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РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ И ПРОЗА ЛЭНГСТОНА ХЬЮЗА О СОВЕТСКОЙ СРЕДНЕЙ АЗИИ

Аннотация: Лэнгстон Хьюз бежал от расового террора США, надеясь отыскать расовое равенство в Советском Союзе и за его пределами. Эти устремления Хьюза наиболее полно воплотились в его произведениях: оплаченной Советским Союзом книге «Негр смотрит на советскую Среднюю Азию» (1932) и ряде эссе, написанных во время его пребывания в России, но опубликованных уже по возвращении в США. В них он проводит параллель между гендерной сегрегацией в советской Средней Азии и расовой сегрегацией в Соединенных Штатах. В СССР Хьюз был поражен художественными находками советского авангарда, вдохновлен советским проектом 1930-х гг. как художественным и политическим предприятием. Он стремился использовать опыт соединения политики и эстетики для исследования революционного потенциала идей Коминтерна в собственных целях. «Пристальное чтение» эссе Хьюза «В эмирском гареме» позволяет проанализировать ситуативно обусловленную эстетику революционного проекта Хьюза во время и после его пребывания в советской Средней Азии. Советский интернационализм казался многообещающим проектом, способным разрушить традиционные национальные границы, развить этническую самобытность и создать межнациональные союзы. С точки зрения Хьюза, революция должна осуществляться на уровне формирования субъекта: если бы стало возможным поставить «цветное население» во главу революционного движения, вероятно, можно было бы спровоцировать появление не-гегельянского взгляда на исторический процесс.

Ключевые слова: Лэнгстон Хьюз; афроамериканские авторы; советско-негритянские отношения; расовый вопрос в СССР; Советская Средняя Азия; расовый и гендерный вопрос в США; политика, эстетика и этническая принадлежность; культурооборот.

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REVOLUTION AND LANGSTON HUGHES'S CENTRAL ASIAN WRITINGS

Abstract: Langston Hughes was escaping racial terrorism in the United States in hopes of finding racial equality in Russia and beyond. This desire may have found its fullest expression in the essays he wrote while in Russia, both in a Soviet-funded pamphlet called *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* and in the handful of essays he published upon his return to the United States. In these essays he came to draw the parallel between the gender segregation of the harem of Soviet Central Asia and the color line in the United States. Hughes was also fascinated by the artistic innovations of the Soviet avant-garde; inspired by the Soviet project — as an artistic and political endeavor — in the 1930s. He sought to use the lessons of linking politics and aesthetics to explore the revolutionary potential of Comintern notions for his own purposes. Through a close reading of Hughes's essay, *In an Emir's Harem*, I consider the situated aesthetics of Hughes's revolutionary project when he was in Soviet Central Asia, and immediately beyond it. The promise of a Soviet-inspired internationalism lay in its abilities to disrupt conventional national boundaries, foment ethnic particularism, and to establish cross-national alliances. For Hughes, the intervention was at the level of subject formation: if you could put a colored people at the forefront of a revolutionary movement, you could perhaps foment a non-Hegelian account of historical development.

Key words: Langston Hughes; African American authors; Soviet-Black relationships; race in the Soviet Union; Soviet Central Asia; race and gender in the U.S.; politics, aesthetics and ethnicity; cultures of circulation.

When Langston Hughes left the United States for the USSR in 1932 he could not have predicted that his most circulated article about the Soviet Republics would be about Muslim women. Although we can never be certain of Hughes's intentions when he stepped on the *Europa* and set sail for Europe, one thing is certain: he was escaping racial terrorism in the United States in hopes of finding a more tolerant example of racial parity in the Soviet Union. "You hold that boat," he famously wrote to his trip's organizer, Louise Thompson, "cause it's an ark to me."¹ Hughes's desire to find racial equality in Russia and beyond may have found its fullest expression in the parallel he came to draw between the gender segregation of the harem of Soviet Central Asia and the color line in the United States. Hughes drew this parallel in the essays he wrote while in Russia, both in a Soviet-funded pamphlet called *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* and in the handful of essays he published upon his return to the United States. One of these essays, called "In an Emir's Harem" found an audience in *Women's Home Companion*, a U.S. women's monthly that boasted a readership of 2,600,000².

What drew Hughes to the Soviet Union was primarily the ideological promise of a society without racism, but he was also fascinated by the artistic innovations of the Soviet avant-garde. Hughes admired the revolutionary poetics of Vladimir Mayakovsky, and later translated Mayakovsky along with Boris Pasternak.³ As a Black writer attempting to establish his authorial voice in a Western canon, Hughes was inspired by the Soviet project — as an artistic and political endeavor — in the 1930s. He sought to use the lessons of linking politics and aesthetics to explore the revolutionary potential of Comintern notions for his own purposes. This talk traces these twinning strategies. Through a close reading of "In an Emir's Harem," I consider the situated aesthetics of Hughes's project when he was in Soviet Central Asia, and immediately beyond it. The aesthetic devices of juxtaposition, montage, allegory, and estrangement — techniques associated with the Soviet avant-garde — are present in "In an Emir's Harem," but they are challenged by their setting alongside Andre Durenceau's powerful full-scale illustrations and the publishing context of the essay more generally.⁴

¹ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 1 "1902–1941, I Too Sing America." 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002: 241.

² Hughes, Langston. "In an Emir's Harem." *Woman's Home Companion* 12 (Sept. 1934): 91–92, ill. by Andre Durenceau.

³ For a close reading of Hughes's translations of Mayakovsky see Kernan, Ryan. "The Coup of Langston Hughes's Picasso Period: Excavating Mayakovsky in Langston Hughes's Verse." *Comparative Literature* 66:2 (2014): 227–46.

⁴ To be sure, Hughes was less a student of the avant-garde than he was a *confrere* in spirit. During his time in Russia, he met Sergei Eisenstein, and translated

In early 1934, with the help and encouragement of his new literary agent Maxim Lieber, Hughes sold “In an Emir’s Harem” to *Woman’s Home Companion* (*WHC*). At the time, *WHC* was the second most popular women’s magazine in the United States, behind *Ladies Home Journal*. Edited by the formidable Gertrude Battles Lane, *WHC* was hardly anti-capitalist, much less pro-Soviet. In fact, for the previous eight years Battles had spearheaded a “Good Citizenship” campaign that was aimed at instructing readers how to become educated consumers. So, what might it mean for Langston Hughes to praise the Revolution in the context of a magazine that extolled the virtues of white female consumerism and homemaking?

With its camels, khans, and veils in vibrant tones of reds, blues, and greens spread across the magazine’s original 18 x 11 broad format, Durenceau’s spectacular image of harem life does one thing, evoking standard orientalist clichés about veiled women and the exotic Near East. Hughes’s essay purports to do quite the opposite. Yet the illustration by Durenceau⁵, a French-born muralist and color advisor to Technicolor in the 1930s, dominates Hughes’s essay in a way that disorients it. These dual representations of Soviet Central Asia converge and diverge in surprising ways. Whereas Hughes’s essay displays techniques of Shklovskian defamiliarization — that process of estrangement so appealing to writers and artists like Hughes — the accompa-

poems by Mayakovsky (who of course died in 1930); but he was hardly at the center of Soviet theorizations about the relationship between artistic forms and the social forms of modernity. Rather, in his work we see a correspondence between these kinds of theorizations and his own investment in fomenting change through a popularly distributed textual medium. To be sure, like others in the 1920s and 1930s, Hughes would not have used the term “avant-garde” to describe his own Soviet work, which he would have considered “leftist” or “revolutionary.” For rich engagements with the Soviet avant-garde see Cooke, Catherine *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City*. London: St. Martin’s Press, 1995; Gough, Maria. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005; and Kiaer, Christina. *Imagine No Possessions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, esp. chap. 1.

⁵ Well known in Los Angeles arts circles, Durenceau was famous enough to have *Time* pen an article about him in May 1934 (the month after Lieber sold Hughes’s essay to *WHC*). Durenceau was best known for being a muralist to the wealthy elite, his most renowned creation at the time was a series of murals designed for Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney’s Upper East Side penthouse, murals of “formalized heads and torsos of huge white Negroes against a pale green background.” Known for suggestive, if not salacious, drawings, Durenceau also illustrated an edition of Oscar Wilde’s *Selfish Giant* and Walpole Press’s *Anthology of Immoral Poems*. He was later tapped to design four 40’x50’ murals for the outside of the Metals Building at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York.

nying illustration refamiliarizes the reader with stock harem brush-strokes.⁶ Seeing Hughes's essay framed by Durenceau's lush colors and sweeping lines encourages the reader to think about Hughes's essay, and in turn his literary output about Central Asia, differently.⁷

Following a conventional orientalist schematic in which women are veiled and facing the viewer, whereas the mullahs and beys are robed and turned away, the illustration concretizes the viewer's gaze around its center image: that of a naked black man, presumably a eunuch, who is blindfolded. In the background minarets and mosques hover in an ethereal hue of white; and the image crosscuts through the written text to show a single mullah gazing from a balcony, and a series of veiled women below him. With the exception of the naked figure, all of the figures are richly robed, so heavily covered that the only things that clearly distinguish the men from the women are the female *paranja* (or heavy Uzbek veil fashioned from horsehair) and the men's rifles. It is a procession of Western fantasy, and its full-scale color palette contrasts with the half-tone wash drawing on the magazine's surrounding pages. This image is sensational, provocative, even a little bit naughty. Titillating, to be sure, but hardly inciting revolution. Hughes's essay would have to work quite hard to elicit anything other than a sigh. Or, as Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad comments, "sex won out brilliantly over fear of Marxist ideology."⁸ But did it?

I argue that Hughes's essay creates a double spectacle when situated in the context of its publication. By this I mean that it correlates to the spectacle of orientalist unveiling, and at the same time presents the spectacle of an African-American male essaying to establish literary authority. Both of these spectacles bespeak the imbrication of race within Western notions of modernity, and draw on a parallel between the gender segregation of the harem and the racial segregation of colonialism. For Hughes the specific practice of female unveiling is associated with racial emancipation in general. In his essays, unveiling be-

⁶ Viktor Shklovsky writes, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." See his "Art as Technique": 12, online at https://paradise.caltech.edu/ist4/lectures/Viktor_Sklovski-Art-as_Technique.pdf

⁷ "Husband to Wife." *Time* (May 28, 1934): 26. See also Frank, Gerold. "Painter Sees Revival for Art in America." *New York Journal and American* (Jan. 1, 1939).

⁸ Rampersad, Arnold. *Life of Langston Hughes* 1:285.



In an Emir's Harem

LANGSTON HUGHES
Illustrated Andrei Druzenov

"BRING them to a pool," said the Emir. The chief steward, a very fat, balding man with a red nose, bowed and turned and ran. Leaving the Ali Haji Hughes, imperious ruler of the harem, on the balcony of the summerhouse with only a boy to brush the fire away, she strode out through the rooms where the big brass bed with its silver covers was, on through the hall with its European bust, and out past the wardrobe and into the garden. "Bring them to the pool," said the Emir, "to bring them to the pool. Let me behold them veiled and calm and bowed in the pool."

Whereupon through the long grape arbor they went with their red and gold robes of emerald and sapphire, which were, just the ornaments that remained and hung in the courtyard, was down the red stairs and the flowers blooming as a row of color at the edge of the garden, down to the low wooden deck if the harem were the Emir's room. The guards smiled. They bowed but through the door. He dejected his message to a woman waiting in, who in spite of the long black veil covering her face and hands and feet because she was not allowed to see the Emir's face, she then the Emir's face. The rainfall had turned back the long way to the summerhouse.

The one hope of escape for the girls in the harem was to be given away

Suddenly the guards let out loud boys-like cries of warning. The paths of the palace garden were closed. Ministers and doctors and attendants stood stock still at a proper distance from the walls. They hush at the first cry, spreading, spreading, flowing along the gravelled ways, slipping from beneath the green grape arbor, swifter than the bees scuttling and the fountain splashing, there rose the tiny bell-like sound of young and lovely girls laughing and chattering.

The Emir's young wives were passing, scores of them. Guarded by old women, the Emir's wives went toward the high-walled pool of the summerhouse—Emirs and damsels of them with gay silks flowing behind them and heavy veils from head to knee hiding their faces, eyes covering their faces. Ankles and ankles clinking, bright slippers throng, between the girls and the old women, the Emir's wives passed.

They did not see into the summerhouse. They kept on along the high wall that surrounded the pool until

they came to a will wooden door-way. The old women tripped and pulled at the heavy door, and when they were opened, through into the sunlight of the pool's wide edge appeared more than a hundred veiled young girls. And when the doors were closed, there in the sunlight against the high wall they began to disrobe with the aid of the old women.

Beyond the square of the bathing pool was the summerhouse, and in its open spaces backing out the Emir, alone, gazing at the warm feminine coverlets just across the pool. No one else dared look at his lovely beauty went down into the water. (Illustration on next page)

"In an Emir's Harem," *Women's Home Companion*, September 1934

comes the representative means of establishing the extent to which the new Soviet freedom contrasted with the inequities of the color line back in the United States.⁹

As did many of his black sojourners, Hughes arrived in the Soviet Union with hope of finding an alternative to the deprivations and hardships of life in the United States in the early 1930s. Dismayed by the persistence of race-based injustices in the United States, especially coming off a book tour of the southern states, in the 1930s Hughes

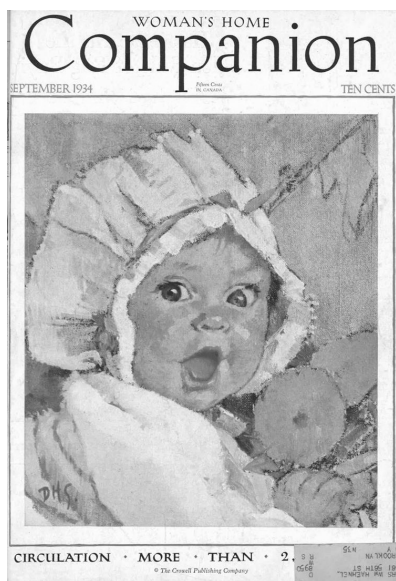
⁹ In "The Soviet Union and Health" Hughes wrote, "most of the women of Soviet Central Asia now have thrown away their veils and are being educated in Soviet schools in ideals of freedom for all. From a land of Jim-Crow, exploitation, and harems, Soviet Central Asia had become the most advanced portion of the Orient and an equal part of the entire great Soviet Union." See *Chicago Defender* (July 20, 1946), reprinted in Berry, Faith, ed., *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Langston Hughes*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992: 88.

turned with great anticipation to the Soviet south as an example of the new Russia's efforts to formulate a society free not only of class hierarchies, but racial ones as well. Comintern support of his colleague Claude McKay, the Scottsboro boys, and the support for black particularism under the aegis of the Black Belt thesis led Hughes to believe that concrete change was underfoot in Soviet territories. Initially part of the group organized by Louise Thompson Patterson that traveled to Moscow to film *Black and White*, Hughes was disappointed by the unraveling of the film project. But the trip brought him into contact with artists and intellectuals with whom he collaborated and fomented artistic ties. Indeed, Hughes's time in the USSR was a powerfully collaborative period for him, one marked by thinking through politically and aesthetically the potential of something like an ethnic radicalism.¹⁰

After it became clear that the film was a bust, Hughes took the assignment from *Izvestiia* to travel through the Central Asian republics and write articles about the effects of the Revolution on these areas. Hughes ended up spending three months traveling through what had recently been a predominantly Muslim region colonized by Russia. During this time Hughes was particularly impressed by what he perceived as Soviet advances over the prior socially mandated inequities of Islam and Russian colonialism. For Hughes the promise of a Soviet-inspired internationalism lay in its abilities to disrupt conventional national boundaries, foment ethnic particularism, and to establish cross-national alliances, thereby facilitating new concepts of citizenship, community, culture, and subjectivity. As Hughes wrote, "new times demand new people. In the Soviet Union, new people are coming into being." For Hughes, the intervention was at the level of subject formation: if you could put a colored people at the forefront of a revolutionary movement, you could perhaps foment a non-Hegelian account of historical development.¹¹ Unlike his poetry from this period, howe-

¹⁰ A robust example of this kind of project can be found in Lee, Steven S. *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For an illuminating discussion of Hughes's multilingual collaborative projects see Kernan, Ryan. *Lost and Found in Black Translation: Langston Hughes's Translations of French and Spanish Poetry, his Hispanic and Francophone Translators, and the Fashioning of Radical Black Subjectivities*. Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2007. And for elaboration of printed materials about Africans and African Americans in Moscow in the 1930s see Mukherji, Ani. *The Exilic Imagination*. Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2010.

¹¹ See Dale Peterson, *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham, NC, 2000), which discusses in detail the way Hegel's account of history marginalized Russians and excluded Africans.



Women's Home Companion. September 1934. Cover

ver, in which the narrative voice is almost always male, and addressed to a male listener, Hughes's Central Asian essays take up a female audience. More specifically, as I stated earlier, these essays are particularly preoccupied with the Soviet program of compulsory unveiling as symbolic of Soviet social advances in general.¹²

Although Hughes was paid handsomely to write in the Soviet Union, when he returned to the United States it proved more difficult to support himself. When Lieber sold "In an Emir's Harem" to *WHC*, he charged \$400 — the largest sum Hughes had ever been paid for a single piece. Around the same time Lieber placed Hughes's story "Why You Reckon" at the *New Yorker* for \$135. And on his book tour,

¹² As I argue in "Between Harlem and Harem," the idea that a comparison could be drawn between Uzbek slavery under tsardom and the Jim Crow South sparked Hughes's interest. As did others, Hughes voiced admiration for the Soviet's ability to abolish laws of racial segregation that had been implemented in Central Asia under the tsarist regime. For Hughes, this Soviet policy of mandatory unveiling took on proportions that while not excluding also exceeded women's freedom. "Unveiling" encapsulated the emancipation of a colored, southern people, previously oppressed by segregation and slavery. The veil symbolized to Hughes not only the backwardness of gender segregation under Islam but also his own understanding of a predominant paradigm for racial consciousness in the United States as elaborated by Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Hughes's speaking fee was typically \$10. Given these various vectors of influence, what might it mean for a woman to bring "In an Emir's Harem" into her home, or, alternatively, for her housekeeper to pick it up on her way to the kitchen?

The cover of the September issue in which Hughes's essay appeared features a portrait of a cherubic white-skinned, blue-eyed baby, fleshed out in pastels, mouth slightly ajar, head cradled by a white bonnet. Below this arresting image the masthead claims in all caps, "CIRCULATION MORE THAN 2,600,000." In picking up this issue of *WHC*, the reader understood the addressee — the white, middle-class woman — one of those millions who belonged to a community of related, if not like-minded, readers.¹³ The title of the magazine suggests such affiliation across a horizon of unknowable female readers, concretizing the relationship between women as one of *companionship* within the home, while in so doing marking the home as a site evacuated of such camaraderie. The notion of companionship implies an intimate engagement of the magazine with the viewer and her body as she leafs through the periodical, holding it close to her chest or even resting it in her lap. Durenceau's illustration explores the experiential dimension of this encounter, which is underscored by Hughes's edgy prose in the opening scene.

He describes a lush, if not lurid, picture of a tyrannical emir who summons his wives to his pool so he can gaze from behind a screen at their naked figures. Hughes writes that the women marched "through the long grape arbors heavy with tiny red-gold globes of sweetness and zooming with bees, past the fountains that splashed and sang in the courtyard, way down past the fruit trees and the flowers blooming in a riot of color at the edge of the garden ... then beneath the fruit trees, spreading, spreading, flowing along the graveled ways, rippling from beneath the green grape arbors, sweeter than the bees zooming and the fountains splashing, there rose the tiny birdlike sounds of young and lovely girls laughing and chattering."¹⁴

Once in the courtyard of the pool, the girls disrobed, "some were milk-white and fair but most of them were a little golden like the grapes in the arbor, or like peaches in the fall. Others were as brown as

¹³ The addressee of the magazine becomes more apparent on the editorial page, which, I would argue, following the work of Warner, Fraser, and others, calls into being its reader at the moment of being addressed. It is the address that establishes a mode of belonging — or, importantly, *not* belonging — to a given community, or what I am calling a reading public; a moment which becomes particularly interesting when read through the framing of Hughes's essay on the Uzbek harem.

¹⁴ Hughes. "In an Emir's Harem.": 92.

russet pears and one or two were dark as chocolate.” He paints a rhythmic picture, lures the reader in with this richly organic — we might even say voluptuous — portrait that links women’s bodies to ripe fruit, metonymically playing on the birds and the bees. This rich and “sexy” description not only engages the reader but also, in so doing, sets her up. In a few paragraphs, Hughes will move on from the past, look to the future, and strip illusions away.

Of course, we cannot know how many readers flipped through eighty pages to get to the back of the magazine, where Hughes’s story continues between ads for laxatives and Lysol. Yet it is here, away from Durenceau’s lurid imagery, that Hughes’s essay chips away at clichéd overdetermination. It is here that Hughes draws back the curtain on his harem scene rather abruptly, changing his tone and his texture. “That was a dozen years ago,” he writes. Now only Hughes can see the bathing scene in his mind’s eye, for “the Emir is gone ... and nobody in all of Central Asia can have a hundred wives now. In fact you can have only one.” He turns to a former wife of the emir, Zevar Razik, to tell him about what life once was, and contrasts her immobility and virtual slavery with the freedoms of her present life — not only unveiling and going to school but also getting a divorce.

But the inclusion of Zevar Razik prompts us to ask about the role of the native informant and corresponding links between a salutary and appropriative gaze. Women, he writes, “can never, by any power, be brought back to the old male-dominated, harem-enclosed patterns of the past.” Yet Hughes’s transgression of the veil solidifies the masculine prerogatives of his vision. In rewriting the memory of confinement, Hughes recuperates the power differential he attempts to undermine by reasserting the romance of male visionary control and the discourse of modern liberation.

Hughes’s play with the correlative effects that Soviet compulsory unveiling brought to women to suggest the subtleties of his renarration of their emancipation. Hughes’s imagined harem provides for an ambiguous mechanism of identification. His liberating gaze re-orders the space of the past and enables him vicariously to experience the lifted veil, and to identify with the sense of being “free and self-reliant.” “In an Emir’s Harem” clears a space for Hughes to grant himself rights denied by Jim Crow culture — that is, Black American selfhood — and trespass the veil. In this sense, his gesture of solidarity becomes one of uneasy appropriation.

At the same time, however, in place of the orientalist past, Hughes is presenting a vision of world revolution in which people of color are the forerunners of change, and not just any people of color, but women. To be sure, there is a certain headiness here in the alignment of



Unveiled Uzbek Women. Papers of Langston Hughes, JWJ MSS 26, Box 459, Folder 11111, Beinecke Library, Yale University

race and revolution, of women and revolution, one that offers a different modality of representation than the Durenceau images. Hughes offers visions of a new future, sandwiched between the ads for SOS pads and Stokely's strained baby food. Hughes writes: "What could have been set in motion to change these ways? The Revolution!" With such discursive emphasis, Hughes links the mood of revolution — one of imperatives and exclamations — to female emancipation, all routed through an artistic medium that throws an aesthetic change-up, tempting us to luxuriate in his imagery, then revealing that that imagery is illusory, a relic of the past. We might even say that the exhilarations of revolutionary changes are met with those of new artistic projects, in this way — and contra Durenceau and Battles Lane — aligning revolution and art.¹⁵ Twinning the power of unveiling with that of modernity in general, Hughes outlines the importance of mobility in this Soviet-centered remapping of the modern. In the Soviet era of Central Asia, women can walk around, free, self-reliant, and fully unveiled. "That strange Bolshevik revolution commenced at once smashing the customs of hundreds and hundreds of years, shattering the oldest traditions of the Orient, deposing beys and emirs, unfrocking mullahs, educating children and freeing women."¹⁶ While he was in the area, Hughes collected photographs of Soviet Central Asia, including some

¹⁵ See Streeby, Shelley. *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence, and Visual Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

¹⁶ Hughes, "In an Emir's Harem.": 92.

UNRETouched, DIRECT COLOR PHOTOGRAPH, TAKEN IN THE HOME OF MRS. R. L. PINE, DAYTON, OHIO.

“No clothes lost through fading”
one important reason why Mrs. Pine has her washing done with Chippo

Look at Peter and Pop-Pop. How charming their small frocks are, with their single lines and dainty details! And Baby and David are well-groomed little men. Their suits are well-dressed and dainty and the white trimmings so smart white.

This photograph shows you that clothes need not be soiled and faded. They are clean and as new as the day they were made. They are clean and as new as the day they were made. They are clean and as new as the day they were made.

Chippo keeps them bright. Chippo takes the dirt out without hard rubbing.

It's *softer*. . . never harsh on hands or clothes

Chippo makes clothes wear longer

Chippo ad. *Women's Home Companion*. September 1934

of unveiled Uzbek women. That this change was remarkable to him is clear from his notations on the back of one of these photos, in which he underscores, “unveiled, emancipated Uzbek women”.

On the one hand, Hughes was moved by the powerful changes wrought by the Revolution, and he sought to move others; his essay presents a utopian world in which women of color are at the forefront of revolutionary change. On the other hand, the magazine grounds these lofty aspirations of his more radicalized visions with imagery that seeks to titillate rather than educate. Hughes’s piece deploys the tactics of the Revolution to discuss gender equity: it presents female liberation as a kind of political vanguard. But to reach its audience, Hughes’s essay is situated to pander to, if not elicit, a Western fascination with the Muslim veil, and in so doing short-changing his own radical rereading of the Du Boisian veil.

It was precisely this kind of stagnation in a backwards past that Hughes sought to contest in “In an Emir’s Harem.” Yet stagnation and backwardness are front and center in this September issue of *Woman’s Home Companion*, as a soap advertisement makes clear.

The Chippo advertisement features a photograph of a Mrs. R. L. Pine of Dayton, Ohio, with her four blond children gathered round her playfully. A caption below the photo reads, “unretouched direct color

photograph.” Below and adjacent to this rectangular photo, in a circular fragment to the left, is a photo of the family’s housekeeper: “Bertha, the children call her ‘Birdie.’” Scrubbing laundry while the family she supports pose in their well-pressed finery above her, Birdie “worked for Mrs. Pine’s mother when Mrs. Pine herself was no older than Patty is now.” In perpetual servitude, and likewise dressed in grey, Bertha is depicted as not only timeless, but also colorless, unlike the Pines, whose luminous color and robust youthfulness is the point of the entire ad. Yet on another, simultaneous register, the photo of Bertha is the photo that depicts “direct color.”

Because the technology here was rather new, readers had to be instructed how to “see” what they were looking at. The fact that the advertisement calls attention to the photo as unretouched implies an unmediated reality here, and is a way of ensuring that the reader understands where the true, which is to say, material reality of color is. Whereas the whiteness of the Pines is presented as an invisible patina across which photographic color is splayed, the dark skin of Bertha is meant to fade into the background, offering no challenge to the vibrancy of the Pines. Since the burden not only of the laundry but also of racialization obviously falls on Bertha, there can be no mistaking who is who. This is an instance in which the reader is taught how to read racial difference, ironically, through color. Not only are the whites more colorful, their vitality reads against the formative grey-ness of Birdie, just as the vibrancy of the Uzbek harem scene reads against the formative blackness of the eunuch. In both images, race is related to physical and visual form, refracted through and shaping ideas about difference while at the same time staking out ideological positions in terms of medium and style, and means of production — in the case of the photograph, the endlessly reproducible image.

The ad juxtaposes the manual labor of Birdie with her production of the colorful Pines. In this period between the wars, when the labor movement in the United States was at its peak, domestic labor both conflates and differentiates the wife from the help (“I usually wash the baby’s woolens myself”). The black domestic is the reminder of the shifts in the value and cost of labor in the 1930s, while at the same time her presence marks her employer as decidedly bourgeois (and not middle class). Not only is Birdie alienated from her labor, she is deprived of agency — all the quotes attesting to the miraculous strength of soap are from Mrs. Pine, not “Birdie.” Sheer spectacle, she literally has no voice.

If we are to understand the framing through which Hughes’s ideas were read, it is important to see them in context, if only to better understand why we know so little about Hughes’s Soviet work. Not only

does the Chipso advertisement make manifest the racial hierarchies of U.S. cultural production in the 1930s, it also establishes the profound difficulty of black voices to be heard amid the consumer-oriented framework of periodicals such as *Women's Home Companion*.

So what kind of traction might Hughes's revolutionary exhilarations find tucked in the back pages of a woman's monthly? Did sex win out? At the close of his essay Hughes claims that Zevar would now call the emir "bourgeois," just about the "lowest thing you can call anyone in the USSR." But given the story that has been told, how would — indeed how could — a reader of *WHC* be moved by the claim that "bourgeois" was a bad word in this context, that of good consumerism? It is possible but unlikely that a reader would acknowledge her own bourgeois vantage point in reading Hughes's story, or feel herself implicated in the problems of racialization, white supremacy, and institutional female disenfranchisement. Try as they might to captivate a reader with the wonders of a revolutionary, emancipated future for women, Hughes's words also enable the woman reading *WHC* to imagine that her own captivity — and that of Birdie's — was surely superior to that of a bygone era.

Hughes may have been playing with techniques of avant-gardism by defamiliarizing the familiar harem scene in 1930s American popular imaginary, depicting liberated Uzbek women as agents of revolution. But in so doing he also uncritically endorsed Soviet intervention in Muslim culture.¹⁷ In this sense, Hughes was unhesitatingly positive about the changes wrought in Soviet Central Asia. Perhaps allowing his agent to sell this article to this most unlikely of venues was Hughes's manner of deftly acknowledging his own misprision. To be sure, after spending nearly a year in the Soviet territories, from June 1932 until June 1933, and then continuing on to travel home through China, Hughes may have tired of his initial enthusiasm for the Soviet project. Perhaps the only way to hang on to this vision of an alternative social imaginary was to publicize it, in hopes that it would find and help to shape a potential public, however fragmentary, and however many years later, in full-scale color.

While Hughes certainly sensed the inextricable links between race and modernity in the United States and Europe, he may have sensed that Soviet modernity was proceeding in a different mode — putting

¹⁷ See Slezkine, Yuri. "The USSR as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Pluralism." *Slavic Review* 53:2 (1994), 414–52; Suny, Ronald. *The Revenge of the Past Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993; Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

ethnicity at its center — for better or for worse. We cannot fault Hughes for his attempts to come to terms with these two seemingly incompatible models. Similarly, we can neither hold him accountable for not being able to predict the future, nor praise him for his silence about the extent of unrealized dreams. On this note, it is important to remember that Hughes's lesser-known writings also suggest a perpetual haunting of the legacy of African Americans in Russia by those who imagined a different future with him, figures like Lovett-Fort Whiteman, who were caught up in the purges and never returned.

Like many of the African Americans who travelled to the Soviet Union to experience the Revolution and its aftermaths first hand in the 1930s, Hughes was caught up in a multitude of imperfect contradictions. Hughes's work from this period reminds us of his multiple points of engagement with these contradictions, and in so doing connects figures as diverse as Zevar and Birdie. Through Hughes's archive these histories are intertwined with the complexities of the Soviet past, amid ideological imaginaries and social realities. Perhaps it is this mode of perceptual estrangement that "In an Emir's Harem" captures best.

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