its course morphed into imperialism, according to Lenin. Opposing the simplistic Marxist vision of a victorious socialist revolution over “a few supercapitalists,” Lenin argued that “gigantic conflicts” would characterize “the dying stage of capitalism.”¹⁵⁵ When Bolsheviks, with their communist leanings, rose to power in 1917, they had to contend with some obvious departures from Marxist-Leninist ideology: “ Revolution erupted in Russia—the “weakest link” in the capitalist chain- - rather than in the advanced capitalist Industrial West..¹⁵⁶ Despite the pressures of readjusting their predictions, Russian Communist leaders maintained their dedication to the pursuit of lofty goals – “from Lenin’s determination to build socialism on the morrow of the Revolution, to [Joseph] Stalin’s fantastic five-year plans, to [Nikita] Khrushchev’s efforts to speed the establishment of a truly communist society.”¹⁵⁷

Lenin’s encouragement and organization of the Bolshevik Revolution afforded him power that he maintained until a major stroke in 1922 rendered him largely incapable of governing. Though 

¹⁵² Ibid., 468.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 473

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

remained faithful to his Marxist beliefs, Lenin showed a remarkable willingness to adapt the ideology to fit contemporary conditions. His New Economic Policy (NEP) is a good example of Lenin's ability to move ideology to accommodate existing realities.

By contrast, Stalin exhibited ruthlessness over willingness to compromise. Having operated behind the scenes as the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Stalin was in a unique position to play his adversaries against one another. With his influence he pitted the Right against the Left and allied himself with other front-runners for the positions of Secretary General and Chairman in order to defeat and then expel his most able opponent, Leon Trotsky. From attention by other leading Marxist toward international revolution, Stalin sharply moved focus to building "socialism in one country." That is he articulated a goal to "advance Marxism in the Soviet Union without dependence on problematic developments elsewhere."¹⁵⁸ His sweeping victory in December 1927 as official General Secretary of the Communist Party marked the beginning of Stalin's Five-Year Plans.

The First Five-Year Plan (FYP) is central to establishing context for this particular chapter. Though the primary goal of the First FYP was to establish financial and industrial independence (and advancement) for Russia, the shortage of consumer goods led to "rationing, and various other privations and hardships."¹⁵⁹ Members of the Moscow movie group had been following Russian politics. In preparation for their trip to Russia, the African American film group packed food items and toilet paper with the understanding that those items were available in limited supply. According to many of the film group members, the pervasive deprivation they encounter in Russia was happily accepted by its citizens because of its ubiquity. Such a positive interpretation of the deficits was not uniformly shared by Russians themselves. Some of the travelers, including Louise Thompson Patterson, Loren Miller, and Langston Hughes contribute to the propaganda wars by countering the American media's reports of their mistreatment in Russia. Their rebuttals are based entirely on the fact that, unlike citizens of Russia, they

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 497.

are not subject to rationing. In fact, the food, board, and travel expenditures that are covered by the Russian government far exceed anything they could afford on their American salaries. In order to fully explicate their contributions to the propaganda wars, I begin with a brief explanation of the goals of the film, followed by an analysis of the publicity surrounding this highly politicized film project.

“Seizing on Meshrabpom-Film’s postponement of the picture, ‘Black and White’, . . . enemies of the Soviet Union are busily engaged in a new campaign of slander and lies directed at the USSR. Newspaper correspondents, particularly those of the United Press and the New York Herald-Tribune, have branded the postponement as a cancellation and assert that it is due to the desire of the Soviet Union for recognition at the hands of the United States.”¹⁶⁰

If any questions remained concerning the impact Black travelers had on American international politics, this important historical moment – a period during which the Soviet experiment, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Depression converged – laid those to rest. The American media had a field day when in June, 1932, Langston Hughes, Loren Miller, Louise Thompson, and eighteen other African American students, actors and writers boarded the North German Lloyd Liner Europa at midnight for the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) to make a movie that was expected to be the first “realistic portrayal of Negro life in America.”¹⁶¹ Apart from the opportunity to advance their variegated career paths, the journey to Russia had strong political implications for the film’s African American participants. Several of the sojourners had come to believe that communism was *the* answer to America’s race problem, and according to the Meshrabpom Film Corporation “Black and White” (or as it is now commonly known – the ill-fated Moscow Movie) would “create a closed cultural tie between the Negroes

¹⁶⁰ Loren Miller, Letter, September 2, 1932, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2 Folder 3, page 1, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

¹⁶¹ “20 Sail For Russia To Make Negro Talkie,” *Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, 25 June, 1932, 5.

of [America] and the workers of the Soviet Union.”¹⁶² However, certain members of the film group began a very public campaign to sever that tie.

When four disgruntled members¹⁶³ of the group waged war against Meschrabpom for postponing the film, attorney Loren Miller, co-organizer of the Moscow expedition, penned one in a long series of scathing letters in defense of the Soviet Union and its socialist experiment. The September 2, 1932 missive was exempt of the diplomacy that many of Miller’s other letters had exhibited. This letter opened with the assertion that the white press had launched a campaign against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and closed with the pointed remark that “distorting the postponement into a cancellation and confusing the issue to make the Soviet Union, the revolutionary movement appear synonymous with Meschrabpom, the newspaper lackeys of American imperialism seek to ‘prove’ to Negroes that they have been ‘betrayed’ by the international proletariat and by the working class of the Soviet Union.”¹⁶⁴ The purpose of this distortion, according to Miller, was to “further isolate the Soviet Union from the working masses of America and to keep the Negro isolated in order to further his exploitation.”¹⁶⁵ Interestingly, Miller’s otherwise active and charged language turns decidedly passive at this point. It is true that the oppression and exploitation of black American masses was an institutionalized American reality. However, it is probable that the propaganda spread by the American media reflected the government’s fear of a black-initiated upheaval (and possibly even an interracial working class upheaval) similar to Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution. White and black newspapers’ handling of the departure of the Moscow 21 and subsequent postponement of the “Black and White” film as well as the documents exchanged between Meschrabpom Film Corporation and Louise Thompson, the film’s black American secretary, prove rather instructive on this point.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ From this point forward I will refer to these four members as the Moscow 4.

¹⁶⁴ Loren Miller, Letter, September 2, 1932, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2 Folder 3, page 3, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

The black media, led by the *New York Amsterdam News* report of March 9, 1932 published a photograph of black vice presidential candidate on the Communist Party's ticket, James W. Ford, "taking notes" while Otto Katz, the director of Meshrabpom Film Company discussed the details of the "Black and White" photoplay.¹⁶⁶ Beneath the photograph appears an article entitled, "Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here: Picture Will Be Called 'Black and White' Without the Buffoonery and Sentimentality of Others of Its Kind." According to the article, Ford, who had just returned from a trip to the USSR, organized a committee for the selection of "twelve to twenty Negroes" for the film. The article reads more like an advertisement encouraging black Americans from all walks of life to participate. "As the Russian films do not feature movie stars," the article reads, "the actors need not all be professionals. Many of the most successful of the Soviet photoplays have been produced without the use of experienced movie actors."¹⁶⁷ The inability of many interested parties to pay for their passage to Moscow and to receive a five month sabbatical from work posed a serious obstacle to the recruitment efforts.

Of the twenty-one black people (one member of the film group, Allen McKenzie, was white) to make the journey, six (Langston Hughes, Wayland Rudd, Juanita Lewis, Thurston McNairy Lewis, Dorothy West, and Estelle Winwood) had some theater experience.¹⁶⁸¹⁶⁹

The next installment of articles, once again led by the *New York Amsterdam*, appeared in June "Announc[ing] Players for Soviet Picture."¹⁷⁰ The June 11 *Afro-American* headline reads "Actors to Sail for Russia on June 14." It was not until June 16, however, that *The Philadelphia Courier*, one of the most widely read black publications, began to cover the story. Even then the article could hardly be considered thorough. Compared to the correspondents for other black periodicals, the anonymous author of the *Courier* article barely seemed interested:

¹⁶⁶ Subsequent to the *Amsterdam* running the story other black publications, such as *Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, *Chicago Defender*, and the *Afro-American* followed suit covering the same information that *New York Amsterdam* had produced in its articles. All of the articles discussing the organization committee ran in March.

¹⁶⁷ *New York Amsterdam News*, 09 March, 1932, 7.

¹⁶⁸ Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2008), 115.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷⁰ *New York Amsterdam News* 9 June 1932, 7.

About 25 Negroes left New York on the Europa for Moscow on last Tuesday evening for the purpose of making a sound picture of Negro life in America under the sponsorship of the Soviet government.

“Black and White” will be the name of the film, which will be produced in English, German and Russian. The picture will portray the Negro as he really is, in contrast with the “darky” types as found in American films. It will tell the story of the Negro from 1850 to 1932, showing his sufferings and advances.

The party included Langston Hughes, poet, Matt Crawford, Taylor Gordon and Loren Miller. The group will be on salary as soon as they reach Russia.¹⁷¹

Whoever is responsible for the piece is likely interested in Langston Hughes more than the other three men named in the article (and perhaps more than the Moscow Movie). Hughes had been on tour in California while anxiously awaiting the departure of the group. We know for certain that “Miller and Crawford had accompanied Hughes on the California leg of his tour.”¹⁷² Years earlier Taylor Gordon, a writer and concert singer, had met Hughes through Carl Van Vechten at a party thrown in Hughes’s honor. It is quite possible that either his performance background or his connection with Hughes, prompted Gordon to go to California as well.

Writers for *The Afro-American*, *The Atlanta Daily World*, and *The Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, however, are far more interested in the political potential of the trip. Though the primary function of their journey was to film a movie about American race relations, the unspoken understanding was that the group’s members were going to report back on Russia’s supposed eradication of racism and oppression. The burgeoning curiosity that white American citizens and members of government had expressed in the nineteenth century had taken a sharp turn from Russia’s contribution to the Enlightenment through science and letters to the Bolshevik-inspired socialist revolution. While black intellectuals were familiar with the works of such noted nineteenth century Russian authors as the Afro-Russian Alexander Pushkin, it was not until Russia’s imperial government was overthrown in 1917 that black publications honed in on the possibilities that Russia represented for its readers. Among the myriad of headlines that were sprawled across these publications was “Soviet Film Shows Efforts of Negro in

¹⁷¹ “Lang Hughes Heads Soviet Film Party,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 16 June, 1932, 7.

¹⁷² Carew, 122.

U.S.,”¹⁷³ “Black and White to Depict Exploitation of Negro,”¹⁷⁴ and the *Pittsburgh Courier’s* optimistic, “New Russia’s Liberality Toward Negroes Is Graphically Described: Phenomenal Rise of Rejuvenated Russia Is Modern Miracle – Formula For Success Is Equal Opportunities For All.”¹⁷⁵ The content of the articles is largely the same, most quoting from a letter composed by the “noted British writer,” Charles Ashleigh, who interviewed the film’s producer, Carl Junghans.¹⁷⁶

The summary that Junghans provides could easily serve as an answer to the questions surrounding the cancellation of the project due to the absolute impossibility of the project. The film is comprised of a prologue that provides a “glimpse” of the African slave trade, the Middle Passage, and American missionary work in Africa, a “swift impression” of the Civil War that emphasizes the shift from chattel to wage slavery in America, and finally, the climax depicts class struggle through, among other events, a lynching. Black and white workers come together to overthrow the “establishment.” Despite the naïve ambitions of the film’s writers and producers there is an air of hope for the success of the film and the possibility of an international and interracial alliance that might eradicate prejudices perpetuated by capitalism.

If the journalists at the *Pittsburgh Courier* appeared reluctant to report the news of the Moscow Movie, they certainly became much more interested when the film failed. In fact one of the paper’s editors, Floyd J. Calvin, would become central to the controversy over the film’s postponement. When news of the disintegration of the film project broke, the Associated Press, whose membership was largely comprised of white journalists, leapt at the opportunity to revel in the failure of the Soviet experiment. On August 13, 1932 the *New York Herald-Tribune* published an article based on a letter signed by the Moscow 4 which had been submitted to the Associated Press. The headline read “Negroes Adrift in ‘Uncle Tom’s’ Russian Cabin,” and the article suggested that the would-be film stars were duped by

¹⁷³ “Soviet Film Shows Efforts of Negro In U.S.,” *Afro-American*, 13 Aug., 1932, 7.

¹⁷⁴ “Black and White to Depict Exploitation of Negro,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 15 Aug, 1932, 2A

¹⁷⁵ “New Russia’s Liberality Toward Negroes Is Graphically Described: Phenomenal Rise of Rejuvenated Russia Is Modern Miracle – Formula For Success Is Equal Opportunities For All,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 Aug, 1932, A3.

¹⁷⁶ “Soviet Film Shows Efforts of Negro In U.S.,” *Afro-American*, 13 Aug., 1932, 7.

Soviet promises of equality. According to the disgruntled faction the cancellation was a “compromise with the racial prejudice of American Capitalism and World Imperialism,” and went on to aver that the Soviet Union was more interested in strengthening its relationship with the U.S. than fomenting its camaraderie with oppressed black people in America.¹⁷⁷ Another rumor had it that “According to the Moon-Preston story, Colonel Hugh Cooper,” the American engineer heading construction of a massive Soviet dam, prevailed “upon Stalin to order the cancellation of the film.”¹⁷⁸ The letter, signed by McNairy Lewis, Theodore R. Poston, Henry Lee Moon, and Laurence Alberga, indicated that the film was cancelled and that Lewis, Poston, Lee, and Alberga believe the reasons for the cancellation to be political. It reads:

Rejecting as unsound, insufficient, and insulting to our intelligence the reasons offered by Meschrabpom-Film [sic] Corporation for the cancellation of the “Black and White” film project, for the production of which 22 Negro men and women were invited to the USSR, we, the undersigned members of this group wish to state that:

WE BELIEVE that the production of the film, “Black and White”, has been cancelled primarily because of political reasons.

WE BELIEVE that this cancellation is a compromise with the racial prejudice of American Capitalism and World Imperialism, sacrificing the furtherance of the permanent revolution among the 12,000,000 Negroes of America and all the darker exploited colonial peoples of the world.

WE FURTHER BELIEVE that this act is one of the Right Opportunism on the part of Meschrabpom-Film [sic] Corporation, a Soviet organization – an act of political expediency, comparable with those ignoble concessions to race prejudice made by the Christian Church, the Socialist Party, and countless other social fascist organizations. Such surrenders have been constantly exposed and relentlessly flayed by the Communist Party and its auxiliaries.

Therefore, because of our aforestated convictions,

WE HEREBY CHARGE Meschrabpom-Film Corporation with base betrayal of the Negro workers of America and the International proletariat.

WE FURTHERMORE CHARGE Meschrabpom Film Corporation and any other organization which may support it in this stand, with sabotage against the Revolution.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Collection.

¹⁷⁸ “Say Race Bias Here Halted Soviet Film,” *New York Times*, 5 October, 1932, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

As the remaining fifteen¹⁸⁰ Moscow Movie travelers have pointed out in subsequent correspondence with the media and their families, this statement is replete with troubling conjecture and unsubstantiated conflation. For one thing, Meschrabpom Film Corporation had no connection with the Communist Party.¹⁸¹ In fact, it was a private organization with offices throughout Europe. Secondly, the point at which the protesting faction of the film group published their statement, the film had not been cancelled, but delayed. In addition to addressing these erroneous statements, the Moscow majority addressed a second tactic employed by the Moscow 4. While Miller, Patterson and Hughes had been relaying positive information about Soviet Russia to the American Negro Press, the Moscow 4 faction had contacted the Associated Press and the New York Herald Tribune to express their disfavor with Meschrabpom and Russia.

According to Joy Gleason Carew, the reporters Moon and Poston had hoped to “gain recognition by the white press in the United States...Together with disaffected members Alberga and Thurston McNary Lewis, they were also quick to spread the news to the international press.”¹⁸² Moon and Poston would achieve their goal. On October 5, *The New York Times* published an article, “Say Race Bias Here Halted Soviet Film,” which promised to provide its readers the “Inside Story” from members of the Negro Troupe.¹⁸³ But recognition from the members of the Associated Press came at a severe political cost. In this lengthy but important letter to Louise Thompson Patterson, journalist and communist party member Wilfred Adolphus Domingo expressed his concern over the white press’s treatment of the story and the possible ramifications it might have for the reputation of the Soviet experiment:

¹⁸⁰ Though the number of American participants in this film reported by newspapers and other sources has ranged from 21 to 26, the archival information available to me via Emory University’s holdings of the Louise Thompson Patterson papers suggests that only 19 people sailed to Russia for the making of the film. Four signed the letter of protest and fifteen issued a collaborative refutation of that letter.

¹⁸¹ Loren Miller, Letter to Floyd Calvin, September 17, 1932, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library. Emory University.

¹⁸² Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians* (New Jersey:Rutgers University Press, 2008), 128.

¹⁸³ “Say Race Bias Here,” *The New York Times*, 6 October, 1932, 10.

...Following that, the famous dispatch from Moscow to the “Herald-Tribune” alleging that the picture had been abandoned and the members of the group stranded had me all confused and worried for a time....

The skeptical ones were quite sure that Russian Communists were no different to white Americans who were not committed to doctrines espousing human brotherhood. Your mother got in touch with me and I did everything possible to set her mind at rest.

With the situation as it was, I waited for a letter from you with details and was very glad to get your as of 25th giving a lucid and chronological review of events in the Soviet Union with respect to the film “Black and White....”

In fairness I will say that Alberga sent me a very long and detailed letter dated the 25th August in which he made as strong a case as possible. The main points were that Col. Cooper who has easy access to Stalin tried to dissuade McKenzie¹⁸⁴ from having any part in the picture as it would be hurting America. That looked bad. Alberta also stated that the papers (presumably those in Russia) admitted that the picture had been abandoned. This latter point I doubted. I suspect that he assumed that postponement, as Ralph W. Barnes,¹⁸⁵ who sent the news from Moscow did, is, in Russia, tantamount to abandonment. In any case I decided that the evidence advanced by the moon action was purely circumstantial. On the other hand, your letter contains the positive statement that the picture will be made in the spring when a suitable scenario is ready in the Meschrapbom outfit is technically prepared for the work.

Taking everything into consideration and remembering the history of the Soviet Union and the Comintern and the philosophy motivating the entire communist movement, I find it difficult to believe that there has been any surrender on their part to American or any other kind of race prejudice. Stalin and his followers are fully aware that nothing is to be gained by courting the distrust of the millions black people in the world; they know instead that for the Communist movement in Russia to be free from the constant fear of intervention it is necessary to make the colonial and oppressed peoples at least sympathetic to the U.S.S.R.

It is a great pity that the group could not stick together and always act as a unit. I know you are anxious to know of the effects of the alleged abandonment on work among our people. I think it has hurt. The Negro editors pounced upon the story and broadcasted it all over.

Mira Page’s interviews with you and Langston Hughes were fine, but so far as I know confined to the pages of the DAILY WORKER which paper is unfortunately not much read by whites not to speak of Negroes. I think that Meschrapbom should have made a denial and handed it to Barnes with a gentle hint that he encouch it in a dispatch or be in danger of being expelled from the country. I mean that steps should have been taken to force the denial being published in the Herald- Tribune.

¹⁸⁴ Note that McKenzie was the only white member of the American film group, which is likely the reason he would have been approached by Cooper.

¹⁸⁵ Ralph Barnes was a reporter for the *Herald Tribune*. Eventually, with the help of Joseph Barnes (no relation), he would “open up a *Tribune* bureau in Moscow – an enlightened step at a time when few American papers were willing to bear the expense or the domestic political risks of representation in the Soviet capital.” Richard Kluger, *The Paper: the Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 298.

This week's Amsterdam news contains the Moon–Poston phillipic mailed from Berlin.¹⁸⁶ The *TIMES* mentioned it. The editor of the Amsterdam news wrote an editorial and reinforced it with the vicious cartoon. I think the cumulative consequences will be disastrous. The only way that all this can only be overcome, I think, is for the Meschrapbom to make the film in the Spring as promised. Failure to do so will be fatal. Remember, the charges made that the word postponement is really a diplomatic way of saying that the picture has been killed. If the picture is made on schedule the lie will have been given to Moon, et al, and the Soviet Union will stand vindicated in the eyes of Negroes while those who believed otherwise will occupy an unenviable position.

Whatever happens now THE PICTURE MUST BE MADE...¹⁸⁷

A valuable archival source, Domingo's missive to Louise Thompson underscores the incommensurate media coverage of the Moscow 15's rebuttals. He also references, albeit briefly, the damaging effects that accusations of racism in the Soviet Union might have for the momentum of the Communist party in America. At least a month before the *Times* article hit newsstands, certain members of the black press had

¹⁸⁶ Henry Lee Moon and T.R. Poston, "Amsterdam News Reporters Tess Why Soviet Russia Dropped Film: American Prejudice Triumphs Over Communism, By Henry Lee Moon and T. R. Poston (Both former member of The Amsterdam News Staff.), *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 October, 1932: 1, 3.

Berlin, Sept. 28 (by mail). – Once again the forces of American race prejudice have triumphed, and this time in a land where it would be least expected – the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. Extending its long and powerful arm into the heart of the Workers' Republic, American capitalism has turned thumbs down on a Soviet project designed to aid in the liberation of the Negro masses in the United States, and the Soviet Union, under the leadership of the Communist party, has accepted its dictates. Upon demand of certain American business interests desirous of establishing diplomatic accord between the U.S.S.R and the United States, the film project, "Black and White," for the production of which twenty-two Negroes were invited to Russia, has been abandoned.

These interests declared that the production of such a film would be viewed in America as "meddling in internal affairs," and stated that the action might retard recognition of the Soviet Union by the American government and influence the latter's position on the Far East situation.

The Soviet Union faced with grave internal problems and threatened on its eastern front by Japanese aggression in Manchuria, has chosen to court American favor rather than to follow the program of the Comintern (Communist International) in promoting the Revolutionary cause among Negroes of the United States and the colonial peoples of the world. And the Comintern has accepted this compromise.

For weeks before official announcement of the abandonment of the film project was made it was persistently rumored among Americans in Moscow that the film would never be produced. It was known that many influential Americans were actively working against the project.

Foremost among these was Col. Hugh Cooper, builder of the recently constructed Dnieperstrol dam, the largest engineering feat of its kind in the world. Cooper is reputed to be the one foreigner who has free access to the offices of Joseph Stalin, secretary of the All-Russian Communist party.

In his opposition to the production of the film, the engineer had the support of Ivy Lee, public relations counsel for the Rockefeller interests, the Pennsylvania Railroad and other financial and industrial corporations. In Moscow, where he is a frequent visitor, Lee is believed to be retained by the Soviet Union as its publicity director.

When the Negro film group arrived in Moscow the latter part of June, Cooper was at Dnieperstrol. Upon hearing of the project, he hastened to Moscow for a conference with Stalin. Finding the Soviet dictator out of the city, the engineer secured ...[illegible]

¹⁸⁷ Wilfred Adolphus Domingo, Letter to Louise Thompson, October 6, 1932, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 1, Folder 22, Special Archives and Collections, Emory University.

run the story.¹⁸⁸ This time, the articles were devoid of the earlier optimism. As Domingo anticipated, some seized the opportunity to rail against the communist party.

One such reporter was *The Pittsburgh Courier's* Floyd J. Calvin. By 1932 Floyd J. Calvin was a renowned reporter. Ironically his journalism career began in 1922 when A. Philip Randolph hired him to serve as the associate editor of *The Messenger* magazine. The primary function of the magazine was to advance the cause of socialism to black Americans as Randolph and his partner, Chandler Owen, believed it was the only way to eradicate racism. Two years later Calvin would take a position as the eastern district managing editor for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which was the “most widely circulated African American newspaper of the time.”¹⁸⁹ On August 27, 1932 in a column entitled, “Calvin’s Digest” with the subheading “Soviet Bubble,” Calvin breaks the story concerning the disintegration of the Moscow film project based on the details he received from the disgruntled faction of the Moscow 21. He writes:

It is unfortunate that 22 American Negroes are virtually stranded in Moscow after having been taken to Russia under contract to play parts in a motion picture depicting the life of Negroes under the capitalist system in the United States. It is fortunate, however, that at least four of that number had the courage to sign a manly protest to the Soviet government against the treatment accorded them.

While we are sympathizing with those of our group who gave up good economic connections in this country to go off on a “wild goose” chase and lost out, and while we are also commending the all too few who showed the real stuff of which they are made by speaking out against the unfair treatment accorded them, it is timely to look a little further into the Communist propaganda among Negroes and to make some deductions and arrive at some conclusion on what attitude negroes should assume on them after this sudden debacle.

The communists are very brazen, outspoken and intolerant in their attitude and criticism of those who differ with them. They have unmercifully lampooned honest men and women who dared to speak their convictions on their plan of political action. This Russian episode offers a splendid chance for retort by those who have insisted all along

¹⁸⁸ The pattern I’ve noted with regard to these stories is that white-run papers obtained their information from the black newspapers without conducting any investigation of their own.

¹⁸⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *Harlem Renaissance Lives from the African American National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100-101. This footnote printed out in large type... check your formatting.

that they claim too much, and offer too much. They offer more than they can deliver and claim more than they can perform.

When the Soviet government bows to American race prejudice, that is proof that the Communists are, after all, on the whole, white people, and will sacrifice Negroes to monetary advantage just as the white people who control the capitalist system in this country will sacrifice them. The claims that the Communists are “different” are proven to be spurious. The claim that the Communists are not prejudiced, or cannot be influenced by prejudice, is proven false. The claim that the Communists offer the best program for political action by Negroes remains obscure and unconvincing, because the highest councils of the Communist party have entered into a solemn contract with a group of Negroes who represent our best – in youth, in education, in achievement – and have seen the contract openly repudiated by their government without themselves offering a burning protest.

The valiant and courageous James Ford must now bow his head in shame. How can he look his Negro comrades in the face and ask their support when 22 of his own brothers and sisters were stranded 4,000 miles from home on the avowed grounds of bowing to American race prejudice? James Ford, Communist candidate for Vice President, loses by the official action of the Union of the Socialist Soviets.

Negroes who were of radical bent are being forced back to the old truth that this country, with all its faults, is the home of their history in modern civilization, and of their hopes for the future. We have a just claim on this country, signed in blood and sacrifice for three centuries. Upon this claim we have built our hopes for the future. Soviet Russia is all theory to us. The Communists would not hesitate to lead the whole race up a blind alley, as they led the 22 Negroes now in Moscow up a blind alley. It is certainly logical to arrive at the first conclusion, since the second is a demonstrated fact.¹⁹⁰

Apart from the contemporary implications of this installment in Calvin’s column, its broader signification posits Calvin’s sentiments at the center of a long standing discourse on the democratic project, integration, and the “New Negro.”



The conversation concerning the best approach for African American people to be brought into the fold of American society had achieved national (if not international) recognition upon the 1925 publication of *The New Negro*. *The New Negro* intended to make the case for a coming of age within the black community, and, with it, a stronger claim for black participation in the project of American democracy. The promise of inclusion in the making of American civilization necessitated the exclusion of

¹⁹⁰ Floyd J. Calvin, “Calvin’s Digest: Soviet Bubble,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 Aug, 1932, A2. I quote this at length because it speaks to the concerns that Domingo notes in his letter as well as being central to Louise Thompson’s later attempt to persuade Meschrapbom to move forward Note that the same column ran on September 3, 1932 on the same page.

“the most important mass movement in black America of the 1920s,” namely Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association with its Back-to-Africa slogan. But even Garvey had to praise the commendable “effort . . . made to present partially the life of the race as it strikes you in Harlem.”¹⁹¹

Garveyism implied the existence of continuums between Africans and African Americans which many black intellectuals perceived as a threat to their ultimate goal to achieve full inclusion into the folds of American society. On another level, “New Negro” politicians remained optimistic about American democracy while Garveyites had given up any hope of inclusion. By the time Calvin entered the conversation it was communism which posed a new threat. Just as editor of *The New Negro*, Alain Locke summarily dismissed historical connections between “dark” Africa and black Americans, Calvin rejected the contemporary ideology that blacks had any commonality with Russian Bolsheviks. African Americans were just as divided on this issue as they had been on the question of continuums. What these explorations of African continuity and communism signified was an attempt on the part of the African American populace to create communities of acceptance to counter the rejection they experienced as marginalized members of American society. In both cases the empowered white majority disapproved, so the black bourgeoisie (as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier would label them) would do well to distance themselves.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ *The New Negro*, Alain Locke, ed. (Atheneum: New York, 1992), xx.

¹⁹² After the publication of *The Myth*, Frazier openly attacked Herskovits’s thesis, arguing that Black culture was in many ways a replica of the dominant White culture, and resisted the notion that African continuities survived beyond the Middle Passage. For Frazier, a pronounced integrationist widespread acceptance of Herskovits’s thesis might result in a stronger push for racial segregation. Herskovits’s blanket response to African American leaders who resisted “the reality” that Africa continues to influence African American culture were merely ashamed of their own past. Mildly put, Frazier resented the remark.

Time and disappointment would eventually spur Frazier to pen rather an antagonistic monograph entitled and attacking the *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). Written in two parts, the text first explains the series of historical events which lead to the rise of a Black middle class, and suggests that their imagined position of power stems entirely from the labor and support of the Black working class. Part two, scathingly titled “The World of Make Believe” the isolation of this rising class from both the White dominant culture, and its self-imposed separation from the Black masses:

“Lacking a cultural tradition,” Frazier argues, “and rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other, the black

Inasmuch as Frazier's black bourgeoisie is Calvin's "Negroes who represent our best – in youth, in education, in achievement," Calvin's anti-communist article anticipates Frazier's 1957 prediction that certain members of the black middle class would face isolation for its lack of identification with the black masses and its rejection by the white world. Long term, Calvin's observations would be more widely accepted, but the immediate response culminated in a backlash against what Loren Miller would describe as "petty bourgeois" blacks – which, specific to this situation, Calvin and the Moscow 4 represent – by a class of black intellectuals – represented most vociferously by Loren Miller, Louise Thompson, Langston Hughes, and Matt Crawford.

Both collectively and individually, the Moscow 15 fired back at the four outliers through black media sources. Their collective statement was sent to *The Crisis*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *Amsterdam News*, and other black-run newspapers and journals. While the primary purpose of the letter was to issue correctives to the information provided by the Moscow 4, it was equally important that they restore the reputation of the Soviet Union in the eyes of black Americans and relieve the white press of any fodder they had with regard to malign Russia:

We, the undersigned members of the Negro group invited to the Soviet Union by Meschrabpom Film to participate in a realistic picture of Negro life in America, "Black and White," issue the following statement:

We greatly deplore and emphatically deny all slanderous charges and rumors concerning the postponement of the film "Black and White" and subsequent welfare of our group. Because of scenario and technical difficulties, Meschrabpom Film found it necessary to postpone work on the film for one year.

bourgeoisie ...has created in its isolation what might be described as a world of make-believe in which it attempts to escape the disdain of whites and fulfill its wish for status in American life (Frazier 24).

It is evident by the close of its introduction that purpose of Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* is to question, if not fully reject, faith in the American democratic project. Not only is the White working class totally disinterested in his Marxist proposition to join forces with the Black working class to overcome elite White domination, but the few Black people who are able to obtain some wealth achieve this goal, not as a result of a sea change in American political thinking, but "the demand for manpower in a war against Nazism with its racial policy..."(Frazier 22). But his greatest disappointment lies with the rising Black middle class, who he feels is in the process of becoming "nobody," because they are too preoccupied with engendering the myths of their power and happiness to show concern for racial uplift.

This has in no way jeopardized the well-being of our group. Throughout our stay in the Soviet Union we have been housed in the best hotels, given food privileges and accorded all courtesies that the Soviet Union affords. The terms of our contract are being entirely fulfilled by Meshrabpom Film and postponement of the film has in no way affected this relationship. In addition we have received many privileges not contained in our contract. We have been given a tour in southern Russia and along the Black Sea. At the present time an extended tour is being arranged for us to Turkestan, the Caucasus and Armenia. Those who return to America are not only given their return passage, but will be reimbursed in American dollars for the money spent in paying their fare to the Soviet Union. Work has been secured for those who wish to remain here. In short, everything is being done for our accommodation.

The statement that the pictured has been cancelled for political reasons issued by four members of our group, McNairy Lewis, Henry Moon, Theodore Poston and Lawrence Alberga, is without foundation in fact and unwarranted in the light of the general policy of the Soviet Union. These false allegations are ridiculous and have already been repudiated by the press in its consistent attempts to arouse the distrust of white and black workers in the success of socialist construction in the Soviet Union where exploitation and oppression of racial minorities have been eliminated.

We deeply regret these malicious and unfounded attacks upon the people whose guests we have been all summer and who are doing everything possible for our comfort and entertainment during our stay in the U.S.S.R.¹⁹³

According to Joy Gleason, author of *Blacks, Reds, and Russians* there was merit to the Moscow 4's accusations. She cites an August 30, 1932 letter written by the U.S. Consul general, George S. Messersmith to the U.S. Secretary of state that indicated: "I have the honor to report that Col. Hugh L. Cooper of New York, returned from Russia several days ago and gave the Consulate General certain information with reference to conditions in Russia. Col. Cooper has been particularly agitated over the reception and kindly treatment which American negroes have had in Russia...He was much exercised over the much advertised film which was to be taken in Russia to show the ill treatment of negroes in

¹⁹³I quote this letter at length because it is the official response to the Moscow 4's collective statement that spawned this media circus. It was signed by Signed by Louise Thompson, Langston Hughes, Matt N. Crawford, Juanita C. Lewis, Mildred Jones, Loren Miller, Dorothy West, Alan McKenzie, Constance W. White, Homer Smith, Sylvia Gardner, Wayland Rudd, Lloyd Patterson, Mollie V. Lewis, and F. Curle Montero. Louise Thompson, Letter to the Pittsburgh Courier, Sept 19, 1932, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

various parts of the world.”¹⁹⁴ It seems that the Soviet Union struck a bit of a compromise in allowing several of the black travelers to tour the country even after it was apparent that the film could not be made. The correspondence between the consul general and U.S. Secretary of State notwithstanding, the film could not have been completed anyhow. The assumption made by the Russian film crew was that the black Americans who would star in the film were “genuine Negroes...” not “a bunch of metisi (mixed bloods).”¹⁹⁵

Perhaps at Domingo’s suggestion, Thompson drafted a formal letter interrogating Meschrabpom and the Russian government on certain points regarding the media circus that the Moscow 4 had incited with their statement of disaffection. She insists on receiving answers to five questions “based on the [August 13] news release:”

1. Why were these false stories permitted to be sent out to the hostile bourgeois press from Moscow?
2. Why has no attempt been made on the part of Meschrabpom Film to correct these stories by the issuance of a statement setting out what it asserts is the truth of the matter? Why has Comrade Katz not issued such a statement as he promised on August 8?
3. Where did the United Press get information of a certain kind, notably that regarding the types? (this same charge was later given to the group.)
4. Why was not the group given the information of the cancellation of the film on or before August 9th, the date on which the United Press felt so certain of its information that it had sent out a news release? (The group did not leave Odessa for the Black Sea tour until the night of August 9.)
5. Why did not Meschrabpom Film not take steps to inform the Negro newspaper men that it knew were in its own group of the true state of affairs so that they might have issued true versions of the abandonment of the film?¹⁹⁶

Attached to the list of questions – which in all reality read as demands – was a summary of the letter issued by the minority faction of the group. The tenor of the questions coupled with the inclusion of the statement issued by the Minority 4, suggests that by this point in their relationship the cultural connection which Russia and Meschrabpom hoped to foster with black Americans was tenuous at best. Prudently, Meschrabpom representatives attempted some damage control as it was evident that the reputation of the

¹⁹⁴ Gleason, 130.

¹⁹⁵ Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia* (Chicago : Johnson Pub. Co, 1964), 22-23.

¹⁹⁶ Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Folder 5, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

film company was, by this point, inextricably bound to that of Soviet Russia even in the eyes of their supporters.

“Comrade” Otto Katz, who had traveled to America to assist vice presidential candidate, Ford, with the organization of the “Black and White” film committee furnished a statement to Louise Thompson that would answer the critics of Meschrapom and Soviet Russia. The statement nods in the direction of some of the abovementioned miscalculations as an explanation for the deferral of the film. Thompson provided a copy of the statement to the Crusader News Agency from Moscow on November 8, 1932.

My dear Miss Thompson:

Having been requested to indicate our intentions concerning the Negro film, I hasten to inform you of the following:

- 1) The statements made by Moon, Post and McNairy Lewis in various newspapers, contrary to their own knowledge of the facts, that the interruption of our film, “Black and White,” was due to political considerations, I brand as completely false. How baseless these statements are – these statements which form a new link in the chain of *anti-Soviet propaganda* in the bourgeois press – you yourself will best be able to show from your knowledge of our films. I do not believe [sic] that I have to prove to you – after your four months’ stay in the Soviet Union and after your close study of our organization – that such an act is completely contrary to the character of our organization.
- 2) As we have already said, the film was postponed because of lack of preparation, and because of the necessity of revising the scenario.
- 3) The film is included in our plan for the year 1933, and we are counting on your further participation in the presentation of this film. We shall remain in close contact, as we have already promised, in order to be able to inform you in good time of the beginning of production, which, we hope, will come in the summer of 1933.

I give you permission to make any use necessary, [sic] of this letter.

With comradely greetings, Otto Katz

Otto Katz: representative of the Mezhrabpom Film Company

In addition to the physical appearance of the black American film troupe, Katz and the Meschrapom Film corporation had to issue revisions based on the group’s lack of connection to or understanding of what it was like to work in a steel mill. These were artists and intellectuals. Though they were filming in a

socialist, and therefore class-free country, “they carried with them social structures from the United States.”¹⁹⁷ Thus, the Soviet assumption that there was a certain class solidarity amongst the group was more than a little bit off the mark. In a letter to the Meschrapbom Film Corporation upon receiving news that the project was, in fact, abandoned Thompson underscores multiple political divisions amongst African Americans that speaks to the impossibility of class solidarity:

“the white bourgeoisie press will make capital of this unfortunate incident, but it will find a willing ally in the Negro petty bourgeois journals....A large section of this press is under the influence of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples....there need be no doubt that this organization will influence its press in open and covert attacks on the revolutionary movement and the Soviet Union using the failure to make the film as a basis. Counter revolutionary organs of the Social-Fascists, the renegade movements, and other will of course seize on the occasion for their own purposes.


The Negro nationalist movement of the Garveyites, long known as one of the most bitter counter revolutionary movements, will find in this incident new propaganda for its role of driving a wedge between white and black workers....¹⁹⁸

Though Gleason argues for the merit of the Moscow 4’s assertion that the Soviet government succumbed to the pressures of influential Americans in an effort to achieve recognition from the US government, there is another viable yet largely overlooked alternative. “Black and White” was set to be filmed in 1932, coincidentally at the same time that the presidential elections were taking place. It was no small coincidence that James W. Ford had put together the organization that would choose the cast for the film. Ford was running on the Communist party ticket along with white presidential hopeful William Z. Foster. In the minds of the candidates and their Russian comrades, there was a real possibility of spreading socialism to America thereby increasing Soviet influence. With no other working model of a socialist government moving toward embracing communism, US government officials would have to look to the USSR for a model. Thompson is keenly aware of the types of problems Foster and Ford will experience as a result of the film’s cancellation and she ensures that Meschrapbom is aware of possible long term ramifications: “....Comrade Ford is largely responsible for the formation of this group. Wherever it can

¹⁹⁷ Gleason 125.

¹⁹⁸ Louise Thompson letter to Meschrapbom Film Corporation, Louise Thomspson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, Box 2, Folder 5, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

be utilized, the failure to produce this film will be cited against the Communist Party campaign now reaching its crucial stages.”¹⁹⁹ Implicit in this remark is the strong suggestion that Soviet allies, such as Meschrapbom, consider the larger political impact of “Black and White,” as the abandonment of the film would not merely affect American blacks.

This particular reading of the film’s cancellation better explains the reaction of the white press, serving as an instrument of American governmental propaganda as well as a lens into the fears of white government officials. While multiple black publications eventually printed the counter-statements of Thompson-Miller-Hughes faction of the Moscow group, the *New York Times* dedicated one insignificant article retracting their earlier article, “Say Race Bias Here Halted Soviet Film.” In brief the article informed its readers that the charges of the Moscow 4 had been unfounded and that the film had been cancelled due to “scenario and technical difficulties.”²⁰⁰ The counter-statement Hughes had composed and submitted to the *New York Herald Tribune* went completely ignored. 

To be fair, the same accusations of disloyalty could be hurled at the American film group. The post-sojourn recollections of individual group members leave contemporary readers wondering if black American communists and communist sympathizers, such as, Hughes, Patterson and others, were truly prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to adhere to commit to a socialist plan. When confronted by Senator Joseph McCarthy, Hughes disavowed any connection to the Communist party, and as critic Ani Mukherji argues, fabricated the details of the script in order to explicate his political shift:

[Hughes] sought to figure the script as a Soviet strawman, bolstering his turn from radicalism. Although Hughes [parted ways with the Soviet-oriented left] as early as 1941, unlike many of his peers he never explicitly renounced the Soviet Union, nor did he ever accuse Moscow of betrayal. Instead... he managed to turn from radicalism on his own terms—employing a notion of “authenticity” drawn from African American cultural traditions, but legible to, and even promoted by, Soviet and American communists. In this way, Hughes was able to defuse anti-communist fervor without having to name names or otherwise betray the far left. The “Moscow Movie” chapter questions the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ *The New York Times*, 6 October, 1932, 10.

applicability of Soviet-styled equality to the United States²⁰¹, but leaves intact the faith that segregation and chauvinism could be reversed—at least on one-sixth of the planet’s landmass.²⁰²

In anticipation of the types of issues Hughes faced as a result of his communist associations, other members opted for anonymity where matters of the Soviet Union were concerned. Neil Homer Smith remained in Russia for fourteen years after the film’s debacle and “sent a number of dispatches back [to the U.S.] ...under the pen name ‘Chatwood Hall.’ Dorothy West published “A Room in Red Square” and “Russian Correspondence under the pseudonym ‘Mary Christopher.’²⁰³

While the choices Hughes, Smith, and West made can be argued as a prudent negotiation of social and political circumstance, the various group members’ acceptance of the differences between their treatment and that of Soviet citizens is harder to reconcile. Louise Thompson, for one, wrote to her mother about the conveniences available to them that were not even available to the Russian director of the film.²⁰⁴ Among their privileges were maid service, housing in Moscow’s Grand Hotel, and one “regular dinner each day at one of the restaurants.” Eventually they would receive “books to trade in the special stores for foreign workers,” whose items were otherwise “very expensive.” In the interim, Meschrabpom “sent supplies to ustwice [sic] – butter, eggs, bread, sausage, fish in cans, cookies and the like – all things that even the Russian workers do not get.”²⁰⁵ In his, *Black Man in Red Russia* (1964), Neil Homer Smith expressed an especial sensitivity to the poverty he observed amongst Russian citizens.

²⁰¹ This interrogation of Soviet-styled equality would become central to the disillusionment of socialist-leaning black Americans, for these itinerants were less interested in immigrating and more interested in transforming America into a more egalitarian society.

²⁰² Ani Mukherji, Chapter Two. Revisiting Langston Hughes’ “Moscow Movie” [holograph], 25.

²⁰³ See Gleason, 132-3.

²⁰⁴ Henry Moon notes “In Hollywood, directors of Eisenstein’s eminence live[d] in enviable luxury, even during the Depression. I remember the night we were guests in the apartment of Sergei M. Eisenstein, the world famous Russian film director....I was amazed by the barren and outmoded quarters which this great director occupied....This was dramatic demonstration of the leveling impact of the Soviet regime.” Ibid., 127.

²⁰⁵ Louise Thompson, Letter to Mother, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Collection 869, box 1, folder 24, Special Collections and Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

Unlike Thompson, he noted hunger and scarcity of food all around him.²⁰⁶ Henry Moon, on the other hand, seemed to tap into the pulse of the majority of the film group in his recollection of the circumstances of the Russian populace. Though he gestures toward feeling some guilt for the comparative luxury of the group's lifestyle he reconciled the special treatment by stating that poverty was "tolerable in the Russia of 1932 [because of its] universality....There was plenty of poverty in Moscow and Leningrad and Odessa...more indeed than in New York or Cleveland ... You could see it in their homes ...in their dress. You could see it in the scarcity of consumer goods in the relative high prices. The Communists had not liquidated poverty ...they had [spread] poverty so that the people as a whole were equally deprived."²⁰⁷ Perhaps the general sentiment of the group was that, despite their assumed identification with their Russian comrades, they were deserving of special treatment because the Soviet people's lack "creature comfort" couldn't compare to the "defeatism and spiritual decay" created by Jim Crow.²⁰⁸ No matter how they chose to reconcile their privilege, the fact is that the Moscow group's acceptance of an exalted status in Moscow more closely resembled a capitalist way of thinking than socialist thought processes. While this group of black travelers could agree that the international solidarity created by the Soviet experiment was an inspiration, like Prince, many of these sojourners had been unable to divest themselves of their American sensibilities and prejudices. So, even on Russian soil "the label *worker* did not sit so well."²⁰⁹

Despite the fact that Meschrapbom was not an instrument of the Soviet government, the latter was involved in the making of the film to the extent that it provided access to food, sundry items, and travel throughout the Soviet Union. Even Thompson, who was intent on clarifying for the American press the differences between Meschrapbom and the Soviet government, blurred the line between the two in her

²⁰⁶ Smith, 17. Gleason observes that this segment of his memoir was likely a recollection based on his altered status from special guest – during the period when the film was going to be made – to foreign traveler living amongst ordinary Russian citizens after the group left.

²⁰⁷ Quoted from Gleason, 127, who quotes from the Moon Collection, Box 14, Memoirs folder.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 128.

²⁰⁹ Gleason, 125.

final letters to the film company.²¹⁰ Her missive suggests that Meschrapbom should be concerned about the larger implications for Soviet Russia in the wake of the project's cancellation. If the USSR or Meschrapbom believed that socialism would find an easy ally in the African American community, Thompson disabused them of the notion. The political diasporic relationship with Russia had detractors (such as the NAACP) and competition (specifically Garvey's 'Back to Africa' movement) within the black community. "Black and White" provided an opportunity to silence critics of the Communist Party and at the same time garnering support for it. The tone of Thompson's letter is that of disappointment with a dimly lit ember of hope that her explanation of the ramifications of the film's abandonment might prompt Meschrapbom to move forward with "Black and White." In many ways, Thompson exemplifies a certain segment of the African American community inasmuch as she occupies a liminal space between frustration with the unfulfilled promise of American democracy and tenuous optimism toward the Communist Party. Hughes' recapitulation of the film debacle, as Mukherji points out, also reflects a similar tone. The desire to "defuse anti-communist fervor without having to ... betray the far left" suggests a lingering investment in communist governance.²¹¹

Nearly three decades later another group of African Americans, motivated by the same optimism, would make another attempt to establish a political diasporic relationship. Some members of the Black Panther Party chose Cuba as their place of exile because they were impressed with Castro's revolutionary identity and because they believed his assertion that socialism had eradicated racism in Cuba. While the Moscow 15 were able to place some of the blame of the failed attempt to establish political ties, the Black Panthers had no such buffer. Upon closer examination of the Cuban government, Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael became fully disaffected with socialism, communism, and – to some extent – with Castro himself.

²¹⁰ I am specifically referencing the letter from which I quoted on pages 74 and 75.

²¹¹ Mukherji, 25.

Where Diaspora Meets Disillusionment: *Panther Politics in Castro's Cuba*

“We had barely begun to sip the beer when a large stocky man across the bar, who was drunker than he should have been, raised his head, probably for the first time in three hours, and stared across the bar at us. Then he growled very drunkenly, ‘Abajo imperialisimo Yanqui! Viva Cuba Libre!’”²¹²

Inasmuch as the “Black and White” debacle was spawned by a failure of Russian socialist politics to address complex issues of race, the Moscow 4’s experience in Russia in many ways anticipates the more explosive encounters between Fidel Castro and the Black Panthers. By 1959 Russian leaders had learned that the Propaganda Wars had the potential to develop into real wars. As a role model and protector of post-Revolutionary Cuba, Russia tried to temper Castro’s aggressive anti-American crusade. But it was that very rhetoric, coupled with the success of the Cuban revolution, which attracted the attention of the revolutionary black community. But like Hughes, several members of the Black Panther Party began to question the applicability of Russian and Cuban-style socialism to America. Some interrogated Castro’s claims that socialism had eradicated race prejudice in Cuba. Ultimately the Black Panthers would be left bewildered by the disparities between Castro’s propaganda and his deeds and Castro would learn to exercise some of the temperance that his Russian role models had suggested.

A sizable segment of the Cuban populace had grown weary of their leader, Fulgencio Batista, and his continual kowtowing to the desires of American businessmen and more importantly, the American government. The Cuban people had fought hard to remove the “imperialist” American influence from their country yet Batista, in the interest of strengthening the Cuban economy through trade with the United States, became an apologist for the U.S. government.²¹³ There is sufficient evidence that anti-American sentiment in Cuba predated Fidel Castro’s regime by decades. However, the Cuban citizens’ support for Castro – who was a “known source of worry in the United States” – was enough for the Soviet

²¹² Baraka, Imamu Amiri, *Home: Social Essays* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 49.

²¹³ This is an abbreviated introduction to the political climate of Cuba at the time in which Castro rose to power. A more detailed historiography is provided later in this chapter.

leaders to deduce one important signification of the Cuban revolution: vulnerable as the country was its citizens would prefer almost any fate to remaining under the thumb of American governance.²¹⁴

The United States had become the dominant force behind resistance to revolutionary change in the world. For that reason the Soviet government approached post-revolutionary Cuba with some trepidation. According to Jacques Lévesque, author of *The USSR and the Cuban Revolution*, “the articles in the Soviet press for the greater part of 1959” are unusual in that there is an “absence of any mention of the Soviet support of Cuba or promises of support Several times in 1959, the Soviet press referred to

²¹⁴ Jacques Lévesque, *The USSR and the Cuban Revolution: Soviet Ideological and Strategic Perspectives, 1959-1977*, Deanna Drendel Leboeuf, trans. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), 9. Note that in May, 1975, Barbara Walters interviewed Castro and advised Castro of some of the views Americans hold about his political tactics and asked for clarification: “Some Americans believe that you did not become a Communist until after you had control of the government; that when you were in the mountains, the people did not know that you were a Communist, so that you deceived the people. I would like to ask you, when did you become a Communist?” Castro’s lengthy response situates him as a longstanding supporter of Communism; it is a response which might explain part of American officials’ fear of a Castro-led Cuban government. He states: “I became a Communist on my own, before reading a book by Marx, Engels, Lenin, or anyone. I became a Communist by studying capitalist political economy, and when I had some understanding of that problem, it actually seemed to me so absurd, so irrational, so inhuman, that I simply began to elaborate on my own formulas for production and distribution. That was when I was a third-year law student at the University of Havana. And I’ll tell you something more, because I do not hide my life, nor my origin, nor do I have any reason to invent things. If I were a false man, if my ideas were not deep and sincere, I would not have been able to convince anyone in this country, because when the revolution triumphed, the majority of the people were not Socialists, and the majority of the people were not Communists. But when the revolution triumphed, my convictions were Socialist, were Communist. I was born within a landholding family, I studied in religious schools, that is, my primary and secondary education. I arrived at the University of Havana being a political illiterate and no one instilled ideas in me. These ideas were the result of my own analysis and my own meditations. I am very sorry not to have had, since I was a child, someone who would have educated me politically. Since I had to discover that on my own, I became what could be called a utopian Communist. Then I discovered Marxist literature, the Communist Manifesto, the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Maybe there are some in Cuba and even outside of Cuba who remember listen-ing to all the criticisms that I made about capitalist society when I had not even read one Marxist document.... Before the revolution, our program was not yet a Socialist program ... It was a program of national liberation, very close to socialism. I would say that it was the maximum that at that time and under those circumstances could have been understood by the masses of the population. Although our program was not Socialist as of yet, I did myself have deep Socialist and Communist convictions. When the revolution triumphed, the people were still not Socialists or Communists because they were still too deceived, too poisoned through anti-Communist propaganda, McCarthyist propaganda, too poisoned by bourgeois papers, bourgeois books, bourgeois cinema coming exclusively from the United States.... What made our people Socialists and Communists? The revolutionary laws, the work of the revolution, persuasion, and education Now the people are Socialists and Communists.... That is a reality, and it is not going to change, no matter how many millions of tourists come here.”

Barbara Walters and Fidel Castro, “An Interview with Fidel Castro,” *Foreign Policy*, 28(Autumn 1977), 22-51.

and denounced the danger of U.S. intervention in Cuba...Explicit and resounding support could have been interpreted in Washington as unacceptable and unwarranted interference intended to turn the course of events in favor of Soviet interests...one of the most recurrent themes in Soviet articles about Cuba, in 1959 and even in 1960, was the firm and systematic denial of any Communist threat in Cuba.”²¹⁵ The Soviet government had every reason to proceed with caution. The Platt Amendment (named for the U.S. Senator who sponsored it) in the 1901 Cuban constitution, gave the U.S. the right to intervene on behalf of Cuba should the latter’s independence be threatened. The Amendment had been repealed in 1934, but the military base at Guantánamo remained as a reminder of U.S. intentions. The Monroe Doctrine (named for President James Monroe), however experienced a revival in 1954 with the U.S. “military intervention against a procommunist regime in Guatemala.”²¹⁶


The Monroe doctrine, in its essence, proclaimed the intentions of the United States government to provide military backing to South American countries, newly liberated from the Spanish government. In its most positive interpretation, the Monroe Doctrine provided South America the space and support to embrace democracy and to enter the “New World” with its rejection of the “Old.” At its worst, the Doctrine enabled the U.S. to impose its own brand of capitalist imperialism on unstable if newly liberated nations. The brief alliance between Russia and America ended after Germany was defeated in World War II. Tensions increased between the Western world, led by the United States, and the Communist world, led by the Soviet Union. Each of the superpowers was engaged in political proselytizing, but the US was especially invested in converting Cuba to democracy because of its proximity to America..

In 1960, Leroi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) published “Cuba Libre,” which touches in profound ways on the very subject of the supposed good intentions of the U.S. government in matters such as this one. He writes:

²¹⁵ Lévesque, 9, 10.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 9

The weird stupidity of this situation is that in most cases the so-called American intellectual is not even aware of what is happening in any place in the world. Not any place where it serves the interests of the various trusts and gangsters that situations be obfuscated. The intelligent American reads an ‘account’ of what is happening someplace in the world, say in the *New York Times*. He is certainly aware to a certain extent that some of what is being ‘accounted’ is slanted in the general direction of American ‘well-meaningness.’ The most severe condemnation of American leaders by the American intellectual is that they are ‘bumblers,’ unintelligent but well-meaning clowns. But we do not realize how much of the horrible residue of these paid liars is left in our heads. Who is it in the U.S that is not afraid of China? Who is it that does not believe that there is such a thing as “the free world”? That West Germany is ‘freer’ than East Germany? That there *are* communist influences in the Cuban government? We reject the blatant, less dangerous lie in favor of the subtle subliminal lie, which is more dangerous because we feel we are taking an intelligent stance, not being had.²¹⁷

What this excerpt underscores is the nimety of American propaganda where its government’s foreign policy is concerned. Moreover, it subverts the notion that America’s interventions are desired by the citizens of these foreign nations.  “We go to Mexico for a vacation,” Baraka asserts, “but not one in a hundred will come back realizing that there are students there getting murdered and beaten because they are protesting against the fraudulent one-party regime that controls the country, which is backed to the hilt by our ‘well-meaning’ government.”²¹⁸

During that juncture in world history, however, the Soviet Union had sufficient political and military power to launch a counter-attack on the United States’ counter-revolutionary war. The anti-American/ pro-Communist propaganda in Cuba was becoming more pervasive with Castro at the helm. While he was “not willing to let [Communists] participate in the higher levels of administration, he did favor their limited participation at other levels, such as in the trade unions.”²¹⁹ Cuban nationalism took on a more pronounced centrality in governmental activities; enemies of Cuban independence (whether perceived or declared) were removed from influential organizations in the country. Cuba would not be another Guatemala if Castro had anything to say about it.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Baraka, 53.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 53-54.

²¹⁹ Lévesque, 13.

²²⁰ Ibid.

It is plausible that Castro's openness to communist involvement in the new Cuban nation was meant as a deliberate invitation to the Soviet Union. The veracity of that statement is impossible to know for certain. It is clear, however, that Cuban propaganda encouraged the U.S.S.R. to "commit itself more fully and at the same time made it increasingly difficult for [the Soviet Union] to continue to maintain its hesitancy about such a commitment."²²¹ Thus began the public relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba. Just as the Cuban Revolution had occurred in various phases, so too did Soviet support of the nation occur in stages. It began with economic contacts. Minister of Foreign Trade, Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan, visited Cuba in 1960 during the Soviet trade fair. On the final day of his ten day visit, he and Castro signed a Soviet-Cuban communiqué promising the purchase of 425,000 tons of sugar by the USSR in 1960 and "one million tons a year for the next four years. In addition it granted a \$100 million credit to Cuba for the purchase of industrial equipment."²²²

Undoubtedly Mikoyan and Castro exchanged information about the intentions and views of their respective governments. As, Lévesque observes, the "tone used by the Soviet press and the number of articles on Cuba following [Mikoyan's] trip tend to show that he drew rather encouraging conclusions from his stay there."²²³ Three months later diplomatic relations were established between the two countries. On July 6, 1960, the U.S. government lashed out, "cutting by 700,000 tons the sugar quota it had committed itself to buy from Cuba."²²⁴ Three days later Nikita Khrushchev – First Secretary of the Communist Party and Premier of the Soviet Union – agreed to pick up the 700,000 tons of sugar that the U.S. had reneged on. In his July 9 speech, Khrushchev announced Soviet support for Cuba as well as an open denunciation of U.S. intervention in Cuba:

I would like to call attention to the fact that the United States is clearly plotting criminal action against the Cuban people. President Eisenhower has announced that the United States will no longer buy sugar or certain other products from Cuba. This is a threat to apply economic pressure and an attempt to suffocate the Cuban economy....It is obvious

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 14.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 16.

to everyone that the American monopolies' economic blockade could turn out to be the beginning of preparations for an intervention against Cuba and give warning that the time has passed when the imperialists were free to plunder and carve up the world as they wished...It would be wise not to forget that the United States is no longer at an inaccessible distance from the Soviet Union. Figuratively speaking, should the need arise, Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people by missile-fire if the aggressive forces from the Pentagon dare intervene in Cuba.²²⁵

In so doing, the Soviet Union's pragmatic approach to supporting Cuba had been replaced with a more rapid approach to commitment, and an all-out war of words began between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.. President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed that the United States would not permit a Communist regime to establish power in the Western Hemisphere. Khrushchev, in a July 12 press conference asserted that the Monroe doctrine, considered progressive during the period in which it protected Latin America from European colonialism, was now unnecessary and in fact antiquated given the reality of "an entirely new historical situation."²²⁶

The "Cuban Question" had taken on especial importance during the elections of 1960. John F. Kennedy accused the Eisenhower administration of "laxity and inaction regarding Cuba" and Nixon rebutted by "accusing Kennedy of irresponsibility by referring to the danger of a Soviet reaction."²²⁷ The *Wall Street Journal* chimed in with its own accusations against Kennedy for endangering the national security of the U.S. in order to obtain votes.²²⁸

The geographical position of Cuba (with its proximity to the U.S.) necessitated the Soviet Union's aggressive support of the Cuban Revolution; however, the fervor with which Soviet support had been granted in 1960 was tempered by the speed with which Castro exacted his Cuban revolutionary agenda. The wording of a Soviet-Cuban communiqué signed by Mikoyan and Che Guevara during Guevara's trip to Moscow emphasizes the Soviet government's hope that Cuba would maintain reasonable diplomatic relations with the U.S. for the purposes of economic stability. It reads,

²²⁵ Quoted from Lévesque, 17.

²²⁶ Ibid., 19.

²²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²²⁸ Ibid.

If the United States buys a certain quantity of Cuban sugar, the Soviet Union will cut its sugar purchases by a corresponding amount ... the Soviet Union agrees to take all steps within its power to supply the Cuban economy with vital and essential products, when they cannot be purchased from other countries.”²²⁹

The Soviet position on Cuban temperance ranged far beyond that of economic diplomacy. In fact, Khrushchev was of the opinion that Cuba be slow moving in announcing itself as a socialist camp due, in large part, to its vulnerability. According to his memoirs, Khrushchev failed to comprehend some of Castro’s political moves:

Before the invaders’ troops were completely annihilated [during the Bay of Pigs], Castro delivered a speech in which he reiterated his intention to set Cuba on the socialist road. We did not understand very clearly why he chose this moment. His speech had the immediate effect of widening the gap between himself and those who refused socialism...As for Castro’s personal courage, such a stance was just and admirable. But from a tactical point of view, it was not worth much.”²³⁰

Castro’s lack of discipline severely limited Khrushchev’s options with regards to Cuban support. On the one hand Castro had “postulated [Cuba’s] entry into the socialist camp without obtaining the approbation of [the Soviet Union],” on the other the loss of Cuba as “a member of the socialist camp and its retrieval by the United States would simply have been a catastrophe.”²³¹ The *certainty* of that type of catastrophe, it seems, eclipsed the *possibility* of war with the United States. The Soviet Union was steadfast in its public support of Cuba, Castro, and a socialist revolution. That unwavering support was likely based on the assumption that Communism in Russia could not continue to exist without the spread and acceptance of socialist ideology abroad.

It is a fair conclusion that Soviet military and economic backing allowed Castro the security to enjoy stronger ties with Cuban Communists, and a more violent characterization of his anti-American campaign.²³² Early invitations to revolutionary black Americans such as Amiri Baraka and Robert

²²⁹ Ibid., 22.

²³⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, *Souvenirs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1971), 466-7.

²³¹ Lévesque, 35. In fact it was not until 1962 that Cuba was definitively recognized in Soviet publications as socialist. See Lévesque, 31.

²³² Lévesque, 15. Note that I am aware of the “Bay of Pigs” and “Cuban Missile Crisis,” but the purpose of this exposition is not to provide a protracted investigation of U.S./Cuban conflicts, but to transition from my discussion of Russian-American conflicts to that of Cuban-American conflict as the latter relates to African Americans.

Williams was given top priority as part of Castro's international import-export propaganda as well as his blatant disregard for Cuban-American diplomatic relations.²³³ For example, Castro welcomed marginalized black Americans to Cuba, paid for their room and board, and hoped to encourage the export of socialist Cuban ideals to other disenfranchised peoples of the world, especially African Americans. This was the milieu in which so many Black Panthers entered the annals of Cuban history, and, as a result contributed to the propaganda wars between the United States, Cuba, and the Soviet Union.

²³³In the interest of maintaining focus on the central point of my thesis, I do not examine those important historical moments [Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis]. Instead, I point my readers to Lévesque's treatment of those topics in the first two chapters of his important monograph.

“I had believed that Cuba was a revolutionary’s paradise. I found a revolutionary’s graveyard instead.”²³⁴

---Former Black Panther Anthony Garnet Bryant, 1997

On June 26, 1969 *The New York Times* published an article reporting the discontent of exiled Black Panther Party members in Cuba. Its source, twenty-two year old Louisiana native Raymond Johnson, had been one of multiple airline hijackers to redirect a flight from its original destination to Cuba. “We feel the Cubans have a misunderstanding of the political and revolutionary thinking of black Americans,” Johnson asserted, “but primarily of the cultural aspect of the black revolution.”²³⁵ Instead of revealing a misunderstanding of black American thought by the Cuban government, Johnson’s statement highlights an exchange of misidentification. Party members were seemingly unaware of the intense and sordid history of Cuban racial and national identity politics, and the Cuban government underestimated the resolve of Revolutionary Black Nationalists to keep both race and class issues at the center of their movement. On a larger scale, the *New York Times*’ publication of articles of this type emphasizes the American media’s harnessing of Cuba-bashing by black Americans for the purposes of furthering American anti-communist/anti-Castro propaganda.

This exploration engages the various sources of this misunderstanding and propagandist exchange. It begins with an abbreviated treatment of Afro-Cuban people’s struggle for equality after the American military occupation in 1902 and before the 1959 revolution when Castro rose to power. Following with an examination of the evolution of the Black Panther’s politics– specifically their adaptation of Marxist philosophies – this chapter will explicate the Panthers’ ideological attraction to Socialist Cuba. Finally, it will engage the actions and testimonies of Robert Williams, a progenitor to the Black Panther Party, and Stokely Carmichael, Prime Minister of the Party. Their experiences informed

²³⁴Eric Pace, “Tony Bryant, Former Hijacker Turned Castro Foe, Dies at 60,” *New York Times*, 26 Dec, 1999, 42.

²³⁵ “Black Panthers in Cuba Discontented,” *New York Times*, 26 June, 1969, 4.

and impacted the exile experience of Eldridge Cleaver, who would prove to be the most vocal Panther member on the subject of his own disaffection with Cuba.

According to many Cuban officials, the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), which required a "multiracial alliance," resulted in freedom and equality for all Cuban citizens.²³⁶ Blacks and Whites had fought, died, and risen together, creating an unbreakable fraternal bond.²³⁷ Even more significant was the fact that this first war for independence birthed one of Cuba's greatest heroes – the mulatto general Antonio Maceo. With his notably African features, Maceo had become *the* symbol of Afro-Cuban pride. However, the recognition of Afro-Cuban contributions to the liberation struggle fell by the wayside during the United States government's occupation of Cuba. The United States played on the fears of race war and exported its own "post-Reconstruction model of American democracy," a model that privileged whites and deprived black citizens. Even when the U.S. government no longer possessed a military stronghold in the Cuban nation its financial investments in businesses and land permitted American businessmen to continue to influence Cuban politics.²³⁸ This particular political practice provided a convenient excuse for a long-standing social tradition of black oppression. With impunity, American-owned properties declined service to blacks. The Cuban government's response was to implore its black citizens to embrace American prejudices for the greater good of the nation's economy.²³⁹

Certain members of the privileged classes began to consider the question of Cuban identity, and whether or not Afro-Cubans were, in fact, "full members" of the nation. Though this notion was not necessarily the dominant one, there was enough support from the Cuban elite and North American government to provide a solid foothold for such ideas. The left and right, however, found a common

²³⁶ To be clear, this assertion has been disproved by multiple scholars of race relations in Cuba. Still, Cuban officials made the argument that race and color had little if any impact on the amount and types of opportunities available to Cuban citizens.

²³⁷ Alejandro De La Fuente, *Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001), 27.

²³⁸ Mark Sanders, *A Black Soldier's Story: The Narrative of Ricardo Batrell and the Cuban War of Independence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxx.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

ground in the belief that Cuba should be predominantly white racially, and largely European culturally. Fernando Ortiz, considered the founder of Afro-Cuban studies, was quoted in 1910 as having proclaimed the cultural inferiority of Cuba to that of English and American civilizations. Issuing a subtle corrective, Ortiz was careful to qualify this statement by rejecting racial essentialism. Cuban inferiority was not a racial issue, but one of lifestyle.²⁴⁰ The decision to “whiten” Cuba by refusing entrance to people of African and Caribbean nations, and encouraging an influx of Europeans was just the next step in an attempt to “civilize” the new republic and preclude a Black revolution like the one that had occurred in Haiti.

In order to meet the increasing demand for sugar and tobacco, the Cuban government began subsidizing the cost of importing white workers from the Canary Islands, Norway, Sweden, Spain, and Denmark. But by the 1910s, the Cuban government submitted to the pressures applied by sugar companies and lifted the legal barriers that prevented the introduction of Black workers into the labor force. The importation of Antillean workers prompted a major expansion of sugar export during and after the first World War. Internally, however, there was concern that Cuba was moving away from the whitening ideal and shifting toward the Africanization of the republic.²⁴¹

Despite their fears of becoming a nation dominated by blacks, the Cuban government had to “at least pay lip service to the ideal of an inclusive republic.”²⁴² After all, Afro-Cubans comprised nearly a third of the population, and therefore played a prominent role in politics. During elections, politicians made empty promises to be more inclusive of Afro-Cubans in the creation of governmental policies. Ultimately, black voters wanted to see black leaders. When he grew weary of politicians’ broken promises and outright deception, Evaristo Estenoz took the opportunity to create a black independent

²⁴⁰ See Fernando Coronil’s introduction to *Cuban Counterpoint*. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York : A. A. Knopf, 1947), xxi.

²⁴¹ De La Fuente, 46-7.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 58.

political party – Partido Independiente de Color (PIC). One of their major goals was to achieve “full participation” in the Cuban government on all levels.²⁴³

Cuban officials permitted the PIC to function for two years (1908-1910) with little incident. In 1910, just before congressional elections, legal action was taken against the group. Martín Morúa Delgado, one of few prominent Afro-Cuban officials, drafted a bill that would make illegal any racially exclusive political group. The bill passed, theoretically banning the PIC. Thus began the use of rhetoric that continues to be pervasive in Cuba. To place race above national identity was to be branded racist, and even evil.²⁴⁴ Despite these accusations, the PIC pushed forward. In fact, the Morúa law only made the PIC more vocal. Alejandro DeLaFuente points out that “as late as February 1912, [President Gomez] offered to repeal the Morúa law if the Independientes dropped the word “colored” from their party name.”²⁴⁵ The Independientes rejected the offer. What Alejandro DeLaFuente chose not to mention is that the PIC was not a racially exclusive group. Aline Helg observes that the group was comprised of blacks *and* whites.²⁴⁶ Whatever the details, the result was astonishing.


As the presidential election drew nearer, the conservative candidate, Mario Garcia Menocal, criticized the incumbent for not putting down the PIC’s revolt, and asserted that crushing the Independientes would be one of his first orders of business. The U.S., with its vested interest in reoccupying Cuba, questioned Gomez’s ability to control the situation. Embarrassed, Gomez obtained a congressional suspension of “constitutional guarantees,” thereby permitting General Jose de Jesus Montecagudo the authority to slay any blacks thought to be associated with the rebellion without

²⁴³ De LaFuente, 69.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 74.

²⁴⁶ See Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share : the Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 195.

interference. By the time the massacre was over, Monteagudo himself used the word ‘butchery’ to describe what the government had done to its black citizens.²⁴⁷ 

In the wake of the “Race War,” white civilians enacted a system of exclusion of Afro-Cubans. The Cuban government encouraged white citizens to establish volunteer militia to supplement the protection offered by the Cuban police force. The patrol system was not unlike the one that operated in the United States South during slavery. Black cultural symbols were deemed a threat to social order. Segregation reentered the political discourse. It seemed that the so-called unbreakable fraternal bond was eroding.²⁴⁸

Despite attempts to completely marginalize them, the Afro-Cuban community still maintained the power of the ballot. When it came time for reelection in 1924, President Gómez was vilified for what has come to be called the Massacre of 1912. Now instead of the PIC being deemed racist for starting a race war, Gómez was accused of trying to whiten Cuba by murdering blacks. By campaigning for change, including but not limited to the improvement of conditions for Afro-Cubans, General Gerardo Machado was able to rise to power.²⁴⁹ Though Machado made good on some of his promises to the Afro-Cuban populace (some blacks attained high-ranking positions in his administration), Machado posed another threat: the replacement of the nascent Cuban republic with a dictatorship. In the end, organized labor groups overthrew Machado’s regime. The strike was representative of another shift in the Cuban political milieu – the shift toward Communist thought.²⁵⁰

By 1933, the Communist-controlled Confederacion Nacional Obrera de Cuba (CNOC) gained power and widespread popularity amongst laborers of all classes. But the factor that distinguished the CNOC from the Partido Comunista de Cuba, and therefore earned it the support of the Afro-Cuban community, was its recognition that the issue of racism needed to be confronted. These concerns “were

²⁴⁷ De LaFuente, 75.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 75-7.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 188.

conspicuously absent ... from the PCC's agenda before the late 1920s."²⁵¹ As a result, the PCC had to make certain adjustments to their goals. Combining the nationalist agenda with the struggle for racial equality, the PCC used the fear of the racist U.S. government intervention to motivate Afro-Cubans to join forces with white Cuban laborers for liberty.²⁵² Although this rhetoric was hardly new to Cuban politics, the centrality of the race question had the potential to inspire some social advancement.

A Cuban chapter of the Ku Klux Klan mobilized while Afro-Cuban clubs were deemed racist. The Populist administration of Ramon Grau (1933-4)²⁵³ was dissolved and replaced that of Carlos Menideta – leader of Partido Union Nacionalista. Though Fulgencio Batista supported Mendieta, he managed to subvert the power of Mendieta's administration when it proved incapable of handling the task at hand – enforcing the nationalist agenda.²⁵⁴

Batista's rise to power brought about more questions on race. A mulatto, Batista had to reinvent himself in order to be deemed worthy of taking the reins. His "racial transformation," according to DeLa Fuente, "was achieved by discovering some 'indigenous' [or Indian] root in his origin. Still, the lingering suspicion that Batista had some black blood coursing through his veins may have impacted the perception of his regime as being sympathetic to the plight Afro-Cubans. The fact that Batista had every intention of morphing the Cuban government into one that was more palatable to the U.S., however, foreshadowed a total disregard for the representation and inclusion of the Afro-Cuban populace."²⁵⁵ The Communist Party responded to this inequity, which – given the cold war climate – threatened Batista's relationship with the American government. In response Batista organized the Bureau of Repression of Communist Activities in 1955.²⁵⁶

²⁵¹ Ibid., 191.

²⁵² Ibid. 192.

²⁵³ Grau's administration called for the forceful repatriation of immigrants no matter their color. Antilleans availed themselves of this opportunity in large number. Ibid., 104.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 207.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 207, 249.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 250.

Civil unrest birthed a group of young idealists – lead by Fidel Castro – who planned to return to the ideals of Wars for Independence hero, Jose Martí. Martí had asserted that the Ten Years’ War, fought by blacks and whites alike, had inspired racial fraternity. Race did not exist, and therefore, according to Martí, racism should not thrive.²⁵⁷ His statements were open to broad interpretations. The Afro-Cuban community focused on Martí’s idyllic republic “with all and for all.” Conversely, white citizens and political figures, fearful of a black-run government, frequently ignored the issue of racial oppression, and accused Afro-Cubans of racism when they spoke of inequality.

Under Castro’s regime, racism was supposedly eradicated by socialism. Purportedly, nationality took precedence over race and color. Thus, any mention of race was deemed Un-Cuban and counterrevolutionary.²⁵⁸ Afro-Cubans were asked to buy in to the project of Cuban socialism with the understanding that, with patience, they would reap full benefits of integration.

In theory the revolutionary Black Nationalist agenda dovetails nicely with socialist ideals. Political revolutionaries such as the Black Panthers concerned themselves first and foremost with the problem of discrimination, which could not be separated from economic issues like jobs, housing, and education. According to a 1968 pamphlet entitled *Black Nationalism and Socialism* ”The effort to get any one or all of these necessities pits the black masses against the established capitalist state which, in turn, shows itself to be ever more hostile and repressive“(5). For many Black Nationalists, Socialism provided a viable solution to the economic and social disparities that capitalism encouraged. It was in this climate that the Panthers gained widespread notoriety. Their Ten-Point Platform addressed the subjects of self-determination, police brutality, fair trials, and land ownership for Blacks. Though the Party’s co-founders had always expressed respect and admiration for Third World leaders, Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, and Che Guavara, it was after “United Front against Fascism” conference in 1969 that Newton and Seale stressed that the Party was committed to the class struggle. In keeping with this changed ideological

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 27-8.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 266.

position, the Black Panther Party revised its ten-point program and platform. “In most cases ‘oppressed people’ and ‘oppressed communities’ were added to ‘black people’ and ‘black community’, but there were no other changes.”²⁵⁹

Founded in October, 1966 by Oakland, California residents, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the Black Panthers were a Marxist-Leninist Party, “but added that Marx, Engel, Lenin, and their contemporary followers did not offer much insight with regard to understanding and fighting racism.”²⁶⁰ Concerned with eradicating institutionalized discrimination and encouraging Black self-determination, the Panthers formulated a Ten-Point Program with the purpose of strengthening and protecting their community. Among those issues raised in the Ten Points were police brutality, housing, and fair trials. According to Newton, the Chinese and Cuban examples of Mao Tse-Tung and Fidel Castro “empowered the Panthers to develop their own unique program and to discard [those] theoretical insights from Marx and Lenin that had little or no application to black [American] reality.”²⁶¹ The ideological attraction to post-Revolutionary Cuba was obvious: the Panthers hoped to ignite their own successful revolution, and Castro’s Cuba represented the possibilities of Socialist theories, harnessed to fit a nation’s needs, and put into action.

Cuba’s revolutionary appeal was not purely ideological, however. Castro played a significant role in the implicit and explicit encouragement of Black Americans to visit, and sometimes to remain, in Cuba. According to the Afro-Cuban scholar, Carlos Moore,

The Cuban leadership always saw black American leaders as manipulable. [redacted] didn’t only start with [the Black Panthers]. First person they invited to Cuba was Joe Louis. Castro came to power and he said, ‘get Joe Lewis here’. Tell American Negroes that they can come here, go to the pool, the beaches, and nobody will discriminate them. 1959, Joe Lewis formed an agency to bring black Americans to Cuba. Castro did this the minute he took power. He targeted black Americans. He said, ‘get me the influential black

²⁵⁹ Newton, Huey. “Black Capitalism Reanalyzed,” *The Black Panther*, 5 June, 1971

²⁶⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 94.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Americans', bring them down here, I'll talk to them. Because Castro saw that he could open up a front in the US with the blacks.²⁶²

Castro's propagandist agenda included the courtship of influential black Americans. In 1959, he extended invitations to Roy Campanella, Willie Mays, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson for a New Year's extravaganza in Havana. Louis accepted the invite, "and found Castro's Cuba a place 'where a Negro can go in the wintertime without discrimination.'"²⁶³ By 1960, Louis was vice-president of a public relations firm that encouraged middle-class black Americans to vacation in Cuba.²⁶⁴

Castro's most successful propaganda coup occurred after he arrived in New York in September 1960 for the fifth general assembly of the United Nations. Castro abandoned the Hotel Shelburne, where he had been staying, due to mistreatment and unacceptable monetary demands by the hotel management. One of many accounts suggests that Malcolm X arranged for the Cuban delegate to stay at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, and Castro enthusiastically accepted.²⁶⁵ However, Moore avers that the highly publicized move from the Shelburne to the Theresa was just a brilliant plan hatched by Castro and his delegation.²⁶⁶ Back in Cuba, Major Raul Castro asserted before a Havana rally that "A victorious enemy gave orders to close the doors of the hotels but must now watch impotently as the heroic population of Harlem opens doors to our prime minister....The truth, the justice and the logic of the Cuban revolution have pierced the walls of lies...winning over the hearts of twenty million oppressed Blacks in the United

²⁶² Carlos Moore, Personal Interview.

²⁶³ Cuba: Fidel & the U.S. Negro, *Time Magazine*, 6 June, 1960.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ralph L. Crowder, "Fidel Castro and Harlem: Political, Diplomatic, and Social Influences of the 1960 Visit to the Hotel Theresa, *Afro-Americans in New York Life & History* 2000 24(1), 79-92.

²⁶⁶ Carlos Moore states, "Castro was not supposed to be in Harlem. He was at one big white hotel. He wasn't supposed to be in Harlem. Another propaganda coup. When he started having problems there, somebody said to him, 'hey, you want to really hurt the Americans?'" "Yeah, yeah, what should I do?" "Go into Harlem." He said "What?!" "Yeah, go and arrange that." Almeida told me. He told me. That's why I reported it in Pichon; I reported it in Castro, the Blacks and Africa, they can't deny it. I was there."

States."²⁶⁷ Later that week, Castro began his four and a half hour speech with a description of the "humiliating treatment" and harassment that forced the Cuban delegation to relocate to "a humble hotel...of the Negroes of Harlem. For some, he declared, "a...hotel in Harlem...must be a brothel." Those who have conducted "campaigns of slander and defamation" should "recognize the fact that the imperialist finance capital is a prostitute that cannot seduce us."²⁶⁸ Not only did this move establish Castro as the undeniable winner in this particular battle of propaganda wars between the Cuban and American governments, it, along with the high visibility of Major Juan Almeida Bosque -- the newly appointed chief of the army and one of a small number of high ranking Black leaders -- earned him the respect and support of many notable African Americans.²⁶⁹ It also called attention to the Cuban recognition of the American media's complicity in advancing U.S. propaganda.

Certainly Castro saw an opportunity in such a warm reception from Black Americans – one that possibly involved power more than revolution. He could strengthen socialist ideology by gaining the support of disenfranchised people all over the world, and become the leader of the “Third World,” by placing the theory of Cuban self-determination and liberation from all forms of colonialism at the center of his message. Mark Sawyer’s *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* underscores the role of self-determination in the actions of the Cuban government, a theme that also figured prominently in the Panthers’ attraction. Threats of U.S. intervention preceding the massacre in 1912 motivated the government to shut down the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC) and any other Afro-Cuban organizations by any means necessary. The Cuban government had fought long and hard to minimize the effects of colonization on its government. The last thing officials desired was to come under the thumb of the U.S. government. Opposed to imperialism and colonization, the Panthers were drawn to this self-

²⁶⁷ Raul Castro, *Revolución*, September 20, 1960, quoted in Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Cuba* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, U of California, 1989), 80.

²⁶⁸ Fidel Castro, Speech to the Fifteenth Session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 26, 1960 in *Official Records of the General Assembly, Part I, Vol. I* (New York: United Nations, 1960), 118-119.

²⁶⁹ Moore, 80-1.

determination rhetoric, having no real knowledge of the official silence on racial inequality. Also, Panthers, who “asserted that urban ghettos were equivalent to colonial states,” were inspired by Cuba “as the head of the anticolonial struggle.”²⁷⁰ Finally, they had a common enemy: the U.S. government. But Cuba, Castro asserted, was not the U.S., and therefore black nationalism had no place there. In the end, Panther members, such as Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, and Raymond Johnson felt a sense of betrayal. After all, they had supported Castro’s propaganda and anticipated reciprocity.

Whether satisfactory or not, Castro had established a sort of quid pro quo with African American political exiles. Just as the Black community opened its doors to Cuba, so would Cuba open its doors to Black revolutionaries in need of asylum. When Robert Williams, who was targeted by the American government for forming armed self-defense groups to combat the terrorism of the Klan, faced federal charges in 1961, Castro invited him to live in Cuba. Williams gained notoriety in North Carolina through his formulation of armed self defense groups in North Carolina, which served to combat the Klan’s attacks. He believed that the only viable response to violence was violence. When he used his platform as president of the NAACP Monroe, North Carolina chapter, to espouse these views, Williams was suspended. Subsequently he embraced socialism, and eventually “hoisted the Cuban flag in his backyard and ran a series of articles in his mimeographed publication, *The Crusader*, about the transformation of working peoples’ lives in Cuba as a result of the revolution.”²⁷¹ Carlos Moore, author of *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (1989), observes that “Cuban officials were aware of Williams’ great popularity among radical black Americans. His pamphlets on conducting urban guerilla warfare from the U.S. ghettos were preferred reading materials for many militant black American youths.”²⁷² Amiri Baraka corroborates these assertions in “Cuba Libre.” He writes:

There were many pictures of Williams in most Cuban newspapers, many interviews given to newspapers and over the various television networks. In most of the interviews

²⁷⁰ Sawyer, 85 and 60 respectively.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 70-1.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 213.

Williams put down the present administration of the U.S. very violently for its aberrant foreign policy and its hypocritical attitude on what is called “The Negro Question.” He impressed almost all of Cuba with the force of his own personality and the patent hopelessness of official Uncle Sham....²⁷³

In fact, with Castro’s support, Williams was able to continue his American political activism from Cuba. He hosted a radio show called *Radio Free Dixie* that was geared toward African Americans; he edited *The Crusader*, which was a black radical publication; and he completed his book, *Negroes with Guns* (1962).²⁷⁴ Castro even provided Williams with a home, a car, and a \$400 monthly allowance.²⁷⁵

But Williams’ Cuban honeymoon was short-lived. He began to observe that power was in the hands of the “white petit bourgeoisie,” while Afro-Cubans were feeling the pinch of fast-returning subtle racism.”²⁷⁶ According to Williams’ biographer, Robert Carl Cohen, in January 1965 a rumor circulated that Castro intended to “cut [Williams] down to size.” In this lengthy, but important quote, Cohen details the interaction:

It was around this time that the chairman of the Communist Party in Havana called him into his office and declared, “Williams, we want you to know that the Revolution doesn’t support Black Nationalism. We believe in integration in White and Black workers struggling together to change capitalism into Socialism. Black Nationalism is just another form of racism. Cuba has solved her race problem, but if we went along with your ideas about black self-determination in the United States, it wouldn’t be long before somebody would start demanding that our Oriente province should become a separate Black state and we are not going to let that happen.”²⁷⁷

Though self-determination was at the center of Castro’s revolutionary appeal to the Cuban people, the heavy concentration of Afro-Cubans in the Oriente province made the concept of Black self-determination seem nightmarish. Williams, who was not willing “to be an Uncle Tom for capitalism, or

²⁷³ Baraka, *Home*, 31-32.

²⁷⁴ Kelley, 71.

²⁷⁵ George Anne Geyer. “The Odyssey of Robert Williams.” *The New Republic*, 164.12 (1971): 15.

²⁷⁶ Moore, 255. Note also that Kathleen Cleaver recalls a remark that Williams made wherein he referred to Cuba as “a racist dictatorship worse than South Africa.” She could not recall the precise context of the statement, but her memory serves her well with regard to the exact language Williams utilized. Kathleen Cleaver, Interview.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

for socialism, either” was set upon leaving Cuba.²⁷⁸ Williams had established an excellent rapport with Chairman Mao Tse-Tung of China. The April 8, 1963 volume of *The Crusader* was almost entirely dedicated to the Chairman. It featured a photo of Williams and Mao Tse-Tung in China at the celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the people’s republic of China as well as a poem, originally published in China, written to exalt Williams.²⁷⁹ However, the focal point of the special edition newsletter was Mao Tse-Tung’s statement “calling upon the people of the world to unite to oppose racial discrimination by U.S. imperialism and support the American Negroes in their struggle against racial discrimination.”²⁸⁰ So, it was no surprise that Williams and his family moved to China when the Cuban government attempted to suffocate Williams’ incendiary revolutionary activities. Certainly some people were shocked by Williams’ cautionary letter to young revolutionaries seeking asylum in Cuba.²⁸¹

There are times when oppressive circumstances will force our people into exile. Under certain conditions, exile is a sensible and logical course of action, but above all, black youth should not inject felony into unnecessary exile. If our people feel they should go into exile, they should do it voluntarily if possible, without burning bridges behind themselves. The hijacking of planes by youth without serious charges against them is a first magnitude tragedy. It closes the door permanently. The drama and glamour soon wear off and those who have other interests are not as disposed to fighting racism as the brothers are. I weep for any Black Nationalist, not charged with a deadly felony, who hijacks a plane to Havana. Black Nationalism is the first order of business “only in America.” At this time I elect not to be specific, but I hope that a hint to the wise is sufficient. For the sake of avoiding tragedy, I hope our nationalist brothers will think carefully before hijacking a plane as a “revolutionary” act. The world is not ready for a militant black nationalist colony yet. If the brothers force the issue it will ultimately lead

²⁷⁸ Leslie B. Rout, *The African Experience in Spanish America, 1502 to the Present Day* (New York : Cambridge UP, 1976), 311.

²⁷⁹ The poem, entitled “To Robert Williams, was composed by Tso Chung-Ling. It opens with a quote from Mao Tse-Tung: With the support of more than 90 per cent of the people of the world, the American Negroes will be victorious in their just struggle.” The poem provides something of a chronology of Williams’s radical activities leading up to his arrest and Cuban exile. It ends with the hopeful message that he will one day be able to return to North Carolina as a hero.

²⁸⁰ *The Crusader*, (6.2) August 8, 1963: 1.

²⁸¹ Geyer, 15.

to bitter disillusionment and some open racist reaction on the part of the “comrades” below the border.²⁸²

Despite his disaffection with Castro and his conduct regarding issues of race, Williams was decidedly cautious about the medium through which he would filter his message to black American revolutionaries. Unlike Bryant and Johnson, Williams opted to give his story to the black press as opposed to the *New York Times* – which had by this point established a hostile reputation where matters of Cuba were concerned. In fact, the *Times*’ coverage of Williams’ Cuban asylum was limited to two sentences in a 1976 article entitled, “Williams, Black Activist, Freed Because of Ill Witness”: “Mr. Williams, 49, a co-founder of the Revolutionary Action Movement and former head of the separatist Republic of New Africa, fled the country before he could be arrested. He lived in Cuba and China before returning to the United States in 1969.”²⁸³ It is difficult to view the *Times*’ decision not to mention Williams’ Cuban radio show and the pamphlets he published and exported to America from Cuba in an article that claims to announce Williams’ “Black Activism” as anything but a politically motivated omission. In another *Times* article “Red China Hints at Cuban Racism,” journalist Harry Schwartz inserts his political dig as he juxtaposes Williams’ anti-American campaign launched from Cuba with Williams’ subsequent disaffection with Cuba:

The veiled charge of Cuban anti-Negro racism was raised in a Peking speech by Robert Williams, an American Negro who formerly broadcast anti-United States propaganda from Havana but recently transferred his headquarters to Peking. Mr. Williams’ speech has been distributed throughout the world in *The Peking Review*, China’s English-language political weekly. It contains the following passage:

‘We Afro-American revolutionaries have discovered that some so-called Socialists we thought to be our comrades and class brothers have joined the international Ku Klux Klan fraternity for white supremacy world domination. To our consternation, we have discovered that the bourgeois-orientated power structure of some Socialist states, even one with a black and white population, would prefer to preserve the white reactionary anti-Communist power structure in racist America.

²⁸² Williams, Robert, “Views and Opinions: Blacks Told Not to Hijack,” *Chicago Defender* (January, 25, 1969):12.

²⁸³ Williams, “Black Activist, Freed Because of Ill Witness,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1976: 21.

Like their Yankee counterparts that they love to ape so well, even to the point of emulating their racism, they are moving might and main to frustrate and defeat the revolutionary movements of the oppressed peoples of the world.²⁸⁴

Schwartz goes on to describe Cuba as working closely with Soviet “revisionists” who are “allegedly opposed to true revolutionary action.”²⁸⁵ In the span of a few paragraphs, the *Times* undermines the revolutionary potential of China – by referencing the unflattering comments Castro has made about its brand of Communism, Cuba – by quoting Williams’ piece in *The Peking Review*, and the Soviet Union – by labeling it as anti-Revolutionary at its core. Interestingly, Baraka was in the unique position to both anticipate and reflect upon the *Times*’ distortion of events related to Williams’ exile. He observes:

On his return to the States, Williams, of course, was castigated by whatever portion of the American press that would even bother to report that there had been an American Negro “leader” who had actually gone down to Cuba and had, moreover, heartily approved of what he had seen.²⁸⁶

Castro’s 1967 courtship of Black Panther Stokely Carmichael would also end badly. Carmichael attended the first Latin American Solidarity Association (OLAS) meeting in Cuba, was made an honorary delegate and was given an opportunity to address a plenary session. A skilled speaker who readily acknowledged his audience and his purpose, Carmichael drew comparisons between Latin American and African American peoples. He described the black American people as an internal colony within the United States, and called for the unity of the oppressed people of the world.²⁸⁷ Though known for his adoption of

²⁸⁴ Harry Schwartz, “Red China Hints at Cuban Racism,” *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1966: 4.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Baraka, “Cuba Libre,” *Home*, 31-32. Later in the piece, Baraka muses over the extremity to which he believes the *Times* would go to distort the American public perception of popular black revolutionaries, such as Williams. “Most of the people in the office seemed to recognize Robert Williams immediately, and after the young woman’s talk, some of the young men left their stapling to ask Robert about the U.S. and why he thought U.S. newspapers told so many lies. One of them asked, ‘Are they paid to lie? Don’t they ever tell the truth about what’s happening down here? The man in the *Times* [Tad Szulc] is a filthy liar. He should be kicked out of the country and an honest man brought down.’ Robert thought this was funny and so did I, but I could see the possible headlines in the *New York Times* if Szulc were to have overheard this exchange. CUBA EXTREMISTS ADVOCATE EXPULSION OF U.S. NEWSMEN” (38).

²⁸⁷ Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 588.

the term ‘Black Power,’ Carmichael came to be known by Afro-Cubans as the revolutionary who spoke of black beauty.²⁸⁸

Black power attacks this brainwashing by saying, *We will define ourselves*. We will no longer accept the white man’s definition of ourselves as ugly, ignorant, and uncultured. We will recognize our own beauty and our own culture, and we will no longer be ashamed of ourselves, for a people ashamed of themselves cannot be free.²⁸⁹

At the closing session, before an enormous crowd, Castro made the announcement that Cuba “would be more than honored if [Carmichael] chose to live here, but he doesn’t wish to stay in Cuba because he considers the struggle at home to be his fundamental duty. Whatever the case, I would like him to know that this country is and will always be his home in any circumstances.”²⁹⁰ Carmichael was not moved to the degree that he would push a socialist agenda on his black American audience. At the February 1968 ‘Free Huey’ rally, Carmichael addressed an auditorium full of revolutionaries on the subject of liberation and transnationalism. During the speech, Carmichael mentioned some of the countries he visited on his recent world tour, among them Cuba, Ghana, and Vietnam. His assertion, that Communism/Socialism was not for black people, proved to be one of the more memorable parts of his speech.²⁹¹ The comments, he states in his autobiography, would “come back to bite me. For Years”:

That brings us to the point about communism and socialism. The ideologies of communism and socialism speak to class structure, to people who oppress people from the top down to the bottom. We are not just facing exploitation. We are facing something much more important, because we are the victims of racism. In their present form neither communism nor socialism speak to the problem of racism. And to black people in this country, racism comes first, far more important than exploitation.²⁹²

Carmichael had apparently made a similar statement one year prior to the Free Huey rally. While visiting Tanzania in 1967, he was reported to have repudiated Communism/Marxism/Socialism” as being

²⁸⁸ According to Enrique Patterson, former citizen of Cuba and friend of Carlos Moore, Angela Davis’ appearance in Cuba left Afro-Cuban on-lookers in awe. Patterson intimated that he had been fired from a government job in Cuba for wearing an afro. Patterson was present when Davis spoke in Cuba, and he recalls the overwhelming pride he and other Afro-Cubans felt as they beheld the beautiful Davis, with her larger than life afro standing before them. Enrique Patterson, Personal Interview, April 5, 2010.

²⁸⁹ Carmichael, Stokely, *Stokely Speaks: Black Power to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Random House, 1971), 107.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁹¹ William Lee Brent, *Long Time Gone*, (Lincoln: toExcel Publishers, 1996), 90.

²⁹² *Stokely Speaks*, 121-22. Carmichael makes a similar speech in Tanzania a year earlier, but there is no extant record of it.

“irrelevant”/”incompatible”/”unsuited”/”alien”to”blackpeople”/”Africa”/”African liberation”/”African culture.”²⁹³ The problem with such a statement was the timing. Castro was at the height of his popularity amongst revolutionaries around the world. The fact that Castro had just issued a statement in defense of the Black Power movement and pledged to grant asylum to Carmichael should he ever need it made Carmichael’s comment even more objectionable. Prior to Carmichael’s highly publicized statement the *Times* of August 2, 1967 published, “Havana: Stokely Carmichael’s Game.” The piece depicts Stokely as a puppeteer who manipulates Castro into believing that “in the event of serious trouble between the United States and Cuba, the American Negroes will oppose their own Government” when, in fact, most “American Negroes....have rejected his leadership.”²⁹⁴ Castro, always suspicious of American news sources, continued to support Carmichael to the bitter end, and, indeed felt a deep sense of betrayal upon hearing Carmichael’s anti-communism remarks; it was a betrayal that would figure prominently in his future relationships with Panther Party members.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ *Ready for Revolution*, 633. In fact, Fellow Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member and collaborator on Carmichael’s autobiography, Ekwueme Michael Thelwell reports

...after consulting the collective memories of assorted members of the age set... We all recalled (however variously) widely circulated reports of a speech in Tanzania in which Stokely Carmichael had allegedly repudiated ...In any event some version of the above had been widely, even gleefully reported in the U.S. medias Carmichael’s sudden and shocking “repudiation of ‘Communism’/’Socialism,’ which had excited a vigorous ideological counterattack from various factions of the African liberation struggle...In fact, it is not difficult to reconstruct what most probably, almost certainly, had happened. By that time Carmichael’s position, one that he maintained to the end of his days, on Marxism-Leninism was pretty much established. An indispensable method for historical analysis, but also distressingly and constrictively Eurocentric as a perspective on social evolution. Consequently, to try to impose or dictate the adaptation of rigid Marxist dogma on non-European peoples, especially Africans, struggling for liberation, was itself a species of colonialism. Moreover, he was coming from Algeria and Guinea, from extended discussions of African cultural socialist revolution at the Partu Congress. A “Mr. President, Karl Marx is not our ancestor” ambience.

²⁹⁴ “Havana: Stokely Carmichael’s Game,” *The New York Times*, 2 August, 1976, 36.

²⁹⁵ Carmichael attempted rather an indirect apology in his autobiography. He describes Cuba as a thriving country, bubbling with activity and pride. According to his observations:

Nowhere did I see signs of racism or of extreme poverty. Be clear now, I did see signs of the lingering effects of racism and poverty. Those couldn’t be eliminated in eight years, but no signs of *present* racism...What I did see was a society in motion. A people with energy, confidence, idealism, and *hope*...Hey, they’d soundly defeated the

Author of “Cuba, the Black Panther Party, and the U.S. Black Movement in the 1960s: Issues of Security,” Ruth Reitan makes the compelling argument that Castro’s dealings with the Black Panther progenitor, Robert Williams, and Minister of Defense, Eldridge Cleaver varied directly with his relationship to the Soviet Union. In point of fact, her claims are largely supported by Lévesque’s claims. According to Reitan:

Two opposing factions emerged, centered around Che Guevara’s revolutionary vision and active promotion of armed insurrection at one extreme, and those who were are of the more conservative, pro-Moscow leadership of the prerevolutionary Cuban Communist Party, called the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), at the other. This latter faction...took a more cautious approach to the Black nationalists and toward security policy in general.²⁹⁶

In Reitan’s examination of the relationship between Castro’s regime and Black nationalists, the U.S. posed the greatest threat to Cuban security, so it seemed only reasonable that the Castro regime would accept the assistance of the Soviet government in keeping the American military out of Cuba. Cuba became increasingly dependent on the USSR for monies and security. Thus, Reitan’s assertion that Castro kowtowed to the desires of the Soviet government:

Revolutionary slogans pervaded the official Cuban media, encouraging Third World insurgents to wage armed struggle, during the middle and late 1960s. However, the pro-soviet dominated government tried hard to avoid acts that would in any way suggest to the U.S. government that the regime sponsored violence on the part of the Black revolutionaries.

It is here that I take issue with Reitan’s argument. Archived newspaper articles, speeches, biographies all reveal Castro’s practically uncontrolled desire to thumb his nose at the American government and Lévesque’s monograph suggests that the Soviet Union was both keenly aware of Castro’s position and to a lesser extent paralyzed by its own desire to bring more nations into the fold of socialist ideology. Castro’s Cuba was a place where black nationalists sought asylum because in America, they found a common enemy. Reitan briefly explicates the contradiction by stating, “Nevertheless, Fidel – in a state of

invasion sent by *los asesinos yanquis*, (yankee assassins) reclaimed their country, and were turning their society toward justice...My heart and respect went out to the Cuban people at a truly hopeful, exciting, and dangerous time. So, yes, I was deeply impressed. Ibid., 584.

²⁹⁶ Ruth Reitan, “Cuba, the Black Panther Party, and the U.S. Black Movement in the 1960s: Issues of Security,” *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* (Routledge: New York, 2001), 165.

defiant nostalgia or frustration against the increasingly bureaucratized and conservative government – would fire off revolutionary proclamations in support of U.S. Black insurrection.²⁹⁷ According to Reitan’s theory, Castro’s reaction to Williams was based on the notion that “Williams’s inflammatory anti-Washington rhetoric was jeopardizing Cuba’s security.”²⁹⁸ While I agree that the dissolution of the relationship between Castro and Williams resulted from a matter of national security, I do not believe that the Soviet government was entirely responsible for the pressure Castro felt. Race relations was still an incendiary topic in Cuba. Black Americans were far more prepared to tackle the race question than any Cuban citizen. Cuba was a country that, according to Moore, had no substantive discourse on the subject of race, but it had been central to the evolution of the United States for more than a century when Williams arrived in Havana. The longer Williams remained, the more he began to notice the inequalities that Afro Cubans faced. He noted that, despite the sizeable population of blacks in Cuba, the Cuban government was almost entirely comprised of white people. When Williams turned his attention to the topic of race in Cuba, he was no longer welcome.²⁹⁹ Castro undoubtedly wanted to avoid adding yet another massacre to Cuba’s already sordid history.

Robert Williams was lauded by most members of the Black Panther Party, but Eldridge Cleaver held Williams up as one of his personal heroes. He read everything that Williams published, he listened to “Radio Free Dixie,” and he supplied copies of *Negroes With Guns* to interested black radicals.³⁰⁰ Yet, Williams’s troubled relationship with Castro did not dissuade Cleaver from seeking asylum in Cuba.

On December 25, 1965, Eldridge Cleaver arrived in Cuba by way of Canada. Having spoken with some representatives of the Cuban government in New York, Cleaver understood that there were certain conditions that he would have to meet in order to make Cuba his home. Of the greatest importance was the fact that Cleaver’s presence had to remain a secret. Cleaver was prepared to hold up his end of the

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 167.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 171.

²⁹⁹ Carlos Moore, Personal Interview, April 4, 2011.

³⁰⁰ Kathleen Cleaver, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

bargain, but he also expected to have the resources and freedom he needed to continue his revolutionary activities.³⁰¹

In a 1969 interview with photojournalist Lee Lockwood, Eldridge Cleaver intimated the reasons he chose Cuba as his place of exile. He admired Castro, Guevara, and the Cuban people; Cubans supported the black liberation movement, and most importantly, Castro had embraced Stokley Carmichael, his comrade. Cleaver's interpretation of Castro's remarks at the OLAS meeting was that Castro had "pledged Carmichael *and* his fellow black power advocates Cuba's *full* backing."³⁰² In reality, Castro's invitation to Carmichael was a response to an article in the *New York Daily News* entitled "Stokley, Stay There," wherein Carmichael was urged to "remain in Red Cuba until this miserable island is rescued from communism, and then he can head for some other Red country." Castro's primary objective was to highlight the problems with imperialist thought by examining the American print media. The invitation to Carmichael was extended secondarily, and at no point in his speech did Castro engage black power advocates or pledge full backing.

In 1975, Cleaver granted an interview on the same subject to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. This time Cleaver's entitlements were based on Robert Williams's experience:

It was agreed that certain things would take place after I got [to Cuba] We were supposed to be given a permanent, well-organized facility there. This request was in accord with the atmosphere at that time; Cuba supported liberation movements. We were supposed to have official status, including a program on Havana Radio. Robert Williams did – he used to broadcast "Radio Free Dixie" to the United States from Cuba, he published, he circulated information. All these things were on our agenda, too. But not only did these things not take place, the Cubans never had any intention of allowing them to.³⁰³

Williams agreed: "American blacks in Cuba today are not given the attention we used to get. Even when Eldridge Cleaver went, he wasn't given the personal attention. Whenever I went anywhere with Fidel, I

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Eldridge Cleaver, *Conversation with Eldridge Cleaver*, Lee Lockwood, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 17.

³⁰³ Eldridge Cleaver and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Eldridge Cleaver on Ice." *Transition*. 49 (1975), 32.

was always on the platform with him. When he drove by on the street and saw me, he would stop and say hello. Now they don't do that anymore.”³⁰⁴

However, it is reasonable to assume that Williams was allotted a certain amount of freedom to broadcast and publish from Cuba because his primary target was the U.S. government and his audience was African Americans in the United States. Cleaver, on the other hand, inducted eight African American men, who had hijacked planes to Cuba into the Havana branch of the Black Panther Party, and defied government officials to deny him that privilege. What is more, he moved all of these young men into his apartment and refused to cooperate with Castro’s people when they came to retrieve those young men who had escaped from Cuban prisons.

Williams had also begun as an integrationist. While in Cuba he began to espouse black nationalist and separatist views which displeased the Castro regime. Similarly, the Black Panther Party was presented as an interracial organization. Bobby Seale himself asserted that Black people “have no time to practice racism and the masses of black people do not hate white people just because of the color of their skin We’re not going to go out foolishly and say there is no possibility of aligning with some righteous white revolutionaries ...”³⁰⁵ In stark contrast, Cleaver’s so-called Havana chapter of the Black Panther Party was shaping up to be wholly Black.³⁰⁶ Put mildly, the Cuban government frowned upon single-race organizations – specifically those with all Black membership.

Cleaver’s activities challenged the status quo, but when the May 26, 1969 edition of the *International Herald Tribune* published an article entitled “Cleaver turns up in Havana,” the Cuban government had legitimate reason to ask Cleaver to leave. He had been granted asylum solely on the basis that his presence remained secret. Here, I believe, is where Reitan’s thesis comes into play. It is quite

³⁰⁴ Geyer, 16.

³⁰⁵ Kelley, 93.

³⁰⁶ According to Kathleen Cleaver, Eldridge had no intentions of setting up a Panther Party in Cuba. He did induct members of the Afro-Cuban community and some black Americans seeking asylum in Cuba into the Party, but his plan was to train revolutionaries in Cuba and sneak them back into America for the revolution. Kathleen Cleaver, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

possible that Castro's people heaped the responsibility of their request that Cleaver's asylum in Cuba remain secret upon their Soviet sponsors. With his cover blown, the Cuban government could ask Cleaver to make an appearance at an Algiers festival so as to take some of the heat off of Havana without appearing to be unsympathetic to the black revolutionary movement.³⁰⁷ Still, Cleaver interpreted the request in the spirit it was offered: he was not truly welcome to return to Cuba.

Panther Party member, William Brent's recollection of these events is quite different from Cleaver's. According to Brent:³⁰⁸

Eldridge Cleaver had come to Cuba from Canada by boat. The Cubans took him in, gave him a house and a car, and let him shop in special stores. He had access to the best restaurants, bars, and nightclubs in Havana. His house was always filled with young Cubans who admired him as a high official of the Black Panther Party. He got away with a lot of things here for a while, but when he started organizing a Panther chapter in Havana, the shit hit the fan. What saved his ass were his strong movement connections and his supporters in the states. They made arrangements for him to go to Algeria.³⁰⁹

If any credibility is lent to Cleaver's assertion that he received much less support from the Cuban government than did his predecessor Robert Williams, it logically follows that Castro's comprehension of black nationalism developed alongside a growing apprehension of extending excessive freedoms to Black American exiles. Certainly Castro's interactions with Williams, Carmichael, and Cleaver only exacerbated an already complex history of race politics in Cuba.

To be fair, two other Panther Party members sought asylum in Cuba and offered more positive accounts of their experiences in Havana. William Lee Brent dedicates almost an entire memoir to his Cuban experience and Assata Shakur provides an all-too-brief account of her Cuban refuge in the

³⁰⁷ According to Kathleen Cleaver, the plan was for her to depart France for Cuba on the very day that the article was published. She realized immediately that something had gone wrong. She had gotten word that she was not to board the plane, and await further instruction. To date she has no idea who leaked the story, but the timing was very convenient for the Cuban government.

³⁰⁸ Note that Kathleen Cleaver states the Brent did not write his own autobiography. According to her Brent had a white amanuensis, an American reporter and Brent's girlfriend at the time.

³⁰⁹ William Lee Brent, *Long Time Gone*, Lincoln: toExcel Publishers, 1996: 174.

prologue of her autobiography. The vast majority of Brent's *Long Time Gone* concerns itself with his imprisonment in a Cuban work camp upon his arrival in Havana on a hijacked American plane. The harshness of his treatment he blames squarely on Eldridge Cleaver who, he avers, refused to acknowledge for the Cuban government Brent's membership to the Black Panther Party. During my interview with Kathleen Cleaver, she spoke to these assertions. The situation was far more complex than Cleaver merely disavowing Brent as a Panther member. Rather, she asserts, Brent had been disavowed as a result of his armed robbery of a gas station while driving a Panther Party van with two Panther passengers who were oblivious to Brent's plan to commit the felony. When asked whether or not Brent was a "provocateur," Eldridge Cleaver would have answered pointedly and honestly, yes. For Brent had been so-labeled prior to the hijacking. In fact, Kathleen Cleaver, explained, Brent was left with only two choices in the face of the charges: he would, having no access to Panthers' attorneys and probably go to prison or seek asylum in Cuba. Panthers with high profiles and/or unwavering support from the organization could be sneaked into Cuba. Eldridge Cleaver provided one such example; Assata Shakur provided another.

In 2004 Jacuma Kambui, author of The Talking Drum website, posted an interview with the American exile and "former political prisoner" Assata Shakur.³¹⁰ A brief introduction to the interview synthesizes the information available in American newspapers about Shakur's famed 1979 prison break. Shakur had been convicted of the murder of a New Jersey state trooper resulting from a shoot-out that occurred on the turnpike after she and two other Black Liberation Army members were pulled over. The details of the case differ dramatically depending on the source and would, themselves, deserve a chapter all their own. Suffice it to say, Shakur continues to proclaim her innocence and Castro apparently believes her. Shakur, unlike Brent, had a political reputation which preceded her. "Luckily," Shakur stated, "they had some idea who I was, they'd seen some of the briefs and UN petitions from when I was a political

³¹⁰ According to Kambui, the website started as a "school project for one of my children during African Heritage Month In 1998, turned into a personal family web site" (<http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/about.html>).

The site has seven pages, one of which is dedicated to the Assata Shakur interview which can be found at <http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/bla4.html>.

prisoner. So they were somewhat familiar with my case and they gave me the status of being a political refugee.”³¹¹ Castro, it would appear, had learned from some of his missteps with American revolutionary personas and approached Shakur with an ardent desire to know which projects she wanted to undertake during her stay in Cuba. Shakur read this as a respectful inquiry, one that surprised her given her expectation that “they might be pushy.” The probability, however, that Castro’s people were less concerned with revolutionary cooperation and respect and more invested in laying out the parameters under which Panthers could remain in Cuba should not be underestimated. Shakur’s recollection of her reception in Cuba provides some insight into some of the changes in procedure that resulted from previous dealings with Panthers: “They gave me a dictionary, an apartment, took me to some historical places, and then I was pretty much on my own.”³¹² Some of Shakur’s remarks during the interview and in her autobiography (which she wrote in Cuba) suggest that she, too, learned from the mistakes of her Panther predecessors. She references a thriving Afro-Cuban culture, mentions Maceo as a Cuban hero, and juxtaposes a depiction of “white [presumably American] leftists who were very bossy and wanted to tell us what to do and thought they knew everything” with the Cuban attitude “of solidarity with respect.”³¹³ When asked directly whether or not the Africanness of Cuba provided her solace, Shakur responds evasively and with an apparent comprehension of the precariousness of her position:

The first thing that was comforting was the politics. It was such a relief. You know, in the States you feel overwhelmed by the negative messages that you get and you just feel weird, like you're the only one seeing all this pain and inequality. People are saying, "Forget about that, just try to get rich, @#%\$ eat @#%\$, [redacted] your own, buy, spend, consume." So living here was an affirmation of myself, it was like "Okay, there are lots of people who get outraged at injustice." The African culture I discovered later. At first I was learning the politics, about socialism-what it feels like to live in a country where everything is owned by the people, where health care and medicine are free. Then I started to learn about the Afro-Cuban religions, the Santería, Palo Monte, the Abakúa. I wanted to understand the ceremonies and the philosophy. I really came to grips with how much we-Black people in the U.S.-were robbed of. Whether it's the tambours, the drums, or the dances. Here, they still know rituals preserved from slavery times. It was like finding another piece of myself. I had to find an African name. I'm still looking for pieces of that Africa I was torn from. I've found it here in all aspects of the culture. There is a

³¹¹ Shakur, Talking Drum.

³¹² Shakur, The Talking Drum.

³¹³ Ibid.

tendency to reduce the Africanness of Cuba to the Santería. But it's in the literature, the language, the politics.

Within the context of this exploration Shakur's remarks about the temptation to relegate all things Afro-Cuban to the underground religion Santería could just as easily be ascribed to Cuban officials as to those in America. Shakur herself admits that, in spite of her own socialist leanings and support of the Cuban Revolution, she knew very little about the country and even less about "... all these black people here and that there was this whole Afro-Cuban culture." So, her statements regarding the tendency to compartmentalize African contributions to Cuban culture as purely religious are likely directed at the Cuban government though sufficiently veiled to protect her political refugee status.³¹⁴

Though Assata Shakur and Eldridge Cleaver both expressed an interest in Afro-Cuban history, neither of the Cuban exiles spoke of slavery, the "Race War" of 1912, or the government's subsequent attempt to whiten the island by importing Spanish workers. Whatever texts Shakur read impressed upon her the notion that "the two races, Blacks and whites, [fought] together for liberation."³¹⁵ Cleaver simply learned that Jose Martí's legacy dominated discussions of the War of Independence, though Antonio Maceo, a high-ranking Afro-Cuban leader in the War, had much to do with Cuba gaining its freedom from the Spanish imperialist government.

The United States and Cuban governments do not directly control newspapers, but it is evident that publishers, "proprietors of an ongoing business," had a stake in "preserving the power of authorities" – this was especially true within the context of international matters. If propaganda serves as political marketing and advertisement and Castro's target "consumers" in the US was African Americans,

³¹⁴ Though not central to my thesis, I do think it important to note that my reading of Brent's and Shakur's largely positive recollections of Cuba suggests they are mitigated by their comparative lack of mobility. Williams, Carmichael, and Cleaver all had alternate options for asylum. Brent was an unknown outside of the circle of Panthers with whom he worked and Shakur's association with the Panthers came well after the Party's power had begun to dissolve under the pressures of COINTELPRO. That fact may also have informed the lackluster manner of her Cuban reception.

³¹⁵ Shakur, Assata, *Assata* (Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987):269.

it is only logical that Castro would emphasize the importance of Maceo's heroism during the war for Cuban independence and Major Juan Almeida's high ranking position in Castro's cabinet. Castro also exhibited a keen awareness of the American press's fascination with post-revolutionary Cuba. His complicity in the hijacking of American aircrafts by members of the Panther Party was newsworthy and therefore difficult for the American press to ignore. Insofar as the American government "produced" disenfranchised black Americans, Castro "imported" black revolutionaries and simultaneously exported the message that Cuba had solved its race problem. Of course that was only Castro's short term agenda. His shifted focus from advertising to the black middle class to encouraging an alliance with black revolutionaries was a bold move on Castro's part – one that reflects his developing comprehension of a long term goal. Initially Castro appeared content to market Cuba to the African American middle class (such as Joe Louis) as a vacation spot. Upon Castro's recognition of his appeal to the revolutionary black community he established a loftier goal. Just as he had succeeded in revolutionizing Cuba, he believed the Black Panther Party could overthrow the American democratic government. During her 1975 interview with Fidel Castro, Barbara Walters asked Castro if he believed America would one day be a Socialist country, and he replied:

I do. One day. Some time ago, the United States was an English colony. If an Englishman were asked if the United States would be independent, he would have said no, that it would always be an English colony. Afterward, the colonies liberated themselves, a nation was established, but it contained slavery. The slave owners would have said that slavery would never disappear, but slavery ended, salaried workers came, capitalism came, it developed extraordinarily, large multinational enterprises developed, and if a reasonable man is asked now if that will be eternal, he would have to say no. Some day the capitalist system will disappear in the United States, because no social class system has been eternal. One day, class societies will disappear.³¹⁶

The conviction with which Castro answered this question offers some clarification of the difference between Castro's and Stalin's approaches to the black American community. The 1932 "Black and White" film project served as a cautious investigation of the possibilities of political diaspora for African Americans and for Soviet Russia. During his early years as Cuba's leader, however, Castro seemed to

³¹⁶ Barbara Walters and Fidel Castro, "An Interview with Fidel Castro," *Foreign Policy*, 28(Autumn 1977), 31.

commit wholly to the idea that the Panthers' could overtake and revolutionize the American government. Similarly the Panthers had moved beyond the type of careful investigation of political diaspora conducted by certain members of the Moscow Movie film troop, and shared the intensity of Castro's commitment to the alliance as well as his vision of a world governed by socialist ideals.

By the time Walters conducted the interview in 1975, Williams, Carmichael and Cleaver had already maligned Castro and his regime in the media. Still, he exhibited the tenuous optimism which characterized Louise Thompson's and Langston Hughes's writings after the film project was cancelled. When Walters asked him what he perceived to be Cuba's role in Africa, Castro continued his advertising campaign to disenfranchised African Americans and at the same time gestured toward the idea that his Cuban regime continued to be distorted by the American media and possibly by the Panthers: I don't know what has been published in the United States about it, but I am sure that the American black people know the meaning of discrimination and of apartheid, and appreciate the effort we made [to keep South Africa from overtaking Angola].³¹⁷

Certainly this appeal to the black community as well as his agreement to provide Assata Shakur with asylum reflected some hope that the alliance between African American activists and Cuba might continue. As Carlos Moore noted, Castro relegated Williams, Carmichael, and Stokely to the status of trouble makers, which permitted him to separate those experiences from his overarching view of the African American radical community.³¹⁸ Though he expressed his belief that socialism would eventually spread to America, he offered the disclaimer that he did not "foresee in a short time any change toward socialism in the United States."³¹⁹

For Castro, Shakur may have represented another opportunity to advance his political agenda, but for some members of the Panther Party there were no new opportunities where this alliance was concerned. In fact, the inefficacy of socialism in eradicating race prejudice in Cuba left those black

³¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

³¹⁸ Moore, Personal Interview.

³¹⁹ Barbara Walters and Fidel Castro, 32.

radicals with only one option. Faced with a lack of viable mentors, select Panther Party members were stripped of their earlier optimism, and they conceded to very institutions they spent their revolutionary careers battling: democracy and capitalism.

CONCLUSION

“I feel that I am a citizen of the American dream and that the revolutionary struggle of which I am a part is a struggle against the American nightmare.”

~Eldridge Cleaver

The climate did not agree with Nancy Prince; Nicholas Said longed for home; The Moscow 4 felt they had been betrayed; Eldridge Cleaver liked to think of himself as “one of those [exiles] who shall return.” In each instance we find that despite their positive experiences in other countries in various eras, each had compelling reasons to return to the United States. This phenomenon is not limited to those upon whom this project focuses. I suggest similar patterns exist in other narratives such as those that extolled migration to Africa, to Haiti and Mexico in other periods. The question I sought to answer when I began this project was this: “why were these people – those in the enviable position to not only travel but find comparatively egalitarian environments – left feeling disillusioned by the end of their encounters? During the process of my investigation I discerned a cycle persistent among many African American emigrants. It begins with an earnest attempt to move from the fringes of American society toward receiving equal opportunity under the tenets of democracy. When America fails them, they begin searching outside the US for some other community to which they might belong. Once they identify such a place, person, or philosophy, they romanticize it, and the reality of other governments, geographies, or groups disappoints. Of course, this is a gross oversimplification of a complex triumvirate, but it is the reason I chose to title my project Democracy, Diaspora, and Disillusionment.

As I read, I could not help thinking about how these subjects fitted into modes of production. The chapters could just as easily been named supply, demand, and price. The United States mass produced marginalized, disaffected black people without realizing that there was a growing demand for black people in socialist nations, such as Russia and Cuba. Soviet leaders had been quite concerned that their

form of government could not stand alone, socialist ideology had to spread around the world. The black working masses were targeted to export the socialist message to the United States. The price, when these black people recognized their meager positions in this power struggle between two nations, was a slew of bad press which undermined Russia's and Cuba's central theses: that socialist leadership rid societies of the ills of the world.

The Hegelian dialectic postulate – thesis, antithesis, and synthesis – is another useful generative triad. The theory has been interpreted to as an intellectual proposition or thesis (such as democracy) that does not achieve its purpose. Frustrated with the inefficacy of the thesis, those who do not benefit from it develop a counter-structure or antithesis (such as socialism or communism). Finally there is an attempt to effect change (synthesis), thereby making the synthesis the new thesis.

Paul Gilroy closes his monograph *Black Atlantic* on the antithesis variable of the postulate. *Black Atlantic* assumes that disillusionment is the starting point for marginalized people of the world, and their ultimate goal is to establish international communities of belonging. However, my observations indicate that for some people of the African diaspora, optimism is the starting point and that it is replaced with frustration. It is from this position that disenfranchised people pursue an antithesis which failing to meet their idealistic expectations, becomes disillusionment. The subjects of this exegesis experience disillusionment specifically because they are unable to synthesize or to combine American cultural practices with socialist systems.

The optimism and belief in a democratic system is most evident in the antebellum chapter perhaps because it was antebellum, the Civil War promised changes that may have fueled their faith in a more favorable future in the United States. Chapter two which deals with the post World War I period, a war to end all wars, gestures toward particular problems with political diasporas – namely miscalculation on the sides of the role model and its students. Chapter three reveals the failure of the socialist antithesis where certain politically active black Americans are concerned. Theirs in my estimation is an especially

poignant disillusionment. When the democratic and socialist theses fail, these leaders of political movements become immobilized and hopeless. They believed they were forced to choose between two systems that do not address their needs.

Gilroy asserts that exile “whether enforced or chosen, temporary or permanent” is generally associated with “a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes ...’race’ itself.”³²⁰ My study suggests that some did not *choose* exile. They were, as W. E. B. DuBois asserts “by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder ...colored in a white world; and that white world existed... to see with sleepless vigilance that [they were] kept within bounds.”³²¹ Realistically these writers and activists were shut out of bounds, and those boundaries were compulsively and vigilantly policed by the white majority.

While Robert Williams discourages young black revolutionaries from “hijacking planes” without “serious charges against them,”³²² I have found that many African Americans felt that the mark of blackness *was* a serious enough charge within the contexts of antebellum, post-Reconstruction, and Pre-Civil Rights era America. They were not attempting to escape national origin nor the culture or mark of blackness. Rather, they were attempting to enter into those policed boundaries between American whites and African Americans. My research suggests that for some members of the black community the pursuit of diaspora, both national and political, was a means rather than an end as Gilroy suggests. Although Russia and Cuba as well as the socialist and communist movements ultimately failed American blacks, Nancy Prince’s, Louise Thompson’s, and Eldridge Cleaver’s political agenda – that is full inclusion into the folds of American society – advanced. I am proposing that a significant implication of black itinerancy and by extension international alliances is that, through their travels and writings and speeches about those travels, black cosmopolites effected change.

³²⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993: 19.

³²¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* 135.

³²² Williams, Robert, “Views and Opinions: Blacks Told Not to Hijack,” *Chicago Defender* (January, 25, 1969):12.

The causal relationship between black Americans' instigation of external pressures to eradicate American slavery and Jim Crow should not be underestimated. It is my argument that these international alliances are central not only to the abolitionist and Civil Rights movements, but to the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, all of which chipped away internally at the boundaries the American government so fervently protected. Though some were disillusioned by the manipulation they sustained at the hands of the Russian and Cuban governments, in the final analysis African America was more successful than either of those nations in pushing its own propagandist agenda. The United States could not legitimately lay claim to its 'land of the free' appellation so long as its black community was oppressed.

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