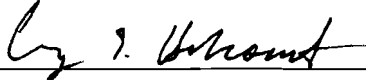


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alice Bardan for the Master of Arts

In English presented on July 9, 2003

Title: Communist Rhetorics and Reception in the Black Bohemian Writers: The Case of Hughes, McKay, and Nugent

Abstract approved: 

Currently we are witnessing a revolution in U.S. literary critical studies, a radical recovery movement. Critics have started reevaluating the progressive literature of the 1930s, previously deliberately forgotten, dismissed, and largely undifferentiated because of its thematic similarity. They propose a rereading both of the silence accompanying the literature of the American Left and an analysis of the reasons behind it. To be sure, this literature appealed to multiple audiences and dealt with major social and political issues of the moment, participating in a cultural dialogue that complicated or resisted the influential leftist perspectives on current condition. Most of the texts approach unfamiliar topics, employ rhetorical strategies, and embody aesthetic principles different from those valued in canonical literature. Therefore, modern readers should be taught new ways to read progressive literature by investigating history, biography, or, in some cases, the collective enterprise that sometimes triumphed over individual voices.

Attempts have also been made to restore the history of black radicalism in America. Recent studies bring about a re-visioning of black and white Marxism in the U.S., showing how African American Communist intellectuals influenced or even transformed their white radical counterparts. In addition, they at first

rearticulated the Communist ideology to fit a class approach to black oppression and later reshaped it to fit a view of African Americans as an oppressed nationality. Poststructuralist and Marxist theory can be applied to the study of writers like Hughes, McKay, and Nugent, exposing the interplay among their bohemianism, their homosexuality, and their relationship with the Communist Party.

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COMMUNIST RHETORICS AND RECEPTION IN BLACK BOHEMIAN
WRITERS: THE CASE OF HUGHES, MCKAY, AND NUGENT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

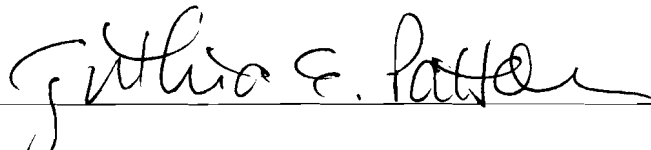
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Master of Arts

by Alice Bardan

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Thesis
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Approved by the Department Chair



Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, whose creativity and generosity have always guided my efforts. I am profoundly grateful for all the ways they have supported my studies and especially for their steadfast love and encouragement.

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favorite teachers ever, I also owe many thanks. I have always received reassurance from him, a big smile, and priceless advice.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Mr. Steve Hanschu, who facilitated my research with many interlibrary loaned books, and my boyfriend Sukhminder, whose dearly love is simply invaluable.

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Introduction

“I Can’t Believe It’s Not Bad”: Rereading the 1930s Culture

At least in the 1930s, the many hundreds of poems taking up the major social and political issues of the moment also participate in the cultural dialogue that supports, complicates, extends, or resists what were the increasingly influential Left perspectives on current conditions. (Cary Nelson, “Dialogic Politics in Poetry” 40)

Every human life is lived in a historical context, its fears and dreams shaped by what it is possible to imagine in a given time. (Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory* 5)

This work originated from a genuine desire to understand progressive poetry and Black Marxist writers and what may make them valuable depending on who looks at them. As a Romanian growing up in a Communist totalitarian regime, I was more than bombarded with “propaganda” literature that was both studied in school and disseminated at all levels. Needless to say, I had so much of it that I used to abhor it, making, in a way, the same mistake as the U.S. capitalist system usually did: to completely ignoring it.

Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Bruce Nugent are chosen as the basis of my study because their lives represent a variety of attempts to resolve the fundamental conflict confronting left-wing artists and intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. After inventorying the most overarching questions that are necessary for a rereading of the 1930s, I will set the stage for a more thorough discussion of two general topics with respect to reading these author’s works: Communism and Bohemianism. To be sure, the premise behind this study is that somewhere along the discourses of Communism (or whatever the ideals connected with it entail) and of Bohemianism one may find intertwining paths that lead to the same ends if we are to analyze the radical history of the above mentioned authors. My view is that, as strange as it might seem, one was not possible without the other, and that a certain state of idealism and imagination had to be the necessary ingredient to satisfy the demands of art, politics, and culture. Moreover, I will bring forth a general debate about the canon, what we study and are offered to study, concluding that we are trained to like certain things and a specific kind of literature.

By concentrating on different readings of the 1930s and of the above mentioned writers, this study clearly intends to shift the analysis more toward the reception of the above mentioned writers' radical commitment and its place in the vogue of literary modernism. In some ways, therefore, my scholarship will also be a study in reception theory, owing an obvious debt to Hans-Robert Jauss's notion of a "horizon of expectation" that would form a particular reader's reaction to a particular literary work. The "horizon of expectation" is, as Wlad Godzich paraphrases it, "the sum total of reactions, prejudgments, verbal and other behavior that greet a work on its appearance" (qtd. in North, *Reading* 30). To be more concrete, although this is not intended to be an exhaustive study, I will discuss the problem of reception in the case of McKay, Hughes, and Nugent.

Speaking about the problem of reception in the interpretation of Homer and in the exegesis of the Bible, Jauss makes the following comment, which can be applied to the subject of my thesis as well:

What is to be done when an authority, distant in time and preserved only in writing, has forfeited the immediacy of living speech or address which it had in the oral culture whence it originated when, more particularly, its doctrine or message is no longer in tune with the world view, the attitudes, and the morals of a later time? (54)

What happens then to a literary period like that of the 1930s, when different authorities, distant in time, analyze it without taking into consideration its immediacy and function in a certain context?

Therefore, to some extent I will try to recapture the time in which the three authors under discussion wrote, and attempt to locate and “puncture” different “prejudgments.” It is because I believe that if we are somehow trained, as many critics have pointed out, to like certain types of texts (the canon, for example), we are not, for certain, trained how to read intentionally politically progressive literature. It remains to see whether we like it or not after we have understood its context and judged it not primarily according to our times, but to the times in which it had a greater impact. Moreover, by investigating the process of “rearticulation” as defined by Stuart Hall, along with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I will demonstrate how it can be applied to the writings of Hughes and Claude McKay.

As recently as 1996, editors Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon published *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, one of the best anthologies in which one may locate a number of the new scholars whose outstanding studies of neglected or forgotten aspects of U.S. radical poetry, most of them focusing on the 1930s, have broadened the scope of inquiry into the period.

Inspired by the canon revisions and pluralism of discourse in literary criticism since the 1960s, contemporary scholars gathered in this anthology have recently broadened the scope of inquiry on the literature and culture of the 1930s to include a variety of textual approaches: theories of feminism, popular culture, ethnicity, New Historicism, and various new formations of Marxism. Their essays attempt a rereading of the 1930s to include questions about the existing paradigms

of radical literary studies as they pertain to literature of the 1930s. As the editors say in their introduction,

What has been the canon of the 1930s literature, and what are the assumptions behind its formulation and existence? To what extent are women, writers of color, gay and lesbian writers, and other “marginalized” authors represented in the extant literary histories of the 1930s, and how does our portrait of the decade change when they are added? [. . .] What may be gained in understanding 1930s versions of communism inside and outside the Communist Party U.S.A. by applying New Left, Neo-Marxist, and New Historicist modes of analysis? (Mullen 3)

In one of the articles Alan Wald proposes, for example, that we must begin our rereading by understanding and appreciating *the history* of thirties criticism. Like Cary Nelson, he calls for a new methodology that would draw on previously neglected materials and contemporary theoretical work in the areas of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, mass culture, and national identities. Moreover, he suggests that the new scholarship should reexamine the influence of thirties literature on later writers. Scholars should question traditional definitions often applied to thirties literature, he contends, including the opposition between realism and modernism.

Cary Nelson, on the other hand, proposes in his “Dialogic Politics in Poetry” a new reading of the period with a new understanding of the relationship

between literature and the political life. As it happens, Nelson insists that writing poetry in the 1930s became a credible form of revolutionary action and that reading poetry became a means of participating in social change. To be sure, Nelson emphasizes that poets of the 1930s viewed writing as a collaborative, dialogic enterprise (in the Bakhtian sense), with many assenting and dissenting voices.¹ Speaking of the more or less unique function and impact of poetry on a day-to-day basis in people's lives, he comments,

Earlier, the IWW's poems set to music had been among the IWW's most successful recruitment devices. Now, to read a poem like Langston Hughes's "Let America be America Again" was to find more than an echo of one's own sense of cultural crisis and necessity. It was to find a place to stand ideologically, a concise discursive perspective on America's history and engagement with its contemporary culture. It was to find a place one could temporarily take up as one's own. Poetry at once gave people a radical critique and visionary aspiration, and it did so in a language fit for the speaking voice. (32)

Therefore, poetry proved to be a prominent, energetic power in articulating and strengthening the necessary forces to make the political shift toward the Left. "To write poetry [under these conditions of readership,]" explains Nelson, "was therefore to ask not only what one wanted to say, but also what other people wanted to read; a sense of audience was pressing, immediate" (32). All this was possible because the revolutionary polemical poems published in a magazine or

newspaper, such as *The Appeal to Reason*, *New York Call*, *Daily Worker*, could be taken up and used by an audience only days after they were written. Such poems were not only politically persuasive but also offered readers politically committed speaking voices with which they could identify. Thus, there was an immediate use of poetry written to play an immediate role in public life that was unique not only to The Depression but similar to the abolitionist poetry of the nineteenth century as well (33). What mattered to the audience was an effort not to capture what an author meant but to take responsibility for how poems could change their own lives. This is why the historical and the political context is, once more, of paramount importance when judging this period, and being more aware of the context helps us understand and appreciate such poetry. With regard to this, Nelson goes on to say,

For poets, therefore, a wide popular audience demonstrated that poetry mattered; compromising its elite status was a gain, not a loss. The mass audience for poetry in the depression was, paradoxically, one of the triumphs of a time of widespread suffering. [. . .] Hand in hand with hunger and unemployment went a sense of impending revolutionary change. Writing poetry often meant helping to articulate and dramatize both the period's suffering and its yearnings for change. To write poetry was not only to comment on these cultural processes but also to help shape them. (36)

To give a more concrete example of the textual sign of changing notions of poetry's social role and its relation to individual expression, Nelson comments on the many poets' inclusion of political slogans in their work, slogans sometimes printed like banner headlines in capital letters. Moreover, the new proletarian poetry used patterns of verbal echoes, reinforcements, extensions, and disputes that permeated poems at the level of individual stanzas, lines, images, and narrative units. "To shut one's ears to that conversation," Nelson warns, "is to silence the material conditions of poetry at the time" (37).

Even more, he advises us that rereading poems of the 1930s in their context does not necessarily mean coming to value their relational power and effectivity. It also means valuing individual lines and images for their capacity to reinforce or differ from the existing patterns in the discursive field. This does not, however, imply that we have to "collapse poetry and rhetoric, for the special social functions attributed to poetry can operate through the echoing and counterpointing of lines and images as readily as they can through entire poems." Nonetheless, we do have to begin to admire poems for their capacity to participate in history, not for their supposed capacity to transcend it (Nelson 40-41).

To show how literature can be politicized, I would like to give an example about the importance and role of poetry by bringing into the discussion a recent event. On February 2003, Laura Bush scheduled a symposium titled "Poetry and the American Voice," inviting leading lyrical poets of the country to read from Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Walt Whitman. Learning that the poets who were invited to the symposium strongly protested against a prospective war in Iraq, she postponed the event,

demonstrating, in a way, that the White House does not always welcome opinions that disagree with its line. Sam Hamill, a long time pacifist who had been invited to the symposium, told the press that he saw "profound irony" in the White House's choice of poets, as they are noted in particular for their social criticism. The initiative called to mind a similar event in 1965, when Lyndon B. Johnson invited various poets and writers to attend the "White House Festival of the Arts." At the time, Robert Lowell caused a scandal by declining the invitation, in sign of protest against the Vietnam War. Philip Roth, William Styron, Alan Dugan and Stanley Kunitz, among others, signed a statement of support for him. In this case, as one of America's leading poets Billy Collins said, even those poets who usually keep away from politics couldn't help but voice their protests; they couldn't isolate themselves in lyric poetry while the country was being involved into a war.

Under the circumstances, I believe the role of poetry was once more put to the test. Both Laura Bush's "fear" of poetry and the bond that was created for many through the new poems against the war testify once more for the power that poetry can sometimes acquire. It is true nowadays that major magazines and newspapers don't have poems on their first page as they did in the 1930s; however, the Internet websites can be just as effective. Poetsagainstthewar.org was created immediately after February 6, 2003, and according to the web site, by March 1 it contained more than 13, 000 poems of protest.

When Laura Bush's spokesman announced that the First Lady "believed it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum," I contend that she in fact acknowledged the narrow view that many have about the role of literature. After all, "one is beating about the bush" rather than acting as a mature intellectual if one is not aware

that not only at some level any event at the White House is a political forum but also that poets like Whitman and Hughes wrote because they wanted to voice their protests and consequently were subversive. In a broader sense, even Dickinson's challenging poetry both in terms of form and content can be taken as subversive and undermining the art of reading. As *The Nation* from February 6 documents, Laura Bush claimed that, "there is nothing political about American Literature." Therefore I can only ponder what we are led to think of literature in schools. How can one discuss Whitman and Hughes without bringing up the subject of war protest? No wonder that so many believe studying English is a safe locus where one can enter and be "secure," reading about the beauty of the world or of long-haired, pensive women that need to be rescued. On the contrary, it is a site of contest, of debates and protests, of frustrations and suffering. One cannot *really* read it without being affected by it or without investing emotions. It's certainly not a safe journey at the end of which one can nicely applaud. It is more than that, if one is ever ready to invest any emotions and efforts to understand the writer. No wonder one of my favorite English teachers once confessed to me, "I've gone all the way to hell and I came back. And it has been so wonderful!" After all, I believe, studying English literature should mean reading not "simulacra"² of radical poets like Hughes or Whitman (and it is no wonder Hughes confessed to liking Whitman a lot), but taking the wonderful walk down to "hell" with them.

Laura Bush was probably not aware that Whitman's call for radical democracy in his *Leaves of Grass* was so scandalous that it got him fired from his government job. Nor did she probably know that although Hughes was never a member of the Communist party, as he admitted to the HUAC Committee, he was deeply involved in radical actions.

He was not, as his biographer, Arnold Rampersad tries to make of him at times in his biography of Hughes, an effeminate character, writing decent and humorous “Simple” characters and nice jazz poems. Hughes wrote constantly about power, injustice, and racism, and in 1942, when he was appointed to the Writers’ War Board (a group assigned to write positive material to inspire the nation and its troops), he used his position to protest and scold the U.S. for its racial policies.

In 1996, Shelley Fisher Fishkin published a very useful essay called “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness’: Remapping American Culture.” It is useful because it provided an overview of over a hundred books and articles from fields including literary criticism, history, cultural studies, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, art history, dance history, humor studies, philosophy, linguistics and folklore, all published mainly between 1990 and 1995 or that were forthcoming at the time. Taken together, these studies mark, as Fishkin posits, a defining moment in the study of American culture. The 1990s witnessed a period of profound challenging and remapping of the American culture, starting mainly with the 1992 publication of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The major strength of Morrison’s compelling study was in her analysis of the idea of “whiteness” seen as a linguistical and social construct and in her urging scholars to examine whiteness as an imaginative, social, and literary construction, to explore ways in which “embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be ‘humanistic’” (qtd. in Fishkin 255).

Many critics took up Morrison's challenge to examine, as she had also urged in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," mainstream American literature "for the impact Afro-American presence has had on the structure of the work, the linguistic practice, and fictional practice in which it is engaged" (qtd. in Fishkin 254).

Without extensive theorizing, Fishkin examines all of the important books or articles that follow in one way or another Morrison's advice, concluding,

We need to formulate new ways of addressing such issues as influence, exchange, appropriation, "hommage," intertextual dialogue, "signifying," "capping," borrowing, theft, synergy and cross-fertilization. [. . .] We must understand and celebrate the hybridity of mainstream American culture, acknowledge the multicultural tributaries that have fed that mainstream [...] We must work to dismantle the paradigms that prevented so many African Americans from receiving credit for all they did (and do) to create that common culture known as "American" throughout the world. (276)

It is from such a critical stance that Gary Holcomb, in "New Negroes, Black Communists, and the New Pluralism," highlights a specific aspect of the mainstream paradigms on African Americans. Countering the "universally accepted uncomplicated narrative of Black Marxist theory" up until the 1990s, that is the conventional portrayal of the relationship between communism and

black struggle as inherently corrupt, Holcomb points out recent studies that challenge “decades of received wisdom” (367).

Condemning readings from the 1960s and 1970s that assumed that blacks were expected to adopt an inferior status under communism, a kind of reenactment of the colonizer-colonized encounter, Holcomb carefully illuminates the more recent undertakings to restore the history of black radicalism in America. Against well-established and otherwise valuable accomplishments of writers such as George Hutchinson, who had paid little attention to radical commitment, Holcomb signals a series of new works that have recently been published. Admittedly, such new works offer an invaluable study of Black Marxist history and theory, bringing a re-visioning of Black and White Marxism in the U.S.

Starting with the premise that “every poem presents itself to us in company with a history of its reception,” Cary Nelson emphasizes in *Revolutionary Memory* that a poem’s history – the appreciation of its meaning and value by literary critics – is sometimes *as important* as the poem itself. In the case of the poetry of the American Left, however, “the accompanying public context is silence,” and Nelson’s objective is to read this silence and analyze the reasons behind it. It is because such poems haven’t been analyzed or paid too much attention; they have been dismissed as junk literature made for propaganda. To read progressive poetry without reflecting on that problematic history is, in effect, “to read it ahistorically” and cut the poem’s original intentions. Following Frederic Jameson’s famous dictum “always historicize,” Nelson proposes that one

should historicize from different standpoints, that is, from the perspective of the period under consideration, from within a critique of the enabling and disabling conditions of current culture, and with an awareness of the institutional history of our interpretative practices. Under the circumstances, contextualization becomes highly important, together with an analysis of the barriers that block our access to the progressive poetry of the past.

In failing to tell appropriate stories about the culture of the Left – both in academia and in our public culture – our society has not only made it just a “phantasmatic invention,” but has also driven it out of existence. Thus, in an effort to understand our own contemporaneity and that of the past, we should recover what has been lost and deliberately forgotten. As it happens, a necessity for interpretation is particularly strong with many of the poems by women, minority writers, and recently published poets of the Left. They are important because they deal not only with topics unfamiliar to many readers, but also employ rhetorical strategies and embody aesthetic principles different from those valued in canonical poems. Modern readers should be taught new ways to read progressive literature, and in this respect Nelson’s aim is to provide an example of such undertakings. To do so, he proposes two models of reading and recovery, one that combines biography and history (and he takes the case of Edwin Rolfe), and another one that focuses on community and continuity in the collective enterprise of progressive poetry (3). The latter model suggests, according to Nelson, “that in some of the key constitutive moments of political poetry a

collective literature is a destination and an overriding value; it triumphs over the individual voice” (3).

On the one hand, although many critics – especially the adepts of the New Criticism – have usually rejected biography in favor of a close textual analysis, a biography of the Left is nevertheless of particular significance, since it can immeasurably enrich the meaning of many poems. This is because, to be sure, historical contingency is “the very marrow” of progressive writers’ work, for their writing was a form of public action. In trying to bring forth contemporary issues, many of them had their lives transformed, so that their poetry and personal lives were inescapably tied to contemporary events. *Therefore*, for many of the writers on the margins of the American culture – whether they were women, minorities, or writers on the Left – politics, history, and cultural conflict are, Nelson emphasizes, partly source, cause, and *raison d’etre*: “What one encounters in their work is often a biographically inflected reaction to a subcultural experience of current history” (Nelson 6).

On the other hand, apart from the model that focuses on biography, critics can focus their approach on the collective enterprise of progressive poetry, on moments when it became part of a broad social and political movement. Much of this poetry has been dismissed based on its thematic similarity and a lack of a defining difference, making it both undistinguished and undistinguishable. It is high time, however, to read and analyze “the most despised, even reviled, feature of proletarian poetry, its commonality and shared cultural mission” (Nelson 6).

Although from the American New Criticism's perspective, 1930s political poetry seems largely undifferentiated, Nelson articulates several distinctive phases. Thus, the revolutionary poetry of the first half of the decade takes up very different topics than the popular front poetry of the second half. As he clearly points out, the field of reference for the poetry focused on the depression was primarily national, whereas the focus of the next phase of "choral poetry" (7) was European fascism and the Spanish Civil War, and therefore in a spirit of international poetic community.

In a chapter about modern poems that "we have wanted to forget," Cary Nelson questions the fact that there is not yet a distinction with respect to whom the term "we" stands for, that is, the "we" who are willing to write the forgotten history. Nevertheless, he attempts to present "fragments of a hypothetical history" (12). Starting with the 1890 collection of poems, *The Light of Persia or the Death of Mammon and Other Poems of Prophecy, Profit, and Peace*, gathered by George P. McIntyre, readers may begin a journey into the forgotten, silent world of progressive poetry. Thus, from the strikes of the 1870s through the difficult years of the 1880s, when as a result of massive immigration employers were able to keep the workers' wages low, one can always trace a need for social change. No wonder such a need has been "forgotten" and suppressed as if it has never been there.

Notes to Introduction:

¹ See, in this respect, Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35) and his theory of the novel. Bakhtin's theory of the novel relies on three key concepts. Chronotope is used to describe the intrinsic connectedness of time and space and their seminal role in constituting literary genres; *carnivalesque*, that is, those forms of unofficial culture (the early novel among them) that resist official culture or political oppression through laughter, parody, and "grotesque realism," and, finally, the dialogism of culture. This concept of the multivoiced nature of discourse is central to Bakhtin's theory of the novel. His belief is that language is fundamentally dialogic: "the word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already an object" (1204-5). In addition, heteroglossia is a term used to describe the "internal stratification" of language, the interplay among its social and class dialects, professional jargons, and so on, "languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour" (1199).

² See Jean Baudrillard's *The Procession of Simulacra*. For Baudrillard, the word *simulacrum* denotes representation but also carries the sense of a counterfeit or fake. Simulacra seem to have referents (real phenomena that they refer to), but they are only representations that mark the absence, not the existence of the objects they pretend to represent.

Chapter I: Shakespeare in Overalls: Reshaping Poetical Forms to a New Context¹

How else other than by humanizing or personalizing can one tell the important story of “engaged” or “committed” writers in a way that acknowledges their sacrifices as well as their very human mistakes? (Wald 7).

If adapted to contemporary urban life, and tempered by the brutality of modern racism and fascism, the category of romanticism remains beneficial to apprehending the evolution of the Left tradition (Wald 12).

About us people come and go

Talking of the C. I. O. Martha Millet in “The Love Song of J. Anonymous Proletariat” (qtd. in Wald 20).

“What shall a lover sing when half the land/ Is driven cold and lives on dank despair?” (qtd. in Wald 15), wonders the Bohemian radical poet and playwright Alfred Kreymborg (1883-1966) in his “American Jeremiad” (1935) and symbolically marking a time of crisis that is totally distinct from what had been before. The atmosphere engendered by the first years of depression definitely created new pressures and demarcated a new background that forced writers to respond in a certain way and to seek out new forms of discourse. This is why, starting with 1929, there emerged a sentiment that a new poetry should be expressed by the working class, and that it should reflect its perspective from a Marxist point of view. At the time, an important role was played by *The Liberator*, whose main writers, such as Max Eastman, Joseph Freeman, Michael Gold, and Claude McKay, were sympathizers of the “Workers Party,” newly established in 1922 after a previous illegal existence. Therefore,

The riddle encountered in harnessing a literary project to a Marxist party – how to reconcile political commitment with poetic craft – would be cast and recast in the late 1920s, the post 1935 Popular Front years, the World War two period, and the Cold War era.
(Wald 15)

In his *Exiles from A Future Time*, Alan Wald focuses on the formation of the tradition and organization of the cultural Left, especially in connection with the contradictions affecting its avant-garde poets, the fashioning of the Black radical literary movement, the unease between feminist concerns and class identity, and the role of the Party-led publications. Wald starts his book by discussing the terms “realism” and

“romanticism” in connection with what is termed as “Great Depression Literature,” “Proletarian Writers,” “Socialist Realism,” and “other hackneyed images used to conflate the Literary Left into ‘the Thirties’ as a rather dreary interlude” (11). Thus, he emphasizes, the literary term “realism” more than “romanticism” includes in its definition the use of direct language, colloquial speech, and anti-bourgeois themes, yet these attributes that are not specific to realism. These have been traits of the avant-garde and of the romantic verse since the time of Rimbaud and Whitman, argues Wald. After all, Vivian Gornick’s *The Romance of American Communism*, one of the uncommon books about U. S. Communism has a title that is quite telling. In addition, if one turns from literary style to epistemology, one notices that the Communist Left’s “realism” with respect to the race and class inequalities of capitalism and the rise of fascism was counterbalanced by illusions in the Soviet Union and the future of the American working class that could be easily called “romantic idealism.” As it happens, Marxist poets usually esteem but ultimately discard romanticism due to the historic links between Marxism and the Enlightenment’s secularism, rationality grounded on empiricism, and convictions about material progress producing widening democratization. Moreover, the close relationship existing between the term “romantic” and what is called the gothic, the erotic, the adventurous, the individualistic, along with romanticism’s cults of nature and of genius do not resonate with the usual praxis of the Marxist poets. However, as Wald points out, other characteristics are inherent in the definition of romanticism that can be applied to Marxist writers:

[. . .] in particular, romanticism’s mode of vision and imagination that organized about the goal of a social utopia; the Wordsworthian demand

for simplicity in language; the desire to regenerate humanity by returning to some essential qualities deformed by contemporary values and social organization; and specific styles such as the meditative voice of the romantic lyric. (12)

Starting from these observations made by Alan Wald, I would like to bring into attention the concept of “rearticulation,” one of the key terms that I will employ in the present thesis. The term rearticulation is, in itself, a part of a cluster of concepts that develop from Antonio Gramsci. Stuart Hall and the co-authors Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe employ rearticulation to describe how political discourses either become dominant or organize for resistance by rearticulating existing terms, concepts, beliefs, and metaphors into new configurations that are persuasive to people in a particular historical context. Cary Nelson was among the first to emphasize the importance of “rearticulation” and its defining sense in his 1989 book *Repression and Recovery*:

The apparent unity and consistency of a particular discursive domain is always an effect of its success, in a given historical context, at disguising the seams between the different (and sometimes contradictory) vocabularies and beliefs it assembles. The struggle to gain control over the production of meaning in social life is thus dependent on this competition to articulate relations between the valued and the devalued concepts and languages in the culture. (251)

To further shed light on the use of this term, Nelson quotes in his book fragments of an explanation of the use of the term “rearticulation” by Stuart Hall. Thus, in a 1985 interview taken by Nelson, he explains that a theory of rearticulation is both a way of

understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they become or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctors, to certain political subjects. Consequently, “it is not the individual elements of a discourse that have political or ideological connotations, it is the way those elements are organized together in a new discursive formation” (251).²

Speaking of a cultural break or rupture between the 1920s and the early 1930s, Alan Wald, moreover, describes a unique cultural crucible that mixed older romantic and more recent modernist legacies in unprecedented ways. He explains that the coalesce of a distinct Communist-led Left tradition in the pre-World War II years was demonstrated on the “policy” level in two definite stages “documented by resolutions of writers’ groups and statements of Party leaders assigned to the cultural field (13).

First, there was a revolutionary proletarian poetry produced in the early 1930s, conceived as a “weapon” in the “class struggle.” Then, monitored by the post 1935 Popular Front, there was a phase of the “people’s poetry,” theorized as an instrument in the “anti-fascist struggle.” In both the early and the late 1930s, therefore, the Party’s orientations, magazines, and institutions furnished a focus and a theme, a potential audience and venues of publication for writers who might otherwise have gone unpublished. However, because the Communist Party membership’s faith in the Soviet Union as the vanguard of freedom and justice was reinforced by the subject matter of certain poems and the parallel campaigns in U.S. and Soviet publications against writing regarded as “negative,” circles outside the Party started accusing the Left poetry of being driven by “foreign” ideology. Yet, Wald emphasizes, there were admitted contradictions in regard to national situations. Thus, the Soviet literary officials abandoned the idea of

“proletarian literature” after 1932 in favor of “socialist realism,” and the latter doctrine depended on a successful socialist revolution, which was not the case in the U.S. However, Wald contends that “the omnipresent obsession with discouraging allegedly decadent and passive writing appears to have generated independently from U.S. as well as Soviet sources” (14). To give an example, he brings forth the 1925 prospectus of the *New Masses*, at the time called “Dynamo,” which stated that the magazine intended to publish “Rhymed and free-verse poetry, favoring vigorous expression of positive ideas and ideals, and avoiding the ineffectual fatalism so prevalent in many aesthetic literary publications” (qtd. in Wald 335). Furthermore, Wald points out as an example of Soviet preoccupation with fatalism that can be traced in Anne Elistratova’s critique of the *New Masses* in *International Literature* from 1932, where she takes Langston Hughes to task for his “distinctly decadent and passive mood” in his poem “Tired” (qtd. in Wald 335).

One thing that is less talked about or emphasized is that the new radical poetry that emerged after the Depression era under the influence of the tenets promulgated by the Workers Party is that it had a very clear coherence. Pointing to the minutes of the first national convention of the John Reed Clubs in May 1932, Wald contends that poets insisted, either in their meetings or on the pages of journals, on their responsibilities regarding antiracist, pro-union, and antifascist struggles (16).

Notes to Chapter I

¹ "Shakespeare in overalls" is a famous phrase used by Daniel Aaron to describe Michael Gold's vision of working-class literature at the time the latter was the editor of the *New Masses* (Wald 335).

² As Nelson documents, this is taken from "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," ed. Lawrence Grossberg, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10: 2 (Summer 1986), 45-60. For a list of Hall's publications, in which articulation and rearticulation are both directly and implicitly at issue, Nelson also recommends "A Working Bibliography: Writings of Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:1 (Summer 1986), 125-29. Moreover, Hall's analyses of Thatcherism are a good place to begin, and Nelson sends the readers to consult "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Speaking of this, in *Hegemony and Radical Democracy*, Laclau and Mouffe also comment that popular support for the Reagan and Thatcher projects of dismantling the Welfare State is explained by the fact that they have succeeded in mobilizing against the latter a whole series of resistances to the bureaucratic character of the new forms of state organization. They cite Stuart Hall, pointing out that he showed "how Thatcherite populism 'combines the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neoliberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, antistatism'" (170). In addition, Michael Bérubé comments in *Public Access* that it is no

accident that British cultural studies began to think “hegemony” at the exact moment of crisis preceding the onset of Thatcherism. For a discussion of Hall, Thatcherism, and Reaganism, see particularly pp.143-45. Kobena Mercer, in “Introduction: Black Britain and the Cultural Politics of Diaspora,” posits that the Thatcher/Reagan decade was, “after all, marked politically not only by deepening social inequalities and the resurgence of racism on both sides of the Atlantic, but by a neoconservative triumphalism that sent the Left spinning into identity crisis” (3).

Chapter Two

Challenging the Canon and Why: *De gustibus (non) est Disputandum*

Perhaps we should worry less about the reading-comprehension skills on the nation's teenagers and more about the reading skills of prominent essayists and editors in the literary public sphere." (Michael Bérubé *Public Access* 115)

In an essay called “The Politics of Knowledge,” Edward Said warns the readers, with the risk of oversimplifying things, that it does not finally matter *who* wrote what, but *how* a work is written and *how* it is read. Said is renowned for attacking or, better said, challenging Eurocentrism and imperialism, particularly the interplay between the dominant West (the “Occident”) and the Middle and Far East (the “Orient”). Said’s analysis shows, many times, how scholarship is sometimes informed by racism and how intellectuals have been complicit in the administration of the imperial power. However, he mentions over and over again that his work and others’ similar to his in an effort to widen the area of awareness in the study of culture so that modern readers can see the enormous importance of silenced or suppressed forms of knowledge, must be done with care. The point is not, in the end, to attack the canon and dismiss it; but, on the contrary, to open it, to show that “culture and society have been the heterogeneous product of heterogeneous people in an enormous variety of cultures, traditions and situations” (380). Thus, the great revisionary gestures of feminism, black studies, and anti-imperialist resistance theory were meant not to replace one set of authorities and dogmas with another, nor of substituting one center for another. As Said emphasizes, “it was always a matter of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, *a part of it*, like the work of women, or of blacks and servants – but which had been either denied or derogated” (381).

It is through such lenses that I want to continue my discussion about the canon, and literary theory will, in this respect, be very helpful to me. Critical theory, however, is still not in the graces of those who accuse theoreticians either of employing a set of

complicated jargon that obscures the text in a tiresome attempt to reveal their pretentious *sagesse*, or of politicizing literature.¹ In fact, my whole thesis is an attempt to politicize literature, and I think it is dangerous and naïve not to perceive it such.

To do this, I will historicize the rise of the English studies in England in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, comparing the original purposes of such studies with questions about what we study now and why. As we all know, higher education before the Victorian Age was under the Church of England monopoly. There were only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, divided into smaller colleges that were run like monastic institutions. Students had to be men, Anglican communicants, and attend the college chapel. In literary studies, only ancient Greek and Latin literature were taught and anyone who was Catholic, Jewish, Methodist, or atheist was barred from entry (Barry 12). What is interesting is that all the teachers were not only male, but also unmarried, so that they could live in the college. As far as higher education was concerned, up to the 1820s the organization of higher education had not changed since the Middle Ages.

English was first offered as an object of study only starting from 1828, and the first professor of English was appointed in 1829. At the time, teaching English involved studying the English language, with literature merely being used as a source of linguistic examples. Therefore, English literature as such was first taught at King's College, London, one of the colleges that later became London University, beginning in 1831 (Barry 13).

F. D. Maurice, one of the professors appointed to teach at King's in 1840, introduced the study of set books, and his inaugural lecture lays down some of the principles of liberal humanism. Thus, the study of English literature would serve "to

emancipate us [. . .] from the notions and habits which are peculiar to our own age,” connecting us instead with “what is fixed and enduring” (qtd. in Barry 13). As Peter Barry comments, for Maurice literature belonged to the middle class and was an expression of their values. Even more, the middle class represented for him the essence of Englishness, so middle class education should have centered on English literature. Quoting Professor Maurice, Barry comments:

Maurice was well aware of the political dimension of this. People so-educated would feel that they belonged to England, that they had a country. “Political agitators” may ask what this can mean “when his neighbor rides in a carriage and he walks on foot,” but “he will feel his nationality to be a reality, in spite of what they say.” In short, leaning English will give people a stake in maintaining the political *status quo* without any redistribution of wealth. (13)

In a way, the study of English literature was thus seen to replace religion, as middle class started attending church less frequently. However, we should not view it all that simple. I believe that behind a desire for ideological control there was also a real desire for the spreading of culture and maintaining social stability.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century much discussion took place to establish a Chair in English at Oxford. Edward Freeman, a professor of history there, gave a speech that is another key document because it touches upon several problems about teaching English that are still unresolved today. Trying to refute the argument of the time that the study of literature “cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and

enlarges the mind,” Freeman rightfully underlined that tastes and sympathies cannot be examined without technical information (Barry 14).

Later on, in the 1920s, three Cambridge teachers were to play a major role in teaching literature: I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis. The first one was the founder of studying English that is still the norm today. He made a decisive break between language and literature, isolated the text from history and context, arguing that students should pay close attention to the details of the text. William Empson, one of his students, wrote the now iconic *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), identifying seven types of verbal difficulty in poetry, to which he refers as “ambiguity,” and gave examples of them, with worked analyses. F. R. Leavis, another Cambridge critic, called the book highly disturbing because it used intelligence on poetry as seriously as mathematics, but T.S. Eliot called it “the lemon squeezer school of criticism” (Barry 15). Lewis and his wife, Q. D. Roth, were apparently a very glamorous couple in the 1930s; he wrote his doctoral thesis on the relationship between journalism and literature, and hers was on popular fiction, both revolutionary topics at the time. Nowadays they and their once famous journal *Scrutiny* are criticized not only because they advocated a close reading of texts but also because their approach to literature was too moral; its purpose was to teach us about life and transmit human values, in the same vein with what Matthew Arnold had argued in the 1850s (Barry 16).

Especially in the last ten years and even less, English departments look quite different than they used to be. All sorts of questions about pretty much everything started to pervade the “rainbow” choice of English courses that are being offered. Moreover, Bérubé comments:

[. . .] in the past ten years or thereabouts, academic critics have begun to question the moral urgency and certainty with which a previous critical consensus enforced the distinction between high and low culture, and the distinction between the aesthetic and nonaesthetic. We have argued that the categories of aesthetic and moral value are contested and not identical categories, and that they are historically and socially variable. (108)

He goes on to argue against those who oppose such a critical stance by exposing its mere “radical relativism that refuses to believe in ‘values,’ thereby generating a moral panic that the institutional guardians of culture have left their posts – or worse, transformed their posts into soapboxes from which they proclaim that there should be no guardians of culture, ‘since everything is beautiful and true as everything else’” (108). Although Bérubé believes that there is no way to win public consent to liberal and progressive positions in cultural politics, he contends that it is only healthy to engage in dialogism.

“All readers evaluate, and all evaluations are tied to the reader’s interests and purposes,” Barbara Herrnstein Smith used to say, to which I would add – depending on what they are offered to evaluate.

A discussion of Smith’s work is nonetheless relevant at this point. Unlike Said, Smith is one of the critics who is not interested in opening up the canon or in discussing marginalized voices of stigmatized groups. Like Pierre Bourdieu, she explores the general logic of categories such as “taste,” “aesthetic,” “value,” or “masterpiece.” More precisely, she is interested in philosophical aesthetics, a set of themes that she traces back to Hume and Kant. She disagrees with Kantian tenets that hold that art should be disinterested and argues instead that art is linked to the purposes that shape our relation to

it, that all aesthetic evaluations rely on complex, unpredictable, and “contingent” social processes.

Therefore, in her work *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Smith insists that, “all value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things,” but an effect of multiple, continuously changing variables (1913). Against the traditional aestheticist position that identifies “essential” or “intrinsic” properties that make an object “art,” Smith holds that there is no set of universally binding principles to account for that. Instead, she believes, there are dynamic processes through which definitions and values are produced, transmitted, or enforced. Although not a Marxist, Smith follows the logic of Marx’s observations on commodity fetishism, thereby warning that by locating values in the “object of art” itself, we fail to see the social processes and the social relations that are the creators of value. Following the line of pragmatism derived from William James and John Dewey, who see entities and values as constituted by their dynamic involvement with other entities (not only human agents), Smith’s ideas are akin with other contemporary neopragmatists like Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels.

To clarify how the neopragmatist theoretical framework translates into the evaluation of a literary work, Smith brings into discussion the decision to teach a certain work in a class. Her point is that such a decision is “situated,” occurring in an institutional context, where the teacher takes into account the nature of the audience, the goals of the course, and so on. Taking as an example a play like *Waiting for Godot*, she

posits that the teacher's decision in choosing it over others does not rest absolutely on whether Beckett's play is good or not.

Good for what? Good as a text in a specific educational setting? Good because it illustrates certain themes and techniques the teacher wants to emphasize? Good because the various secondary materials are readily available to students? Good because knowledge of works by Nobel Prize winners is part of being well-educated? Good because the instructor studied Beckett during his or her own college years and hence can readily draw on models of how to go about teaching this play? (Leitch 1911)

In considering why some works of art endure over the long run, Smith shifts her focus from the interested actions of individual human agents to emphasize the accumulation of social and cultural power by the works themselves. In other words, certain texts, by virtue of their repeated citation, inclusion in the curriculum, and constant reinforcement of cultural authority, ultimately constitute the very foundational meanings and understandings that orient individuals in this world. This concept will be critical when I will later analyze why certain texts have not only been dismissed as unworthy of study, but also deliberately forgotten. In the end, as Smith insightfully argues, literary texts act to "*shape and create* the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted, and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing" (qtd. in Leitch 1912). Hence, when readers want to reinforce their worldview, their ideology, they return to these works, which embody the tradition because they largely created it. Therefore, questioning the canonical status of such works becomes less threatening if we understand their tradition in this creative way. By providing students with

“necessary backgrounds,” teaching them “appropriate skills,” “cultivating their interests,” and generally “developing their tastes,” the academy produces generation after generation of subjects for whom the objects and texts thus labeled do indeed perform the functions thus privileged, thereby ensuring the continuity of mutually defining canonical works, canonical functions, and canonical audiences. (1930)

Speaking against Godamer, who characterized “the classical” as “a notable mode of ‘being historical’ and the historical process of preservation that, “through constant proving of itself sets before us something that is true” (1930), Smith notes that what is commonly referred to as “the test of time,” is not, as the figure implies, an impersonal and impartial mechanism, “for the cultural institutions through which it operates (schools, libraries, theatres, museums, publishing and printing houses, editorial boards, prize-awarding commissions, state censors, and so forth) are, of course, managed by *persons*” (1930), not “time.”³ Furthermore, she constructs her argument by underlining that those who have the power of making selections and preserve works through time, will, in turn, tend to choose only the texts that “fit” *their* characteristic needs, interests, resources, and purposes. Like Louis Althusser and many other critics, Smith ultimately concludes that the texts that survive will tend to be those who appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies. She comments:

However much canonical texts may be seen to “question” secular vanities such as wealth, social position, and political power, “remind” their readers of more elevated values and virtues, and oblige them to ‘confront’ such hard truths and hard realities as their own mortality and the hidden griefs

of obscure people, they would not be found to please long and well if they were seen *radically* to undercut establishment interests or effectively to subvert the ideologies that support them. (1931)

The same critical position was also taken in the 1990s by critics like Gerald Graff or Michael Bérubé, who call for “teaching the conflicts” and an accessible critical theory directed to a public rather than a narrow academic audience. Like Smith, Graff, for example, is also critical of Kantian conceptions of art that is seen as “disinterested,” “free” of all connection to mundane needs, against what Smith calls “aesthetic axioloxy.”⁴ In his influential essay “Taking Cover in the Coverage,” he takes a look at the ways in which the university institutionally and historically has shaped intellectual work: “There is something strange about the belief that we are being traditional when we isolate literary works from their contexts and explicate them in a vacuum or with a modicum of information” (2059), he says in disavowal.

In “Dancing Through the Minefield,” feminist critic Annette Kolodny discusses once more the way we are taught to read well and with pleasure only certain texts. To be sure, she acknowledges taking great pleasure in a text like *Paradise Lost*, although as a Jew and a feminist she subscribes neither to its theology nor to its hierarchy of sexual appreciations. When considering the implications of the assignment of aesthetic values to texts she admits that “we find ourselves locked in a chicken-and-egg dilemma,” unable easily to distinguish as primary the importance of *what* we read as opposed to *how* we have learned to read it. Her argument is that *we read with pleasure* what we have *learned how* to read, which is to a large extent dependent upon what we have already read (works from which we have developed our expectations and learned our interpretive strategies).

Therefore, what we choose to read, teach, and “canonize” is largely dependent on our previous readings (2156). Like Said and others, she does not want to deny or diminish the canon; for her, questioning the sources of aesthetic pleasures that we have gained from reading Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and so on only means that our aesthetic response is once more invested with epistemological, ethical, and moral concerns.

To give another example of how the canon is constructed, I will further bring into discussion Michael North’s *Reading 1922*. North scrutinizes the important year of 1922, known mainly for the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, and uses it as a test case for investigating the relationship between literary modernism and the public world of which it was a part. What North is ultimately trying to point out is that there are still so many biases and omissions for an account of such a short period of time, and that one must at least be aware of what is promoted as canonical literature at large.

North exposes the fact that when Pound brought into print and introduced to the public *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, two works that critics acclaimed as a complete expression of what was “deemed” by critics to be the spirit of a new generation and a break in literary history, other great works of the time could not benefit from a similar praise. Willa Cather, for example, also confessed at the time that “the world broke in two in 1922 and thereabouts.” Yet though she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922, her work was forgotten due to a harsh review published by Edmond Wilson and that apparently hurt her deeply. Her work, deemed as “backward,” was only part of a larger and more general separation of the avant-garde from the “backward.” Speaking of the 1922 literature and the canonized version of modernism that could not accommodate Claude McKay, Willa Cather, or other important writers, North comments:

Other new literatures were introduced the same year, among them a very ambitious one located in Harlem. The year of *The Waste Land* was also the year of Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* and James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry*, which were commonly reviewed together as the first instances of a new African American spirit. That spirit was evident in other areas as well – in Carter Woodson's *The Negro in Our History*, on stage in *Shuffle Along*, and in the visual arts with the establishment of Albert Barnes' collection of African art – so that 1922 has also been called the *annus mirabilis* of the Harlem Renaissance. (8)

Ultimately, as North insists throughout his books, we should keep in mind that many modernist works were also at first received as “ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral subversive, and generally ‘antisocial,’” as Frederic Jameson put it in *Postmodernism* (qtd. in North 211) – or as Clive Bell denounced jazz or accused Eliot for having “played the devil with the instrument of Shakespeare and Milton” (qtd. in North 27). Nowadays, because they have become familiar to us we perceive them as “elitist” at the least. “Whether works like *Ulysses* have in fact become so thoroughly domesticated that they seem ‘realistic’ as Jameson suggests,” North insists, “is open to question” (211). I believe the same is true of progressive literature. The first step for the literary critics is, I contend, by analogy with what I have discussed in this chapter: to investigate and illuminate more on progressive literature, rescuing it from the status of taboo.

In his poem “Of Modern Poetry,” Wallace Stevens argued that “the poem of the mind”

has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

It has to face the men of the time and to meet

The women of the time. It has to think about war

And it has to find what will suffice.

Although Stevens's work has been only recently reconsidered from a more leftist perspective, he will always be right in his "Modern Poetry."⁵ But I will discuss later the necessity of writing a certain type of poetry, at a certain time, for certain men and women. For now, I would like to turn my discussion to the 1930s and to modernism.

Notes to Chapter Two:

¹ Michael Bérubé actually quotes Peter Shaw, one of Lynne Cheney appointees to the National Council on the Humanities, who said in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that “theory” of any kind is at present a code word for the politicization of literature. (Bérubé 45)

² Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar analyze some aspects of this process in “Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions,” trans. James Kavanagh, *Praxis* 5 (1981): 43-58. See also Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 230-44, for a related analysis of what he refers to as “the quasimiraculous correspondence” between “goods production and taste production” [Smith’s note].

³ Speaking about the test of time, Annette Kolodny recalls a discussion with an Oxford-trained colleague of hers who once assured her, “If Kate Chopin were really worth reading, she’d have been lasted – like Shakespeare.” To this, Kolodny sadly comments that for her colleague, it was the canon that conferred excellence, and Chopin’s exclusion demonstrated only her lesser worth (Kolodny 2152).

⁴ Smith means by “aesthetic axiology” the traditional philosophies or definitions of art that hold the art object’s value to be unchanging and inherent in the object itself (Leitch 1914).

⁵ See, in this respect, Al Filreis’s more recent book *Stevens and the Actual World*.

Chapter III Modernism Versus Radical Poetry: The Big Controversy

at times the timid christ,
longing to speak...
women pass hurriedly, disdainfully by.
.....
recalling the verses of sensitive men
who have felt these things...
who have reacted, to all things on earth,
I am dissolved in unemotion.
Herman Spector "Outcast" (1929) (qtd. in Wald 199)

Alan Wald devotes a whole chapter in his *Exiles* to the debate over the modernist writer with respect to radical poetry. The conventional set of associations with radical poetry is anything but modernist, yet this is the result of a cliché perpetuated for generations. Let me start by saying that controversies began during the late 1920s and late 1930s, and that the challenge was posed directly by the verse and literary criticism of T. S. Eliot. It seems that progressive poetry tended to be realistic, “functional,” pleasing to the masses, as opposed to a more “cerebral” and “individualistic” one.

Here are some of the “accusations” at stake. As documented by Wald, Leonard Spier’s views “present the kind of parochial, anti-intellectual judgment that always remained present in the Communist Left.” Spier believed that

Eliot’s poetry, essentially trivial, pedantic and snobbish, reeking of the library and parlor, is certainly the worst example for radical poets to follow. The proof is: ask any ten workers [. . .] and the majority will tell you they don’t know what he is talking about.(qtd. in Wald 194)

Others, like Alfred Hayes, who sometimes substituted for Gold in writing the cultural program for the *Daily Worker*, urged revolutionary writers to study Eliot to learn from his “ability to make life vivid and concrete, his dramatic power, his diction stripped to the concentration of prose,” deeming that “our poetry has lacked this – it is pictureless, unhuman, [un]dramatic. It is poster poetry, holiday poetry, epic poetry with the heroes left out and only the chorus” (qtd. in Wald 194).

Wald notes that while many leftist writers were aware they could not adapt Eliot for revolutionary poetry, they were nonetheless attracted to some aspects of his modernism. Mike Gold, famous for his anti-modernist views, made his argument by comparing the sale of books among workers: “American workers don’t read and love poetry as do German, or Jewish, or Russian, or Latin American workers.” Moreover, “just as a machine is a different social force in America than in U.S.S.R., just so the proletarian poet must find a different conception of the function of poetry from that entertained by T.S. Eliot. He cannot be an individualist and ignore his audience.” (qtd. in Wald 195).

Such a concern about politics of form in the U.S. is, Wald reminds us, similar to those expressed by European Marxists. In this respect, the famous debate between Georg Lukacs and Bertold Brecht paralleled in a way the “Gold versus Eliot” views in U.S. The two Europeans questioned whether modernism was a detachable experiment in form, usable for various ends, or whether it produced in its very formal features an ideology that replicated rather than transcended the reifications, to use a favored term of Lucacs, of bourgeois society (Wald 195)

Brecht viewed modernism as a set of experimental artistic techniques generally free of political content that can allow the writer to attain a higher mode of realism than conventional techniques. Lukacs, on the other hand, viewed modernism as an ideology fostering subjectivism and personalism, mirroring the reifications of bourgeois society and inextricably linked to specific modernist literary forms. Commenting on this, Wald underlines that in theory, most U.S.

Communist editors – people like Gold, Joseph Freeman, V.J. Jerome, Joseph North, A. B. Magil – tended to favor Lukacs’s antimodernism. However, in practice, the most significant number of Communist poets, especially in New York, were familiar with Eliot, Crane, and other modernists and aspired to appropriate some of the modernist features for the Left. Moreover, those experimental writers with Communist penchants or members of the Party, such as Dos Passos, were more or less “forgiven.” As it happens, Communist writers from other countries who are today often discussed in relation to modernism – such as Neruda, Brecht, or Aragon – were never criticized for being too personal, obscure, or difficult (Wald 196).

Michael North’s seminal work *The Dialect of Modernism*, on the other hand, uncovers the crucial role of racial masquerade and linguistic imitation in the emergence of literary modernism. Rebelling against the idea of standard language, and literature written in it, modernists such as Joseph Conrad, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams reimagined themselves as racial aliens and mimicked the strategies of dialect speakers in their work. In doing so, they made possible the most radical representational strategies of modern literature, which emerged from their attack on the privilege of standard language. At the same time, however, another movement, identified with Harlem, was struggling to free itself from the very dialect the modernists appropriated, at least as it had been rendered by two generations of white dialect writers. For writers such as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston, this dialect became a barrier as rigid as the standard language itself. Thus, the two modern

movements, which arrived simultaneously in 1922, were linked and divided by their different stakes in the same language. North shows, through biographical and historical investigation and through careful readings of major literary works, that however different they were, the two movements are inextricably connected, and thus, cannot be considered in isolation. Each was marked, for good and bad, by the other.

Chapter IV

Black Marxists and Their Liberation Struggle, Communism, and Bohemianism

“About us people come and go

Talking of the C. I. O.” Martha Millet in “The Love Song of J. Anonymous Proletariat” (qtd. in Wald 20).

If adapted to contemporary urban life, and tempered by the brutality of modern racism and fascism, the category of romanticism remains beneficial to apprehending the evolution of the Left tradition (Wald 12).

Why Communism? Why Bohemianism? Why Communism and Bohemianism, two apparently mutually exclusive terms? Was it ever possible for a marriage to exist between the two, and if so, what was the outcome of it? What do Communism and Bohemianism mean or imply? Whose Communism and whose Bohemianism? The following chapter will attempt to answer these questions and to define the two terms by underscoring the misunderstandings associated with both of them.

Currently we are witnessing a revolution in U.S. literary critical studies, a “radical recovery movement,” to use Gary Holcomb’s term. There is a strenuous effort currently done by prominent scholars of several American universities to challenge received assumptions about the study and the history of U. S. ethnic literature of the modernist period. Heavily influenced by Cary Nelson’s 1989 seminal work *Repression and Recovery*, critics started to put to test the canon of modernist poetry, the prevalent views of white supremacy in the ranks of Communist and other radical movements, the tendency to fabulize difference between ethnic literature and the “dominant” literary tradition which inevitably essentializes absolute cultural difference between the two, and so on.

Cary Nelson is the first critic who introduced poststructuralist theory and criticism to the study of radical poetry. Thus, the notion of modernist literature has been deconstructed to expose why the study of writers with certain leftist trainings or penchants is of paramount importance if we want to have a more global insight and understanding of the period. Undoubtedly, the study of “difficult” modernist poetry has been valued to the exclusion of and to the

detriment of a more radically politicized one. Moreover, most of the mainstream modernist poets have been analyzed until recently only from certain angles, with critics being not only oblivious to writers' politically radical action but also claiming that they were even hostile to it. Poetry has been therefore usually viewed as apolitical, as if poetry can escape ideology. Most critics have chosen to take for granted the fact that many writers did not belong to the Communist party as members – due, undeniably, to the Red scare period of the 1950s that demonized writers with leftist associations. To sum up, the modernist canon has been accused of comprising only politically conservative authors, with the leftist-inclined ones having been put down, unworthy of serious study.

Faced with such problematics, critics now propose that a scholarly focus on left recovery would offer students of literature the modes of analysis that are concerned with the way minority writers materially challenged the dominant hegemony. It is true that, due to the university curricular reform today, we are able to study minority and women's literary study, yet this multiculturalism poses, as Holcomb observes, "the foremost impediment in the way of radical recovery studies," policing radical discourses. In his "Diaspora Cruises," Holcomb reminds us of Laclau's shrewd exposure of how conservative enterprises are able to accommodate populist movements by putting into practice a rhetoric of difference as a substitute for radical discourses. Laclau cogently articulated that dominant groups pacify social dissent by substituting the idea of celebrating diversity, Holcomb summarizes, believing that the source of the kind of critical prohibition Laclau articulates may be traced in the historical trajectory of ethnic literary

studies. In terms of the study of ethnic literature, without insistent critical attention paid to resistant discourses, rebellious acts are more easily assimilated into the dominant hegemonic pedagogic-academic order. Resistant discourses are rendered, in other words, acceptable, yet a radical recovery criticism, Holcomb emphasizes, offers a means by which scholars and educators may hold a conversation about the predicament that Laclau articulates. In addition, he identifies a problem in the historical isolation of given ethnic studies and believes the problem lies in the application – or absence – of literary historiography. Also in “Diaspora Cruises” he underscores:

While indeed engaged in the advancement of arts and social issues that represented ethnic cultures, many ethnic writers simultaneously played leading roles in *pluralistic* progressive causes. It is becoming apparent that to *segregate* the study of ethnic literatures historically from the study of literature produced by authors associated with “mainstream society” and other ethnic minorities— particularly with respect to the history of leftist, Marxist, and other forms of radical and activist politics—is to tell an incomplete and therefore misleading story.

As I have mentioned before, I am in the “privileged” position to have watched the high value placed by the dominant discourse on Communism before the 1989 Revolution in Romania. For their part, Romanian Communists sought to paint the regime in the brightest possible colors, and resolutely dismissed all criticism from capitalist democracies as mere bourgeois propaganda. However,

because the system was so fierce in advocating it, putting everything on its scales to judge and mold its values as it suited best different interests, I made the same mistake as many Americans still do: avoiding it, ignoring it, blocking my openness to its significance, intent, or achievements. For me, as a Romanian, the word has acquired a taboo status, just as it did in America.

Needless to say, the United States has for a long time been the “leader” of a massive anti-communist campaign disseminated by a multitude of different sources and means. Usually, it has painted communism as a supreme and unqualified evil, an evil sought by the Soviet Union to impose it on the rest of the world. But as much as I would like to, I will not elaborate on this too much, for it is not my purpose for this paper. Suffice it to warn my reader, for the moment, that he or she should always be aware of absolutist positions or rhetoric. Both sides have exaggerated their visions of each other, distorting the reality or the context by emphasizing only what was wrong. The image of America that I grew up with, for example, was just as evil and full of drugs, armed people and uncertainties: a country where one had to pay for health benefits and education, and where money was valued above any morals. Likewise, anti-communist rhetoric has stressed only the dictatorship and the repression of the communist regimes, neglecting the contexts in which they appeared, the advance and progress they made, and so on.

I will be referring to both “Communism” that stands for the Communist Party of the U.S.A. (CPUSA), and to the other form of “communism” of the 1920s and 1930s, the one seen as the non party-version, the material form of

Marxism that is not necessarily directly affiliated with organized forms of Marxism. Moreover, as documented by William Maxwell, in the early twentieth-century U.S., Communism was also subject to a peculiar myth that linked it to sexual promiscuity and miscegenation. Especially in the South, the word *communism* itself, pronounced com-mune-ism, according to W. J. Cash, had a sexual connotation based on stereotyped visions of nineteenth-century utopian communal societies, which suggested that notions of free love were integrally tied to a communal living (127). Communists' promised revolution seemed to some (white southerners in particular) a threat in racial-sexual moral order coming along with leveled economic differences. Maxwell even notes that a 1934 strike wave in Birmingham, Alabama, was met with editorials against "Red literature preaching free love [and] inter-marriage." To many, at the time, the most frightening thing about sovietized free love was the prospect of affection between black men and white women. As one worried commentator put it, "To Colored men, complete equality with the Whites, as proclaimed by Moscow, *means free possession of White women*" (qtd. in Maxwell 128; emphasis in original).

Historians now agree that between 1920 and 1935, no one engaged in more theoretical discussion about the situation of black Americans or was so actively involved in organizing black workers and fighting racial injustice as the American Communists. Unlike previous groups in the American Left, particularly the Socialists, the Communist Party viewed the "Negro question" as a national question, and defined the Party's role as fighting for proletarian hegemony within a broad Black liberation movement that included other political tendencies.

The discourse that helped shape the Communist ideology was then borrowed, adapted and successfully used by African Americans in their search for freedom and equal treatment by the whites. To be sure, from a strictly class approach vis-à-vis black oppression, the Communist thinking evolved toward a view of African- Americans as an oppressed nationality. The latter view recognized the prevalence of racism and the special needs and demands of African-Americans, and in the early 1930s the Communists refined and implemented their policy on blacks as an oppressed nation. In 1930 the party decided to use the slogan of equal rights for blacks in the North and the South, and in the South alone the slogan, “The Right of Self-Determination for the Negroes in the Black Belt.” This new policy was accompanied by the promotion of blacks to leadership positions through a greater recruitment among blacks, a greater involvement in black struggles, and a campaign against racial injustice within the Party.

During the 1930s, the Party led three major African-American “struggles”: the struggle to save the Scottsboro boys, who were imprisoned for rape in Alabama in 1931; the campaign to free Angelo Herndon, a black Communist convicted of insurrection for leading a biracial demonstration in Atlanta in 1932; and the struggle to improve the lot of the black tenant farmers in the South through the Sharecroppers’ Union. I will later discuss how some of these aspects influenced authors like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, underscoring the significant impact of communism in combating racism in the labor movement and in support of the Black liberation.

Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Arna Bontemps incarnated, among others, the links between the Harlem Renaissance and the revolutionary spirit of the Black Left in the 1930s. It is true, they did not belong to the Communist Party. However, as Wald cogently emphasizes, no prominent African American writer was willing to risk the exposure of appearing in public as an acknowledged member of the Communist Party except Richard Wright. Nonetheless, sympathy for the party was so widespread at the time that “it is possible to acknowledge African American Literary Communism as a major component of mid-twentieth-century culture, one that would grow even stronger during the late 1940s and early 1950s” (Wald 267). In addition,

What is more memorable than formal membership in the Party is that, for Black writers, the publications, clubs, and committees that were at least in part created by Party members, and with Party support, constituted principal venues in which many Black writers came together to formulate ideas, share writings, make contacts, and develop perspectives that sustained their future creative work.
(Wald 267)

A very important event was the formation of the League of American Writers in 1935, headquartered in New York, which was also the center of Black literary Marxism, that provided a new visibility for Black pro-Communist authors, bringing them into closer contact with each other. Langston Hughes and Richard Wright served as vice presidents of the League, and among its African American members were Ralph Ellison, Alain Locke, Marshall Davis, McKay, and others

(Wald 285). In addition, as Holcomb emphasizes in “Diaspora Cruises,” many ethnic writers were associated with intellectuals and workers of other ethnic groups and cultural orientations, as well as with white workers, intellectuals, and leaders, in politically radical unity. Or, as Cary Nelson emphasized, these writers must be understood as part of a collaborative, Bakhtinian “dialogic” intertextuality.

The John Reed Clubs placed a distinct weight on leading Black writers to the revolutionary movement. In fact, Black writers like Langston Hughes advocated for a more intense effort to attract Black authors to John Reed Clubs everywhere:

If the JRCs in the larger centers would send speakers and contact the Negro literary clubs and student groups, we might be able to catch the coming artistic generation while they are still on the wing. A lecturer going forth and pointing out to them the part which artists and writers have played in the liberation of the working class in Russia, and the part which they can play here, might do something toward winning the younger Negroes to our side. (qtd. in Wald 86-87)

Unlike other accounts on the Black cultural figures that had meaningful contacts to the Communist party, William Maxwell’s take on the subject fully acknowledges the important mutual relationship between the modern black literature and the Communist Party. Like Alan Wald, Barbara Foley, Cary Nelson, James A. Miller, and others, Maxwell takes pains to reconsider the abuse of black

writers by the Old Left, calling attention to the variety and the complexity of the African American involvement with Communism. Yet unlike them, he stretches, on the one hand, the historical frame to include the 1920s, in other words, not only the post-Depression period. The Harlem Renaissance is of paramount importance for him, since it was then when the working-class Harlem internationalists were most impressed by the Russian Revolution and the pro-Soviet Left and forged their efforts towards a rebirth of Harlem. The big influence, therefore, started with the Harlem Renaissance and not in a “Depression-fed enlistment of literary innocents” (6), Maxwell comments. On the other hand, he sets out to investigate by cross-examining the negotiations of African American literary intellectuals with official Communist versions of “white” Marxist theory.

To be sure, it was the Old Left, the author underscores, that in fact promoted a wide range of exchanges between black and white authors, genres, theories, cultural institutions, and so on, yet it is still mainly “stretched as a dire scene of white connivance and black self-cancellation” (1). Moreover, he argues that it was due to the unique promotion by the Communist Party for African American initiative that a majority of “New Negro” writers became Old Leftists, seventy-five percent of them, as he testifies. Therefore, it is crucial for us to recognize how each of them influenced each other if we want to understand both how the history of racism in America changed and how black modernism found its way and is now gradually remapped next to white modernism. Even more, the history of African American literature cannot be treated without the history of

American Communism and without doing damage to both. It is because so many black intellectual writers, though at various points denying or repudiating their Party membership, were at the same time deeply involved with Communism. We are talking here, among others, about Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson, Dorothy West, Paul Robeson, William Attaway, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Frank Marshall Davis, Owen Dodson, Ralph Ellison, Robert Hayden, Chester Himes, Melvin Tolson, Margaret Walker, Theodor Ward and even Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, who by the late 1930s ended up praising the Soviet answers to the race problem or praised the value of Marxist historiography.

New Negro, Old Left is thus one of the most recent books that analyses the inseparability between Communism and African American literary studies, exposing, one by one, previous malicious accounts of this “marriage,” or alliance between the two, especially maneuvered by the second American Red scare discourses. Moreover, the writer indignantly posits that it is wrong not to see how black intellectuals influenced or transformed their white radical counterparts, “save through denunciations issued after escape.” As a result, Maxwell sadly concludes,

To this day, semester after semester, thousands of U.S. and college students are taught the justice of Wright’s and Ellison’s profiles in Communist racial hypocrisy. *Invisible Man* indeed remains one of the diminishing few must-read inscriptions of U.S. anti-Communism, an Ideology that English majors may now know

most vividly as a black intellectual response to false “Brotherhood.” [. . .] Postessentialist accounts of racial identity, post-cold war revisions of U.S. radical culture, and postsegregationist studies of America’s literatures make the present high time to rethink this debilitating premise. (5)

The term “bohemianism” is by all means a term of confusion and source of sometimes contradictory definitions. Although it “has come to symbolize rebellion,” now, as Leslie Fishbein underscores, “it has a rich and colorful tradition that sustains those who seek refuge within its bounds” (59). Fishbein also documents that it was Balzac who introduced the term to the literary world in his *Un Prince de Bohème*, and that the general public took note of the phenomenon with the publication of Henry Murger’s widely popular *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* in the 1850s.¹ Afterwards, “it was Thackeray who introduced the word and the concept of bohemia to England from Paris” (Sedgwick 193). The English-speaking public was familiarized with bohemianism through Thackeray’s immensely popular *Vanity Fair*, and in the 1890s du Maurier’s semiautobiographical novel *Trilby* precipitated a second bohemian craze (Fishbein 59).²

After commenting on Thackeray’s bachelors as the ones who “created or reinscribed as a personality type one possible path of response to the strangulation of homosexual panic” (192), Eve Sedgwick points out in *Epistemology of the Closet*, that what is most importantly specified about “Mr. Bachelor” is “his

pivotal class position between the respectable bourgeoisie and bohemia” (193). In addition, she contends that “except to homosexual men, the idea of bohemia seems before the 1980s not to have had a distinctly gay coloration” (193). At the turn of the century, however, as one moves past Thackeray toward

the ever greater visibility across class lines of medicalized discourse of – and newly punitive assaults on – male homosexuality [. . .] the comfortably frigid campiness of Thackeray’s bachelors gives way to something that sounds more inescapably like panic. (Sedgwick 194)

Fishbein, on the other hand, points out that what is interesting about the writers who emphasized America’s bohemia is the homage that they paid to social proprieties and this land’s sense of civic responsibility. For example, William Dean Howells in *The Coast of Bohemia* (1899) portrays a heroine who lives with her mother and does nothing but smoke, and for most of the characters “an interlude in bohemia is merely a way station on the journey to respectability,” reducing “the bohemian desire for freedom to a silly wish to smoke” (Fishbein 59).

Commenting on the general atmosphere and on the bohemianism of the Greenwich Village in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Fishbein links them with a general concern for socialism. The same connection could be made, I believe, in the cases of many Black Bohemian intellectuals who were attracted to the Communist party:

What in other eras might be viewed as a highly personalistic concern with psychological well-being, an individual attack on the constraints of bourgeois morality, at this time was regarded by *The Masses'* radicals as an organic part of their socialist outlook. (62)

During the height of proletarian realism in the mid 1930s, Max Eastman, the famous editor of *The Masses*, noted in response to communist charges of mere bohemianism against him that the bohemian desire to live free of bourgeois convention and respectability was akin to the aim of nineteenth-century utopian socialists, that of creating an egalitarian society on a small scale within a capitalist regime. Eastman informed his critics:

The wish to live in a free and real life, and to cherish and communicate its qualities in works of art deserves the respect of every revolutionist. It is the substitution of this personal revolt, and this impractical communication of qualities, for the practical scientific work of mind or hand that the revolution demands of every free man in its desperate hour – it is that which is to be condemned. (qtd. in Fishbein 63)

Joseph Freeman, on the other hand, along with Mike Gold and others, accused bohemians of being too immature or irresponsible to accept the imposition of social order, whether that order be capitalism or communism. However, the promotion of a free spirit, a relaxed sexual attitude and an openness to discuss taboo subjects did bring about important social changes that otherwise would have been impossible under rigid political discipline required by the Party.

Moreover, just as after years of lecturing on Whitman, Emma Goldman came to discover that Whitman's bisexuality was essential to his knowledge of human complexity, his sensitivity to the nature of women through his own femininity, I contend that authors like Hughes, McKay, and Nugent's bisexuality also played a key role in their radical enterprises. Because "bisexuality, the full and free expression of all loving sexual impulses, posed the most striking alternative to puritanism conceivable to America's social radicals" (Fishbein 40), these authors thus intertwined or conceived of their revolt as being a sexual one too. Siobhan B. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* shows, in this respect, how African Americans, virtually absent as subjects from the 1920s dominant discourses such as sexology and the emerging film industry, found in fiction an important medium instantiating political agency and for contesting dominant cultural stereotypes. Somerville sets out to investigate the extent to which the discourse of homosexuality began to shape the texts associated with the "New Negro" movement, as well as the often contradictory ways in which African American writers registered its effects. In addition, she offers of a model of tracing and mapping the intersections of sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

Somerville provides a sustained discussion of how race and homosexuality are constituent elements in the construction of both. It is because, among others, the idea of race and the idea of homosexuality share many things in common: they have a common history and went through a modernization process at about the same time. The critic emphasizes, among others, how during the 1920s two neighborhoods in Manhattan, Greenwich Village and Harlem, developed

“flourishing enclaves of gay culture” and that many of the writers who were central to the Harlem Renaissance movement actively participated in these gay and lesbian cultures. The literary critic George Chauncey also seeks to uncover in his *Gay New York* how “gay social networks played a key role in fostering the Harlem Renaissance” (264), accompanied, at the same time, by the price of respectability that was also paid by many. Although two of the major patrons of the Renaissance (Alain Locke and Van Vechten) were gay and promoted a number of gay-identified or sexually active young writers (McKay, Nugent, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, and possibly Hughes among others), Harlem’s leading churchmen, such as Adam Clayton Powell, periodically railed against the homosexual “vice” growing in the neighborhood (254). Chauncey investigates at large attacks from the part of the church, such as Powell’s, together with other campaigners against “immorality” coming from Harlem’s social elite and intelligentsia. Du Bois, for example, fired the managing editor of *The Crisis* after the latter was arrested for homosexual solicitation in a public washroom. However, he underscores that many gay writers’ novels depicting Harlem scenes included gay and lesbian characters, including McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), and *Infants of the Spring* (1932). Following a line of several other critics, Chauncey concludes,

The poetry of Countee Cullen and possibly other Renaissance figures can be read as offering critiques of heterosexism as well as racism and odes to homosexual love as well as to black solidarity. In their boldest collective move, in 1926 they published *Fire!!*, an

avant-garde literary journal that included Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lillies, and Jade," an extraordinary homoerotic story (or prose poem) celebrating his cruising and consummating an affair with a Latin "Adonis." Their flamboyance was instantly denounced by Harlem's leading intellectuals and social figures, including Alain Locke, who considered such flamboyance unacceptable. (265)

Speaking of puritanism, when Max Freeman paid a tribute to Isadora Duncan, portraying her as a quintessential symbol of paganism, as one who "rode the wave of the revolt against puritanism" (qtd. in Fishbein 44), McKay was one of the few who recognized that Isadora's sensibility was so refined in its paganism that she failed to appreciate more primitive forms of culture. McKay pointed out that Isadora lacked any feeling or regard for black dancing and its imitations and derivations, commenting, "She had no real appreciation of primitive folk dancing, either for an aesthetic or an ethnic point of view. For her every movement of the dance should soar upward" (qtd. in Fishbein 45). Duncan, who is now considered the originator of the modern dance and for many radicals of her day the embodiment of the pagan spirit, looked for "pagan innocence" in the ancient Greek culture; moreover, in her formula for a new dance worthy of Walt Whitman, she specifically ruled out any reference to the sensual rhythms of jazz.

A revolt against old orders and the Victorian Puritanism also implied a revolt or a reconsideration of religion. In attacking the hypocrisy of the church, some of the earliest radicals were implicitly asserting their belief in the meaning

of the Christian ideal and in its ability to respond to the deepest human emotions. The subject is, again, too big for me to deal in a few sentences, but as far as McKay, Nugent, and Hughes are concerned, each shared a revolt against the church's failure to help the poor and its segregation of the Black people. Hughes's famous poem "Goodbye Christ," written in the 1930s, got him into a lot of trouble, and I will later discuss how the poet answered to the accusations brought about by HUAC in 1953. Claude McKay turned away from traditional religion ever since he was an adolescent, although towards the end of his life he became a devoted Roman Catholic. He was especially influenced by his brother Theo, who was a free thinker, and by the time he was fourteen he apparently shared his beliefs. Moreover, as Leslie Fishbein documents, McKay was joined by a band of ten boys in his high mountain village in Jamaica, who also believed in free thought. Bruce Nugent, the most bohemian of all, was an openly gay man and eccentric enough not to follow religious tenets à la carte.

Notes to Chapter IV

¹ According to Jerrold Seigel, Murger's newspaper sketches, collected in *Scenes of Bohemian Life*, as well as his 1851 drama, *Bohemian Life*, provided Puccini with the raw material for *La Bohème*. Seigel also takes Murger's life as one who embodies all the conflicts and tensions associated with a bohemian existence. The critic argues that bohemia of the nineteenth century France grew up where the borders of bourgeois existence were uncertain; it was a space within which newly liberated energies were continually thrown up against the barriers being erected to contain it, and where social margins and frontiers were tested. Bohemia, we further learn, frequently fueled political dissent. In addition, by dismantling the old collectivities (estates, guilds, councils), the bourgeois transformation of society gave individuals unprecedented freedom; in this respect, Seigel is interested to investigate what this freedom meant for people like Murger with one foot in bohemia and the other in bourgeois respectability.

² Eve Sedgwick dedicates a whole chapter in her *Epistemology* to discuss Thackeray, George Du Maurier, Henry James, or James M. Barrie as writers who explored bachelors in bohemia. She notes that "the filiations of this tradition are multiple and heterogeneous" (193) and based on James's *Notebooks* she mentions that Du Maurier, for example, offered James the plot of *Trilby* years before he wrote the novel himself.

Chapter V

Good Morning, Revolution: Langston Hughes in the 1930s

“The fish is in the water and the water is in the fish,” Arthur Miller once wrote, meaning that society is inside the man and the men inside the society. When analyzing writers like Hughes and McKay, some critics tend to forget the circumstances in which they wrote some of their poetry and dismiss it as “doggerel” or mere propaganda. However, as Alan Wald rightfully interrogates, “How else other than by humanizing or personalizing can one tell the important story of “engaged” or “committed” writers in a way that acknowledges their sacrifices as well as their very human mistakes? (Wald 7). The following chapter attempts, therefore, to humanize and personalize Hughes and McKay, trying to go beyond received criticism of them.

Like McKay and many other African American writers, Langston Hughes never joined the Communist party. Critics found two major reasons accounting for his decision: one serious and one facetious. The serious reason was his belief that artists and writers especially were not permitted freedom of expression in a Communist society. The other reason was because jazz was condemned as “decadent capitalistic music” in a Communist society, which surely must have made Hughes frown (Barksdale 9). Yet Alan Wald comments, quite interestingly, that the pro-Communist Left received “its biggest boost” when toward the end of the 1920s, Langston Hughes expressed its sympathy for the Communist Party.

Hughes had been exposed to radical ideas on the one hand through his grandmother, who cherished the memory of her first husband (a true follower of

John Brown who had been killed) and by Jewish high school students in Cleveland at the time of World War I on the other hand.

I will leave aside Hughes' jazz poetry, so much praised and discussed by "an army of critics," and undertake instead a brief analysis of his 1930s writing. Langston Hughes produced five volumes of poetry in the 1930s – *Dear Lovely Death*, *The Dream-Keeper*, *The Negro Mother*, *Scottsboro Limited*, and *A New Song*. In addition, he published the prizewinning novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), a volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), seven full-length and two one act plays (Barksdale 40).

However, despite his wide previous appraisal by critics, the fact that his tragedy *Mulatto* ran on Broadway and on tour for almost twenty months in 1935, and the fact that his long one-act play *Don't You Want to be Free?* set a record of 135 performances at the New York Suitcase Theatre in 1937, the 1930s drastically changed Hughes' reputation. Moreover, Hughes's column in the Black newspaper *Chicago Defender* featuring the folk hero Jesse B. Simple won a major audience. According to Wald, the character "Simple" was originally designed by Hughes to promote a Left-wing view of why the antifascist war must be supported despite the existence of domestic racism, but Simple acquired a vitality of his own (Wald 88).

Speaking about the collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks* (a work that obviously alludes to Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*), Wald contends that unlike his poems, the short fiction of this volume and others "rarely translates Hughes's revolutionary goal," yet, "occasional tales such as "Little Old Spy" (1934) render his sympathies explicit" (88). I would contest this view. Many of the stories do reveal, through Hughes's irony, his inclination for Communism. The collection was received

well at the time, yet Hughes's evident anger against racism did not please people like Alain Locke, who remarked that "greater artistry, deeper sympathy and less resentment, would have made it a book for all times" (qtd. in Langston xviii). In *The Nation*, the novelist Sherwood Anderson praised Hughes's depiction of whites but condemned his depiction of blacks, which was, according to him, mainly a caricature. Even the social activist Martha Gruening deplored the fact that Hughes painted whites as either sordid and cruel, or silly and sentimental. Against such comments, both old and new, I would like to give three examples of stories that contradict such views. The first one is called "Breakfast in Virginia," a story calling attention to the bonds that sometimes can be created among blacks and whites who "gave up the pleasures of civilian life to bring an end to Hitlerism" (167). Although a little sentimental, it does call for a black-white alliance. It tells about two colored soldiers and a white man who travel in the Jim Crow train for the first time to the North. Corporal Ellis, who as a white man can be served breakfast in advance, invites the two Negro soldiers to his table, but the steward refuses to serve them. "But these men are soldiers," says the white man in embarrassment, inviting his friends to his room. "Breaking bread together is the oldest symbol of human friendship," he says, reminding the readers of their religious readings. One of the two shy Negroes dares then to look in the eyes of his host and smiles, while the other one prefers to be more reserved. He thanks for the breakfast, "looking across the table at his fellow American," also reminding the readers that he is a fellow American too, therefore with the same rights.

The second story that I chose was published in 1935 and is titled "Professor."

“Professor” is a brilliant story that brings forth a complex set of issues growing out of the positioning of the African-American voice in relation to Communist rhetorics. The plot follows a simple line, relying heavily on ironic twists on the part of the author through a carefully constructed dialogue. The story opens with a colored professor, T. Walton Brown, waiting (significantly) in front on the Booker T. Washington Hotel. A car with chauffeur comes along and takes him with great pomp to Mr. Ralph P. Chandler, a rich philanthropist and “a power in the Negro education, too.” The Chandlers have another guest for dinner, Dr. Bulwick, and they all engage in a conversation about the inclusion of Black students in white colleges. Bulwick and Chandler are luring Mr. Brown with the promise of a donation to his institution and a position there as a chair, provided that he complies with their views:

“The American Negro must not be taken in by Communism,” Dr. Bulwick says at a certain point “with great positiveness.” “America has done too much for the Negro for him to seek to destroy it,” adds Mr. Chandler seriously, making the poor professor bow down and nod with obedience. A dialogue such as this one clearly points out some of the anxieties of the time with respect to the Blacks’ attraction to Communism. Hughes has no reserve in making his point clear that the black professor has been both intimidated and bribed to “dance properly to the tune of Jim Crow education.” Mr. Brown’s story about the miserable conditions where he has always lived, about how hard he worked as a waiter for seven years to be able to get his Ph.D., and so on, is set against the small reward that he would get from his “benefactors”: a small trip to South America where he would not feel like Negroes. Asked by the powerful Mr. Chandler what he would need for his college, Mr. Brown is ashamed to ask much. Hughes comments in the story:

The sane and conservative way in which Dr. Brown presented his case delighted the philanthropic heart of the Chandlers. And Mr. Chandler and Dr. Bulwick both felt that instead of building a junior college for Negroes in their own town they could rightfully advise local colored students to go down South to that fine little campus where they had a professor of their own race like Dr. Brown. (106)

Consequently, such a story from the 1930s didn't lose its fresh flavor when we think of the recent debates on the media and in the Supreme Court with respect to the University of Michigan trial and affirmative action.

The story "Something in Common" is yet another telling example of a story that can be as fit for discussion today as it was at the time it was written. It speaks about the anxieties that some people in the US still have when facing voices of dissent, proving once more that Hughes's stories are indeed "for all times."

The story is set in Hong Kong, which at the time was still a British possession. It features again two main characters, an old white man and an old Negro. Complete strangers, they both enter a bar at the same time, looking equally poor in the eyes of the British bartender. The Negro asks for a beer and the white man for a scotch. Learning the high price for the beer (around ten dollars even today), the Black man complains: "Too high for this lousy Hong Kong beer," "but, reckon it's as good as some we got back home." Interpellating him with superiority from the other end of the bar, the white man feels compelled to protest, "I'll bet you wouldn't mind bein' back there, George, in the good old U.S.A." The two engage in a neutral conversation, but the Negro repeatedly protests, "Don't *George* me, 'cause I don't know you from Adam." Or, when the white

man offers him a drink with “Have a drink, boy,” he replies “Don’t call me *boy*, I am as old as you, if not older.” Then they start talking about women; while the white man would give all the “Chinee gals” for a white woman, the Negro would exchange all the white women anyone for a “yellow gal, like we have in Missouri.” However, the white man reminds him half of them in Kentucky have “white pappys,” putting the blame of interracial relationship on the women and comparing their children with little dogs.

What the two men have in common, it turns out, is not gin, as they pronounce at the table, but racial tension. The white man interpellates the black one and humiliates him, yet the official discourse is one of friendship, as he repeatedly invites the Negro for a drink “even if it is his last penny.” In his eyes, he’s doing a favor and he’s treating the Negro out of “noblesse,” when in fact he is only insulting him. Mindless of the Negro’s repeated protests, he keeps calling him “George,” and the latter has to protest once more: “I told you, don’t *George* me. My name is Samuel Johnson. White man, you ain’t in Kentucky now. You are in the Far East.” “I know it. If I was in Kentucky, I wouldn’t be standin’ at this bar with you. Have a drink,” insists the white man in his “benevolent” gesture. “Where is your home, George?” asks the white man with renewed disregard for the Negro’s name.” “You must think it’s Georgia,” the Negro replies ironically. “Truth is, I ain’t got no home – no more home than a dog.”

Although the white man feels he also doesn’t have a home, he confesses that sometimes he would wish to be back in the States. Yet when the Negro would rather not, because “a black man ain’t got a break in the States. [. . .] States is no good. No damned good.” Hearing this, the white man is simply appalled:

“Shut up,” yelled the white man waving a pretzel.

“What do you mean, shut up?” said the Negro.

“I won’t listen to nobody runnin’ down the United States,” said the white man. “You better stop insultin’ America, you big black ingrate.”

The discussion goes on with their insulting one another, and the British bartender throwing them out of the bar.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” sputtered the old white man. “Are we gonna stand for this – from a Limey bartender?” [. . .] He’s got no rights to put his cockney hands on Americans,” said the old white man.

“Sure ain’t,” agreed the old Negro.

Such a story is, I contend, one that can be analyzed for what it tells about discrimination, assuming superiority, advancing discourses of good intentions that actually mask interpellation, and so on. Admittedly, it is a simple example of how we sometimes put forth false patriotic slogans and refuse to engage instead in arguments. It is easy to shut somebody off because certain remarks could insult the country. After all, like in the “Professor” story, “America has done too much” for many, so one is not allowed to disagree with it. Just recently, when France, among other nations, did not want to offer her veto for a war on Iraq, many from the American media started insulting the French. As always, Americans have done too much for the French...to allow them to have their own opinion. But of course, as Laura Bush emphasized, one should not mix literature with politics. Actually, I remember that when I argued with a friend who thought that going to war in Iraq was a good thing, he shut me up with the same “plaque.” For him, going to war was good because it showed the world what a strong nation America is if it affords to disregard an international opposition; When, after an exchange of sharp retorts

I told him that people are dying so that “a peasant” like him can feel part of a superior nation,” he said, “No, so that you can come and study at one of the best universities,” reminding me of what America has done for me.

Coming back to the discussion of Hughes and his relationship with the Communist party, I have to mention the degree to which he was involved. During the Depression years he collaborated closely with the Communist party, joined the John Reed Clubs, published frequently in the *New Masses*, issued columns and a pamphlet praising the Soviet Union’s treatment of its dark-skinned nationalities, wrote a poem to honor the 1934 convention of the Communist Party, and was elected president of the Communist-led League of Struggle for New Negro Rights (Wald 89). Yet many critics chose to hide or dismiss the writer’s collaboration simply by taken for granted the fact that he denied his membership in the Communist Party.

Speaking of one of Hughes’ most famous essays, Arnold Rampersad commented in his *Life of Langston Hughes*:

As noble of his aims were, Hughes was thus placing an enormous strain on his integrity as an artist. The defiant spirit of “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was essentially no more. Like many writers responding to the Depression, Langston was altering his aesthetic to accommodate social reality. (221)

But how badly was Hughes altering his aesthetic one might wonder? Why do we see the poet less integral as an artist during certain times, and who wants us to believe it? Rampersad even contends that unlike most white artists, the poet had

to “face a paradox: to reach the black masses, his writing had to be not radical but genteel, not aggressive but uplifting and sentimental” (221).

Under the circumstances, while this is not intended to be an exhaustive study of Hughes’ poetry of the thirties, I would like to question what Rampersad and others dismissed. In contrast to Rampersad views, Alan Wald comments by quoting Hughes:

His new agenda of producing “rhymed poems dramatizing current racial interests in simple, understandable verse, pleasing to the ear, and suitable for reading aloud” [. . .] was fully in harmony with even the most extravagant wing of the proletarian literary movement. (89)

Richard Barksdale traces at least two prominent literary spokesmen who disparaged Hughes’ literary productivity during the 1930s. One of them is V. F. Calverton who, in his 1940 article “The Negro and American Culture” published in *Saturday Review of Literature*, praised McKay’s *Harlem Shadows* (1922) for its “rich tropicality” and “pagan zeal,” but dismissed Hughes for not having grown in importance, but “rather stood still.” Such a view, Barksdale remarks, is telling of the perception of Hughes as a poet who lacks the gift of prophecy and a mistake from Calverton’s part to hope that “newer” figures like Wright, Hurston, and Tolson would have “greater staying power and growth” (40).

Another critical assessment of Hughes’ literary career in the 1930s can be found in Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. This book, originally published in 1967, contains no literary criticism per se, but it apparently

enjoyed a huge popularity, reaching by 1971 its fifth printing. In it, the author portrays Hughes as a poet who “never developed much scope beyond the artistic, aesthetic, and intellectual limits of the 1920’s.” Even more, “he was one of the aborted renaissance men [. . .] a man of culture without a cultural philosophy” (qtd. in Barksdale 41).

Speaking about the African-American writers’ choice of belonging or not to the Communist party, James Bloom notes in “Political Incorrectness,” that for the Marxist writers of the 1930s, art and critique served as a politics of inclusion, a set of positions that right-wing journalists now call “p.c.” Quoting Mike Gold’s praise of Langston Hughes as “a voice crying for justice for all humanity,” he comments that

Therein lies all the moral authority the Left has traditionally claimed and can ever credibly claim. It resides in the central universalist tenet of Marxism: contingent class identity precedes allegedly innate ethnic, racial, and even gender difference. [. . .] This vision disciplined the radical criticism of the 1930s and provided it with a resonance and audience that today’s academic criticism often lacks. (267)

The same view is expressed by Alan Wald, who informs us that Hughes also served as a correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, and that his 1938 collection of poems, *A New Song*, was published by the Communist-led International Workers Order (IWO – originally created to provide insurance policies and other benefits for workers). It is here that Gold praises Hughes in the

introduction, declaring “the best Negro literature” to be a folk literature “close to the joys and sorrows of the people.” According to Wald, Gold designates Hughes’ verse as the product of a two-stage evolution, moving from nationalist expression (seen as an articulation of the dreams of the Negro People) to a deeper stage of a “voice crying for justice for all humanity” (qtd. in Wald 89).

The collection that Gold so praises begins with one of Hughes’s most wonderful poems, “Let America Be America Again,” a poem that, just as McKay’s “If We Must Die,” can be used in other contexts as well, especially in the recent rise of patriotism in the U.S.

During and after World War II, Hughes was less visible in the Party affairs, yet he supported the Progressive Party presidential campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948, condemned the prosecution of Communist leaders under the Smith Act in 1949, and still admired the Soviet Union. As Alan Wald documents, based on Lloyd Brown, a Black former Communist Party member, Hughes ceased paying personal visits and used the telephone instead to keep in touch with the Party. The reason was, obviously, because he tried to look out for himself. In 1953, when he received a subpoena to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Hughes “worked out a settlement in which he resolved to publicly praise HUAC so long as he was not compelled to name names” (Wald 90). This episode is also discussed by Faith Berry in *Langston Hughes: A Biography*. Recently, on May 5, 2003, Hughes’s testimony from March 24, 1953, has been released and can be read by anyone on the Internet.

The Communist Party did not attack Hughes during this period, although DuBois wrote that Hughes was “beneath contempt” for not including Paul Robeson in his 1955 juvenile book *Famous Negro Music Makers*. Moreover, according to an interview of Lloyd Brown in 1990 and with Tiba Willner in 1989, some Communist party members were told that Hughes was placed in a compromised situation due to his homosexuality, threatened with a public scandal if he wouldn’t make a deal (Wald 89). Then, after McCarthy died, “the Party literary journal contacted Hughes for a contribution of poetry, but he apparently refused, saying that he had no poems at hand. However, the Party continued to publish the poet’s earlier work in its publications (Wald 90). In her introduction to *Good Morning Revolution*, Faith Berry points out, however, that as a result of the McCarthy hearings, Hughes’s name was, for several years, on a list of “un-American” authors whose books were banned from libraries throughout the world. In addition, his books were also banned from the schools and libraries of certain states that passed anti-Communist laws. Moreover, Hughes’s public appearances at the time were met with picket carrying signs with the words “traitor,” “red,” and “Communist sympathizer.”

Langston Hughes has generally been viewed as “the consummate poet of the Left, for both African-Americans as well as Euro-Americans” (Wald 314). He made, as many point out, a virtue of his “simplicity” to the point that it became an aesthetic issue to be addressed. In an essay that appeared in *International Literature* in 1933, Hughes was observing that literature of the past, reflective of class peace, is incapable of responding to the new world situation. Therefore, the

restoration of a new era was needed, an era where the “flesh,” previously defeated by “the spirit,” returns to an equal partner (Wald 314).

Claude McKay

Claude McKay has been generally viewed primarily as a militant black poet who played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance and as the author who wrote “If We Must Die” and *Home to Harlem*. “America” and “If We Must Die” are usually the only poems listed in anthologies, and the latter poem, a response to the Harlem race riots of 1919, is especially known because it was read to the British people by Winston Churchill and into the Congressional Record by American Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., as a World War II rallying cry. *Home to Harlem*, on the other hand, although praised by some, has been usually considered as a book that caters to the stereotype of the black man as an exotic primitive. More recent studies of McKay, however, dismiss his work’s oversimplification and bring to light a much more complex relationship that he had with the Harlem Renaissance.

Apart from Langston Hughes, whose work he admired but with whom he never established a strong bond, McKay had a rather bitter relationship with Black intelligentsia like DuBois, who dismissed his first book, *Home to Harlem*, as simplistically portraying the black man as an exotic primitive, or Locke, who dared to alter the title of one of his poems in his famous 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*. Such animosity was not, overall, as a result of merely a clash of personalities, but due to a firm conviction, on the part of McKay, that black progress must come from within the black community instead of being imposed from without. James Giles comments:

By maintaining his pride in his blackness and the heritage it implies, the black common man will determine his own progress. Always a believer in community solidarity, McKay advocated a “spontaneous” uncontrolled spiritual and economic rebirth for his people. Any control, even from the black intelligentsia, might dilute the African heritage in the name of a strictly Western concept of advancement. (20)

In *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North discusses at large the processes of publication of McKays’s works, underlining that he was introduced over and over as a phenomenon, “a human oxymoron bringing new nature into the cultured realm of poetry” (103). It is important to mention that McKay had many white patrons who helped him to be published but who, on the other hand, presented McKay in a certain way to the public. At first, after Walter Jekyll had urged him to write his *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* in dialect, McKay acquired the status of being “the first educated black West Indian to bring the dialect into English verse” (North 101). Although he had once confessed that, “to us, who were getting an education in the English schools the Jamaican dialect was considered a vulgar tongue [. . .] All cultivated people spoke English, straight English” (qtd. in North 101), he later commented in *My Green Hills of Jamaica*: “A short while before I never thought that any beauty can be found in the Jamaica dialect. Now this Englishman had discovered beauty and I too could see where my poems were beautiful” (qtd. in North 102). As North further underscores, McKay needed to transfer the glory of England to the dialect before he could appreciate it:

Dialect, tea meetings, perhaps obeah and sex, became beautiful only when touched by the wand of English approval. Thus the essential contest of *Banana Bottom* is not really between Bitia and the Craigs, Jamaica and England, but between the Craigs and Squire Gensir, England and England's Jamaica. (102)

The novel *Banana Bottom* is a very significant one, because it was conceived to double Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In the novel, Mrs. Craig wants to cultivate young Bitia Plant until "she would be English trained and appearing in everything but the color of her skin" (*Banana Bottom* 31) against Squire Gensir, who is Walter Jeckyll in disguise. Gensir berates Bitia for turning against Jamaican culture: "Obeah is a part of your folklore, like your Anancy tales and your digging jammass. And your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin. You ought to learn to appreciate it as I do mine" (*Banana Bottom* 125). It is in this argument that Michael North identifies the central basis of the novel, with Bitia is always hesitant between dialect, tea meetings, obeah, and sex, on the one hand, and standard English, hymn singing, Scotch Presbyterianism, and loveless marriage on the other (North102).

In the preface to *Harlem Shadows*, McKay confesses that he has taken inspiration from "our purely native songs the jammass (field and road), shayshays (yard and booth), wakes (post-mortem), Anancy tales (transported African folk lore), and revivals (religious)," which are "all singularly punctuated by meter and rhyme." It is, in his view, such "regular forms" that most faithfully express his own particular version of the black experience (North 115).

The novel *Home to Harlem* expresses the anxieties that McKay himself felt with respect to what kind of language to use in his writings. Ray, his alter ego in the novel, confronts, as North suggested, the problematic freedom of modernism – in the manner of Joyce, Anderson, and Lawrence, and is, at the same time, attracted towards the African-American language and culture exemplified by his friend Jake: “Could he create out of the fertile reality around him? Of Jake nosing through life, a handsome hound...” (*Home to Harlem* 228).

Dreams of patters of words achieving form. What would he ever do with the words he had acquired? Were they adequate to tell the thoughts he felt, describe the impressions that reached him vividly? What were men doing of words now?” (*Home to Harlem* 227).

McKay sympathized with those modernists he considered true crusaders “against the dead weight of formal respectability,” but he was upset when he was told, “If you mean to be a modern Negro writer, you should go meet Gertrude Stein” (*A Long Way* 248). In Paris, where such advice was apparently common, McKay was rather hostile toward Stein, whom he considered one of the “eternal faddists who exist like vampires on new phenomena” (*A Long Way* 348). The source of this animosity was the idea that a “faddist” like Stein held the key to becoming a “modern Negro writer,” that if he wished to be accepted he would have to write like “Melanctha.” Instead, he clung defiantly to words that he knew were “in some circles considered poetically outworked and dead,” and he refused “to stint my senses of the pleasure of using the decorative metaphor where it is more truly and vividly beautiful than the exact phrase” (*Harlem Shadows* xxi).

Although McKay probably never held a communist membership card, and later in his life he seemed to repudiate Communism he has evidently shown, nevertheless, a deep involvement with the Communist Party. Wayne Cooper's collection of McKay's short fiction, non-fiction, letters, and poetry in *The Passion of Claude McKay*, reveals that the Jamaican did address the Third Communist International during his "magic pilgrimage" to Russia. Analyzing his speech, Giles points out at least three interesting comments that McKay makes: one is that he speaks of having been pressured into becoming a spokesman for "Negro radicalism in America to the detriment of my political temperament"; another point would be that he comments bitterly upon "the great element of racial prejudice among the Socialists and Communists of America" and ends his speech with his "hope" that blacks will soon be in the front of "The red Army and Navy of Russia" in its battle against "the international bourgeoisie"(Giles 33). Responding to McKay's repudiation of Communism, Giles comments:

McKay's insistence in 1944 that he "was never a Communist" and that Communism is an unworkable, "primitive ideal" probably resulted from his intellectual differences with the Party and from his sense of being personally threatened by it. (34)

As we find out, many critics point out that McKay was never a Communist. Maxwell, however, establishes that once arrived in Moscow, McKay declared himself a member of both the Communist Party and the African American Brotherhood (72). However, his mentioning in a letter to Eastman that he once had a romantic hope about the future of Communism reveals an initial

enthusiasm, perhaps best illustrated in his 1921 *Liberator* article “How Black Sees Green and Red.”

The article opens with an account of McKay’s experiences in Trafalgar Square while selling copies of the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, Sylvia Punkhurst’s London-based Marxist journal. After the introduction, the focus is on the England-Ireland conflict and on the reasons for McKay’s complete sympathy with the Irish revolutionaries. Ireland, he says, is the only white nation that is being exploited by Western imperialism in the same way that most of the nonwhite areas of the world are. For him, then, the animosity between Negroes and Irish-Americans in the United States lessened in importance. He believed that the Irishman and the American Negro were engaged in an identical international struggle and that it was imperative for both to realize that fact.

Indeed, the surge of emotion that McKay felt for the Irish nationalists leads him into an expression of faith in the universal proletariat; and his faith is so strong that he dismisses the racist prejudices of white workers as unimportant. One should assume that this early devotion to the proletarian cause was deep, sincere and “romantic”; within less than ten years, the white worker’s prejudice against blacks mattered a great deal to McKay. (Giles 34)

If before the Harlem Renaissance black artists tried to avoid primitivism in their works, writers like Hughes, McKay, and Bruce Nugent were among the first to celebrate their African American heritage by utilizing African motifs in their work. Bruce Nugent,

who was also a painter, employed dance in his paintings “as a trope to express primitive vitality and freedom from sexual inhibition” (Wirth 57).

Nugent met Hughes at one of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s cultural gatherings, just after Hughes had returned to Washington to live with his mother after a voyage to Africa and a short stay in Paris. Nugent would later write of Hughes

I met Langston Hughes...He was a made-to-order Hero for me. At twenty three he was only a scant four years older than I, and he had done everything – all the things young men dream of but never quite get done – worked on ships, gone to exotic places, known known people, written poetry that had appeared in print – everything. I suppose his looks contributed to the glamorous ideal . . . as did his voice and gentle manner.

(3)

Claude McKay knew and appreciated both Hughes and Nugent, although he was never a close friend of them. It is my contention that these three writers influenced each other in various ways and that they all shared a distinct rebellious spirit, also influenced perhaps by their inclination toward homosexuality.

Bruce Nugent: Blue Smoke From an Ivory Holder

“He blew a cloud of smoke...it was growing...the smoke no longer had a ladder to climb...but soon the moon would rise would clothe the silver moon in blue smoke garments clever idea he had had music but truly smoke was like imagination [...] was it Wilde who had said a cigarette is the most perfect pleasure because it is unsatisfied...the breeze gave to him a perfume stolen from some wandering evening...it pleased him [...] in truth it was fine to be hungry and an artist...to blow blue smoke from an ivory holder.”

Richard Bruce,¹ *Smoke, Lilies and Jade*

Back in 1987, June 3, the obituary section of Washington Post announced the death of Richard Bruce Nugent, aged eighty, “a Washington native who became a writer and painter in New York City.” Reasons: “congestive heart failure. He leaves no immediate survivors.” Ironically, though a well-recognized bohemian, this man outlived most of the other Harlem Renaissance figures with the exception of Dorothy West. A non-conformist all his life, he left home at thirteen and became an extravagant decadent.

He went about tieless, underwearless, sockless – and sometimes even shoeless – wearing a single gold bead in one pierced ear, sleeping in Washington Square or under Wallace Thurman’s bed.

Thurman observed that Nugent “never recovered from the shock of

realizing that no matter how bizarre a personality he may develop, he will still be a Negro.” (Watson 90)

Although he had been married to Grace Marr, Nugent did not leave any children. Yet ever since 1926, he had published in *Fire!!*, a short story that is now considered the first publication by an African-American that candidly depicts homosexuality. Throughout his life, he successfully tried his talents at painting, drawing, and writing poetry and even dancing.² Nonetheless, this famous bohemian’s sustained efforts to avoid a traditionally successful career explain, in part, why his work has never been included in the Renaissance canon. Apparently, his treatment of openly gay themes put him at odds with the self-conscious “positive” image making so advocated by the Renaissance’s “rulers.” As it happens, these critics would not rush in praising art that was not intended to morally uplift the black people. Decadence, perversity, open homosexuality were indeed tolerated in Harlem, as long as they were confined to the space of performance; yet when it came to higher forms of art and literature, artists were expected to advance the race. Du Bois didn’t “care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (qtd. in McBreen 3); even the more “open-minded” Alain Locke, who praised such Harlem Renaissance artists like Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, and sculptor Richmond Barthe (whose art was more in keeping with the movement’s aims), was yet a critic of those artists who, in sharing with what he called “the blindness of the Caucasian eye” slavishly imitated European ideals of beauty (McBreen 4). However, it is true that Locke openly praised Nugent’s brilliance when he wrote to Charlotte Mason that the latter was a genius.

Later in life, Nugent remembered DuBois's having asked him: 'Did you have to write about homosexuality? Couldn't you write about colored people? Who cares about homosexuality?' I said, 'You'd be surprised how good homosexuality is. I love it.' Poor DuBois" (qtd. in Mc.Breen 13).

In 1925, he met Langston Hughes and recognized him as a "made-to-order Hero. He had done everything – all the things young man dream of but never quite get done – worked on ships, gone to exotic places..."³ (Watson 91).

In his 1932 roman a clef "Infants of the Spring," Wallace Thurman described Nugent through the character Paul Arbian claiming that Oscar Wilde was the greatest man that ever lived. Arbian's fate, however, just like Nugent's, seemed sealed by his inopportune choice of role model: "he sits around helpless, possessed of great talent, doing nothing...Being a Negro, he feels that his chances for a notoriety a la Wilde are slim" (qtd. in McBreen 8).

Despite previous inconveniencies, Bruce Nugent's work is being reevaluated and given its due value. With time, Nugent's artistic contribution will come out of the "blue cloud of smoke" with which it was shrouded. It sometimes happens with ivory holders...

Notes to Bruce Nugent:

¹ Richard Bruce was a pseudonym to avoid parental disapproval.

² Through dancing in particular, Nugent understood the construction of his own gender as a literal performance: “I was, at one time, something that not many dancers were: I was tall, I was seemingly masculine and strong, I behaved - on the stage- in a masculine manner” (qtd. in McBreen 6).

³ Nugent recalled that on the night of their meeting, “he would walk me home and I would walk him home and then I would walk him home and then he would walk him home and I’d walk him home and it went on all night” (qtd. in Watson 91).

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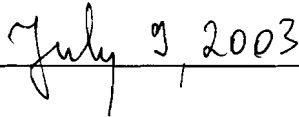
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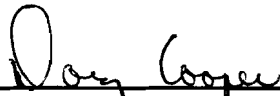


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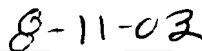


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