

Black Writers and the Left

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Edited by

Kristin Moriah

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INTRODUCTION

I went home full of reflection, probing the sincerity of the strange white people, I had met, wondering how they really regarded Negroes. I lay on my bed and read the magazines and was amazed to find that there did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated. When I had begged bread from the officials, I had wondered dimly if the outcasts could become united in action, thought, and feeling. Now I knew. It was being done in one sixth of the earth already. The revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force.

—Richard Wright, “I Tried to be a Communist”

Some political events of the past year or so provide an important context for this collection and perhaps provide some contours to the current relationship between leftist politics and young people of color. I was present late one fall evening, in the very early days of the Occupy Wall Street movement when hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons spoke earnestly to a crowd assembled at Zuccotti Park. Simmons was quick to sense the importance of what was developing in the concrete patch in Lower Manhattan. He is a trend seeker. He wanted to be a part of the movement even, perhaps especially, in its most raw, socialist anarchic form. Simmons’s presence seemed sincere, if not odd coming from a man who is no stranger to the conspicuous consumption and wealth that set him so far apart from the 99%. He was heckled by a member of the largely white crowd for jumping the line of people waiting to speak. “Celebrities need to check their privilege,” they cried. Raw democracy can be brutal. And yet, Simmons early adoption of the principles of the Occupy Movement can be understood as part of a continuum in which African Americans embrace the power of political organization and protest in search of economic justice. The heckling incident also raised questions about the qualitative difference between the kind of cultural capital Simmons carried in Zuccotti Park and the movement’s reception of other celebrities and well-known public figures, like Michael Moore, who were allowed to speak at Occupy’s general assemblies. Here, I am more interested in understanding who is afforded a place to speak than I am in promoting star worship. It seems doubtful that Simmons would have been

treated the same way at an Occupy the Hood General Assembly, but who is to say? He was eventually allowed to take the microphone.

Later that fall, I attended a workshop for activists of color, most of whom had been involved in the Occupy movement in some way, shape or form. Many of the participants expressed an ambivalence about working with white colleagues in General Assemblies, and felt as if their concerns were not always acknowledged and prioritized among the myriad of issues to be addressed during public forums or in private. All this while the mass media and academic forums observed a lack of African American participation in the Occupy Movement. In the mainstream media, the apparent lack of black participation was crudely framed as an extension of an imagined general political apathy among African Americans. According to the standard narrative, the Occupy Movement was supposed to be a young, white, college educated movement; a surprise, I'm sure, to the many seasoned activists of color involved. Still I watched in spring as a predominately black mass of thousands convened in Union Square, Manhattan, to protest the gross injustices of the Trayvon Martin case and to hear the Martin family speak. I was present when the rally was commandeered by folks who claimed to be affiliated with Occupy, only to be redirected towards Zucotti Park and met by the NYPD. There could not have been a more apt metaphor for the relationship between the African American community and the Occupy Movement at the time.

The Occupy Movement is relevant here because it is so heavily aligned with contemporary leftist politics. In this context, race continues to be a politically explosive issue even in progressive circles. Like the CPUSA of past, the Occupy Movement must be racially inclusive in order to be truly populist. Its leaders were educated on racially diverse college campuses in an age of affirmative action rhetoric and sensitivity training. Community organizers in predominately black neighborhoods and institutions have been strengthened and reenergized by their alliances with OWS. The Occupy Movement held (and continues to hold) much promise and excitement for those who attended, providing much needed energy for grassroots movements. More recently, its organizational framework provided a clear grid for Occupy Sandy relief efforts in the Greater New York area. The Occupy Movement also represents a yearning for social justice that has as much in common with the Civil Rights movement as it does with the Arab Spring. But the relationship has not been an easy one. It is not clear that questions about racial exploitation within the movement have been fully and adequately addressed. The ways in which race is framed within the Occupy Movement is reminiscent of the experiences described by African American intellectuals in the early part of the

twentieth century, when the CPUSA provided the major platform for social change and explorations of social justice issues for many African Americans. Only time will tell if this affiliation ends on the same note.

This collection began as a course paper for a graduate seminar in which I was both free to explore the depth of the CPUSA's influence on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and somewhat stunned by the lack of critical insight into his engagement with leftist politics, the subtleties of its attraction and repulsion, the contradictions between the CPUSA's ideology and Ellison's racial consciousness. Very few critical sources could tell me exactly what it was about the African American experience that made this relationship so fragile. The dearth of resources was new to me then, but has become more familiar as my now that I have spent a little more time in the academy, especially within the field of African American studies. Thus, the papers assembled here are an attempt to fill a gap that exists both in academia and our own cultural knowledge. I am honored to have had a role in their publication.

Each essay presents a fresh reading of African American literature and a reconsideration of the relationship between black writers and American leftist politics. Carmen Phelps's examination of Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* dovetails with Menhouka Case's interviews with Lorraine Hansberry's colleagues: both essays provide critical details about the influence of the leftist ideology on these women's work in spite of the fact that they are rarely recognized as leftists. Cathy Bergin's study of Chester Himes tempers our understanding of the racial politics of the CPUSA during the 1940s while Washella T. Simmons confronts racial politics on the job as well as within the labor movement in the work of William Attaway and Chester Himes. Philip Goldstein and Chauncey Ridley revisit Ralph Ellison's engagement with communism by way of French existentialism and the blues. Gregory Meyerson Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and "Bright and Morning Star". Ben Alexander's study of Langston Hughes time at Yaddo and Tryone Williams outline of the intellectual development of Harold Cruse. Kyle Wiggins exploration of Charles Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* expands the boundaries of what we traditionally think of as the black left tradition. My sincerest hope is that as a whole they add to the store of intellectual energy surrounding the project of documenting and analyzing African American cultural life and politics. The lessons that we learn from such studies are as relevant today as ever.

CHAPTER ONE

LEFT BEHIND:
THE REINVENTION OF DOROTHY WEST
IN *THE LIVING IS EASY*

CARMEN PHELPS

“To Cleo, culture was a garment that she had learned to get into quickly and out of just as fast”

—Narrator, *The Living is Easy*

Eleven years after Dorothy West yielded her editorial leadership of the *Challenge* and later *New Challenge* magazine to then associate editor Richard Wright, readers are introduced to Cleo Judson – a character who appears in the writer’s first novel, *The Living is Easy*. It is perhaps through the invention of Cleo Judson that West found an opportunity to confirm aesthetic and political ideologies that may have been previously compromised when she decided to relinquish her editorial responsibilities to Wright and the “Chicago Group” – a leftist cadre of artists from the Southside of Chicago.¹ West’s development of one of the most articulate African American female characters to be represented in literature, who refuses to compromise her goals for any reason, is an accomplishment worthy of evaluation when taking into consideration the writer’s expressed disenchantment with the *Challenge* and the sequence of events leading up

¹ In *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (1999), Bill V. Mullen lists the following individuals as members of Richard Wright’s Chicago South Side Writer’s Group; Ted Ward, Robert Davis, Edward Bland, Russell Marshall, Fern Gayden, Dorothy Sutton, Theodore Bland, Julius Weil, Barefield Gordon, Frank Marshall Davis, and Margaret Walker. Out of the Writer’s Group came Wright’s manifesto “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in the *New Challenge* in 1937. Mullen suggests that Wright’s program is similar to that of post-1935 Leftist ideals, in its emphasis on a cultural program for social change and its appeal to interracial alliances.

to her decision to abandon it. For the character Cleo Judson, compromising her aspirations of becoming a member of Boston's African American elite is not an option; and although such ambitions ultimately end in her being alone and on the precipice of financial ruin, there is no indication that Cleo is remorseful about the means she has employed in her attempt to realize her goals. Given the degree of conviction and fortitude demonstrated by Cleo and the writer's narrative strategy for addressing issues of cultural and political relevance, West's novel reflects an authority and insight that had previously been marginalized during her final years as editor of *Challenge*. Furthermore, *The Living is Easy* can be read as an historically and aesthetically transitional text integrating existing and newly emerging ideals that move beyond the exigencies of the Left and perhaps exceed her own earlier expressed priorities as the founding editor of the *Challenge*.

When West arrived in New York City, she was one of the youngest female members of a cadre of Harlem Renaissance writers whose talents had already established them as members of the African American intellectual elite. In an interview conducted by scholar Deborah McDowell between the years of 1984 and 1985, West recalls that Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, for instance, were very "protective" of her – and that McKay treated her as a "little handmaiden." Even Zora Neale Hurston referred to West as "baby" in written correspondence (270). It is questionable whether or not West was eventually able to outgrow such characterizations, even as she matured and started what was to become one of the most popular independent magazines of the Harlem Renaissance. In addition, her editorial and entrepreneurial leadership as an African American woman was most likely susceptible to harsh critique by her male contemporaries and indeed anyone who may have questioned her ability to successfully define and perpetuate the aesthetic exigencies of the period. Readers and supporters had expressed an overwhelming sense of anticipation and investment in this magazine, which promised to introduce audiences to a new generation of literary voices. In the first volume of *Challenge*, published in March of 1934, West's editorial reads, "It is our plan to bring out the prose and poetry of the newer Negroes. We who were the New Negroes challenge them to better our achievements. For we did not altogether live up to our fine promise."² The magazine was a much anticipated endeavor as expressed by the literary community; yet as early as September that same year, West's editorial comments convey to

² Dorothy West's earliest editorials in the first year of the *Challenge*'s publication expressed her goal to publish the work of a new generation of African American writers who would build upon the cultural and artistic ideals of their literary predecessors.

readers that the mission of the magazine remained unfulfilled, and her dissatisfaction with the quality of materials being submitted for potential publication is made clear. “We were disappointed in the contributions that came in from the new voices. There was little we wanted to print. Bad writing is unbelievably bad. We felt crazily that the authors must be somewhat spoofing and that they didn’t really mean for us to take their stuff for prose and poetry.³ Issuing a challenge to young writers to produce work that compares in quality to their predecessors, such as Arna Bontemps, West publicly admits to readers that without quality writing, the magazine would not survive as a monthly publication and would instead be published as a quarterly.

In further discussion about West’s role as the editor of *Challenge/New Challenge* between the years of 1934 and 1937, in the interview, West speaks candidly about Richard Wright and the influence of the Chicago Group on the magazine. According to West, the group planned to take over the magazine and re-define its mission as a Leftist publication - an idea to which she was opposed. Yet she felt forced to yield her editorial leadership to Wright and the Chicago Group so that such a mission could be accomplished (272). West’s opposition to the influence of Communism suggest that she must have had a full sense of what it meant to identify as a Leftist writer of this period, given her close association with writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright, for instance, in McDowell’s interview, she recalls her disinterest in its ideals.

Well, as you know, I went to Russia in the early thirties. My little joke is that they tried and failed to make a communist out of me. After almost a year there, I was ready to get out of the country. Since it was, by now, obvious to all involved that I was not good communist material, they were perfectly willing to let me go. They gave me \$300 in American money. I was the only person of the 22-member delegation to get \$300 in spendable dollars ... I returned to Boston ... It was there that I got the idea for the magazine (271).

Although West’s insights regarding the intricacies of Communist ideology and/or its ultimate agenda may have been limited in her earlier years, by the time she had established the *Challenge* in 1934 through the first and only publication of its reincarnation, the *New Challenge*, West would have undoubtedly developed a full sense of the influence that Communist ideology was having not only upon African American culture in Harlem, but also publications such as hers that were being utilized for the purpose

³ This is taken from the editorial page of the 1934 September issue of the *Challenge* – the magazine’s second issue.

of communicating its ideals. In his comprehensive study of communism and its role in African American culture during the thirties, Mark Naison writes

The Communist Party's approach to the black arts, and to black culture generally, remains one of the most controversial features of its activity in Black America ... The Party's concern with black culture extended far beyond its involvement with the prominent black artists whose work normally frames the debate – Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson ... Party leaders began to speak of the black arts (with the exception of vaudeville and musical comedy with sexually explicit themes) as politically “progressive,” in and of themselves (203).

Naison goes on to outline many of the prevailing debates among African American intellectuals regarding the consequences of Communist influence within the African American community. What this study makes clear is the extent to which the Communist Party sought the political and ideological support of such communities for the purpose of advancing their agenda for the purpose of the eventual establishment of a third major political party in the United States (227). Ultimately, West was unable to protect her magazine from these influences despite her best intentions – a fate which has contributed to an interest among scholars to pursue West's political and aesthetic agenda.

Consequently, under the editorial leadership of Richard Wright, the final issue of the reincarnated *New Challenge* was published in 1937, conveys a discernible shift from the aforementioned priorities that had been expressed by West in 1934 to those reflecting a Leftist agenda. No longer did its mission solicit work that met broadly defined aesthetic criteria, as it had under West's editorial leadership.

We are not attempting to re-stage the “revolt” and “renaissance” which grew unsteadily and upon false foundations ten years ago ... We want *New Challenge* to be a medium of literary expression for all writers who realize the present need for the realistic depiction of life through the sharp focus of social consciousness ... Contributing editors from several large cities have been selected in the hope that the organizational activity of groups in those areas will be facilitated ... The magazine, being non-political, is not subsidized by any political party ... ⁴

⁴ Sharon Jone's essay “The Bourgeoisie Blues: African American Literary Aesthetics in Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy*,” productively points out the various arguments that have been constructed in response to the novel, which attempt to situate it in specific historical and aesthetic paradigms and offers an

Despite the disclaimer regarding the magazine's refusal to endorse or solicit the support from any particular ideological party, critics have acknowledged the Communist Party's support for the *New Challenge* and its expressed agenda. And although Wright's endorsement of Communist ideals as observed in much of his literature can be described as ambiguous, his uncompromised standing in the Party at the time "illustrates both his own integrity as an artist, and the Party's willingness to tolerate a certain amount of heterodoxy in order to keep a valued black artist within its fold." (Naison 210). West may have ultimately been the unfortunate yet conscious victim of Leftist paternalism, given the pressures she was under to adapt her aesthetic values to the expressed Leftist goals of Wright and the Chicago Group.

Maybe you don't realize it, but it was very hard for one little woman back then. Women of the present are a little more aggressive than I was back then. I guess you could say I was passive. Plus, I was small and my voice soft. So when the Chicago group started having meetings about the direction of the magazine, I remember deciding to give it up (McDowell 271).

However West characterizes herself during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, the writing in *The Living is Easy* exhibits a political insight that can be interpreted as anything *but* "passive." Her portrayal of an African American owned newspaper called *The Clarion*, which is owned by Thea Binney's brother, Simeon, verifies that at least by the time of the publication of this novel, West had become quite aware of popular debates about the representation of African Americans in popular media. During a conversation at Cleo's dinner party, she expresses to her guests,

... when a colored man commits a crime, the whole race is condemned. Tell Robert Jones's story to the world, and the world will be stirred by the drama and tragedy of the killing. But the rest of the race will be the real martyrs. Wherever white people see them, they will watch them for danger signs. They will be frightened by a dark face, or a slow answer, or a quick step. They will think that all Negroes are armed (263-264).

Although West's previously mentioned comments regarding her disinterest in and ignorance about communist ideology have underlying implications of self-doubt, given her demonstrated political insight in *The Living is Easy*, such comments can also be read as perhaps deceptively and strategically apolitical. Perhaps the opportunity for West to assert her own

argument that regards the work as complex in its employment of various cultural themes.

political and ideological insight so effectively was not to present itself until she writes *The Living is Easy* and develops the character Cleo Judson. In “The Wages of Weight: Dorothy West’s Corporeal Politics,” Meredith Goldsmith suggests that “Cleo gains access to the inner circle through her mastery of the theatrical apparatus of assimilation, using her imitative skills to claim a place among the elite.” (36) Indeed, the fact that “culture was a garment that she had learned to get into quickly and out of just as fast” Cleo, may be reflective of West’s own mastery of the literary form through which she reclaims an authority that had been previously denied her in her role as editor of *Challenge*.

In *The Living is Easy*, Cleo acknowledges the role that she plays in securing a future defined by financial and social mobility for her family, and considers herself to be responsible for their collective interests in this regard.

I declare before God, I have to pull the weight of this whole house ... Be second class niggers leaning over the fence looking at first-class folks. Nobody thinks of the children but me. Mr. Judson only cares if their bellies are full. The rest of you only care if they keep themselves clean. I’m the only one cares to see them walk proud. If they don’t learn to hold their heads up in the colored world, how they ever going to know to hold their heads up in the white world (228)?

In distinguishing herself as the most capable individual in her family, Cleo “integrate[s] positive masculine and feminine gender traits into her female body. As a result, she will be able to rebuild her life as a woman and as a human who has reached a new level of self-definition, beyond limiting, binary gender definitions” (Sanders 436). In an earlier episode of the novel, Cleo positions herself as an authority figure possessing all of the necessary emotional and physical capabilities necessary to protect the social well-being of her friends as well. When her friend Thea comes to Cleo for advice on how to protect her family’s inheritance and reputation from the “hands of a West End woman,” Cleo takes it upon herself to intervene on her friend’s behalf.

Thea was Cleo’s model of perfection. She had been a day pupil at private school, and later a boarding student at a select academy, an institution which had taken her natural airs and graces and cast them in the same impeccable mold that produced the young ladies who were to take their inherited places behind the tea-tables of Boston. These young ladies were now the young wives of wealthy businessmen with old if not illustrious names. They lived on fashionable streets and were served by butlers who were, as often as not, old friends of Thea’s father (92).

Feeling a sense of responsibility to offer aid to her friend and ensure that her future would not be threatened by the vindictive impulses of “The Duchess” - a woman of low virtue, who owned a gambling house for men - Cleo plans to go to her home to “scare the bejesus out of her.” She says to Thea, “I’ll have her heart or your inheritance.” One of the most compelling aspects of Cleo’s character is the fact that she *publicly* and ostentatiously demonstrates her disregard for conventions of gender, refusing to remain within the social or behavioral confines of what might otherwise be construed as appropriate feminine behavior. West’s portrayal of Cleo is without subtlety or innuendo; Cleo’s agenda is clear, and she earns either complete respect or criticism from those around her. One wonders whether or not West herself was liberated through her character’s convictions, and how West’s audiences might interpret *her* legacy and in particular her vision as a writer and editor if she had been less encumbered by conventions gender and class at the time she chose to turn over editorial leadership of the *New Challenge* to Richard Wright, for instance.

If “a close reading of the text amid the social, historical, and economic aspects of the period reveals the presence of ‘bourgeoisie,’ ‘folk,’ and ‘proletarian’ aesthetics,” such a reading must take into consideration the ways in which Cleo’s character reinforces West’s ability to develop a narrative framework in which the influences of each of these ideals were ambitiously explored.⁴ This is most apparent when readers encounter narrative passages in which the setting is described.

Cleo read the guiding sign above a tippler’s head and turned down the street she sought. Here were no amiable loafers. Here were the sullen and shifty-eyed, the denizens of the dark. These were the dregs, the men without women, the women without men. These were the haters who thought they were beaten because they were black. There were no children here. Sometimes a wizened, ratfaced gnome in the shape of a child hugged the shadows of a stoop, from which he would never emerge to walk in the sun. Here were the hunted, the thieves and killers, the nameless, the faceless. These were the blood brothers of men everywhere who were born without race pride ...

They stood silent. They stood motionless, and the sick smoldering went on inside of them because here was one of their own who would disown them. The minds of the men shouted whore as she passed, because they knew she was not. The women’s thoughts hurled Miss White Lady at her because they could not bear to admit she could walk with dignity and still be colored (99-100).

West's characterization of Cleo as the embodiment of vanity and middle-class security amidst this "ruined street of rotting frame houses," is exemplary of the writer's ability to represent the character's interstitial identity as it is perpetuated by the confluence of race, class, and gender. Not only are readers provided with vivid descriptions of the landscape of this neighborhood, but West explicitly references the "minds" and "thoughts" of the inhabitants of the street, appealing to the psychological implications of urban depravity and how it implicates Cleo's own bourgeoisie existence. Such a treatment substantiates the writer's ability to assertively critique and provide commentary on multiple themes of social, cultural, and political relevance, and confirms West's competency as a writer to productively elaborate upon the relationships between these themes. Her ability to do so with facility positions her as an undeniable voice of social and political sophistication and insight that may have once been compromised in her final years as editor of the *Challenge*.

An examination of Cleo's character is also useful for the purpose of identifying West's novel *The Living is Easy* as that which implicates the writer's literary foresight in anticipation of black nationalist aesthetics of the future. In a conversation with the Duchess, she expresses the following about her husband,

Mr. Judson ... is helping my sisters. It isn't them I'm concerned about as much as it is their children. I suffer for children. I lie awake nights wondering if those poor little things have enough to eat, or proper clothes to wear, or a decent place to lay their heads. I persuaded my husband to let me send for them, and their mothers too. I won't know peace until we're all under the same roof, where I can tend my flock to the best of my ability (117).

Cleo's sentiments resonate with essential criteria of black nationalist aesthetics, which appeals to the conceptualization of family as a microcosm for "nation" in the process of constructing an ideological and cultural foundation for race and cultural based nation-building as well as the reification of the concept of community.⁵ In yet a later scene, Cleo's investment in the financial and social well-being and success of her family is made clear when she expresses resentment about the prospect that Thea's son will have a better chance of going to Harvard than her nephew.

⁵ Black Arts Movement writers such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Haki Madhubuti, for instance, were some of the most vocal proponents for and architects of a black nationalist aesthetic incorporating motifs of family and nation-building in the process of achieving social and political empowerment in the African American community.

“What right had her son to a better life than Tim? Well, by God, he’d get there. She had a dozen years to dream and scheme how to do it. When he was ready, she would be ready too!” () Cleo’s frustration about the social inequities perpetuated by class motivates her desire to ensure that those within her family have equal access to the material and symbolic privileges of bourgeoisie society. This particular aspect of her character parallels West’s own expressed desire to look toward future generations of writers to realize the ideals cultivated by their predecessors while she served as editor of *Challenge*.

Where Dorothy West’s voice as an editor and defining voice of the Harlem Renaissance period may have been silenced by an increasingly influential leftist popular front, it is revived in *The Living is Easy* and through the voice of her character Cleo, whose consciousness and insight is clearly conveyed and who pursues her own agenda despite the opposition of others. Joyce Durham’s assertion that “it is both fruitful and meaningful to analyze the positive contributions and influences this particular ‘little’ magazine achieved in recording and advancing the contemporary black literary tradition,” reminds readers that no matter what West may or may not have accomplished in her role as editor of *Challenge*, she remains integral to ongoing debates about the relationship between aesthetics and politics in African American expression (20). West should be credited for having continued to pursue her own aesthetic values and interests as a writer, as such a decision reflects a commitment to her own standards of performance despite the influence of politics.

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Sanders notes Sanders moves forward in her analysis of gender construction with regard to Cleo's character to point out the various ways in which she defies conventions of sex and gender in pursuit of middle-class ideals, recognizing that she is willing to compromise her "femininity" in order to achieve her goals.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE ROTTEN, LOUSY, STINKING, DOUBLE CROSSING COMMUNISTS!”: THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND CHESTER HIMES’ *LONELY CRUSADE*

CATHY BERGIN

The hostility directed towards the Communist Party in Chester Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* has traditionally been read, along with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953), as a powerful cultural response to the perceived failure of Communism to comprehend the complexities of race and identity. This anti-Communism however needs to be understood as distinct from the anti-Communism of the Cold War period and also in the literary critical field, which, as Bill Mullen has observed, has often overlooked the relationship between black writers and the left which dominated black culture during the Depression.¹ So while the hostility to Communism in the texts seems unambiguous, the nature of that hostility is best understood through an investigation of the *specific* character of the textual understanding of the war-time activities of the CPUSA and its impact on black struggles. This point is key. The ultimate failure of the Stalinist CPUSA to secure its position as vanguard of the black working class is often posited as illustrative of the inability of Marxism, as a “European Enlightenment” ideology, to divest itself of its white ethnocentric presumptions. In this rubric, Marxism’s original sin is its fixation on the dialectic of class struggle which eschews the ambivalences and dislocations of race and, moreover, guarantees that it is deeply implicated in the very traditions which ensure the continuation of

¹ Bill Mullen, “A New Blueprint for African-American Literary Studies,” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.1 (Spring 2001) pp.148-9.

racist oppression.² This argument identifies Marxism as a Eurocentric alien economism which is ill-suited to even *comprehend* the complexities of racism.³

The oft-cited “betrayal” of black workers by the American Communist Party – their self-serving adoption of black politics, motives perceived as ‘dubious’ – which has characterised studies of this period until the recent past, is often presented as a tautological effect of Communism’s inherent “racism.”⁴ I wish to argue, however, that when placed in their historical context, the unquestionably damaging policies of the American Communist Party in the 1940s are not evidence of a power hungry cabal intent on achieving political power on the backs of black Americans. With a focus on the politics of the era, we are presented, rather, with a chaotic tragedy of reckless political strategies which ensured the Party’s isolation in the face of the sustained attacks of the McCarthyite era.⁵

My argument here is that American Communism was not a “God that failed” *because* the “Communist Party could not accommodate race.”⁶ The anger which saturates Himes’s representation of the Party points to a bitter sense of treachery, precisely because so much was expected. Himes’s creation of a sense of treachery and betrayal are in themselves a rejection of cynicism about the *ability* of Communism to fight racism; betrayal demands initial loyalty. This loyalty was “betrayed” during the Second World War and an appreciation of the vitriol which accompanies Himes’s representation of the Communist Party can only be achieved by focusing

² See for example Robert Young, *White Mythologies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) p.3.

³ This characterisation of Marxism is true even of more sympathetic theorists like Cedric Robinson, who identifies Marxism as an important and influential but irredeemably European philosophy which was responsible for the “cultural debilitation” of the black radical tradition. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983).

⁴ The two earliest extremely influential articulations being Wilson Record’s, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951) and Harold Cruse’s *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (William Morrow, 1967.)

⁵ According to many historians the disastrous effects of Comintern led directives from the Hitler-Stalin Pact and throughout the war rendered the organization incapable of withstanding the witch-hunts of the 1950s. For example see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982) p.169 and Naison, *Communists in Harlem* p.273.

⁶ Ian Peddie, “Poles Apart? Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nelson Algren” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 47, number 1 (Spring 2001) p.119.

on the historically concrete aspects of CPUSA activity following the outbreak of war.

CPUSA and the WWII

The disastrous effects of Soviet foreign policy become tangibly apparent in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Even the most nuanced historical accounts of how committed Party activists attempted to adapt and modify Comintern directives are necessarily overshadowed by the sheer impact of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939.⁷ While this history need not be retold in detail here, it is nonetheless necessary to sketch the political zigzags which have been at the source of much of the suspicion which characterises black post-war fictional representations of the CPUSA.

On August 22nd 1939, after four years of Popular Front anti-fascist work, Party members were greeted with the news that the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. By September 19th the Party's national committee declared that "this war cannot be supported by the workers. It is not a war against fascism."⁸ The war was re-characterised as in inter-imperialist conflict. As McDermott and Agnew point out however "no amount of theoretical sophistry could hide the fact that the Comintern had jumped to the discordant tune of Soviet foreign policy."⁹ The anti-fascist coalitions collapsed as the Party attempted to rally a new broad front against the war under the slogan "The Yanks aren't coming." It was met with anger and hostility. *The New Republic* accurately reported that "fellow-travellers are dropping like ripe plums in a hurricane."¹⁰

⁷ Robin Kelley argues that the effect of the Pact in Alabama was actually beneficial to the Party, as the racist nature of anti-Communism in the South meant the Communist- Liberal alliances which took off elsewhere never really emerged in Southern states. By abandoning Popular Front liberalism which had necessitated a dilution of radical racial politics, the Alabama organisation attracted a variety of committed activists during the 22 month lifespan of the Nazi-Soviet pact. See Robin DG Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990) p.191.

⁸ Quoted in Irvig Howe & Lewis Cosser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1962) p.388.

⁹ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern: A history of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: Macmillan, 1996) p.198.

¹⁰ Isserman, p.37.

One of the few areas left relatively unscathed by the about-face was the CPUSA's black organizations, certainly in comparison to the Party's Jewish front groups which were devastated.¹¹ Of significance here, was the political rhetoric ushered in by the new Party line, a return to the anti-imperialist Pan-Africanism which had characterised the, so called Third Period.¹²

The Party called on African Americans to step up the demand for equality at home and to boycott the Jim Crow army and the segregated war industries. As the war was now one of competing imperialists, the Party focused on the bloody history of British and French imperialism, a focus which struck a chord with many political African Americans. Paul Robeson angrily told a reporter that Britain's democratic credentials were far from impressive as they had done nothing "about giving India and Ireland and Africa a taste of democracy."¹³ Robeson was not alone in locating hypocrisy in the Allies' cause, and many black Americans failed to see a major distinction between German fascism, British imperialism and Jim Crowism at home.¹⁴

When Germany invaded Russia in June 1941 all talk of "imperialist war" ceased. Fascism was again the main enemy and Party members "responded as if German bombs were landing on their own homes."¹⁵ The *Daily Worker* declared in July 1941 that: 'no honest American, and certainly no Communist, will say that a limit should be set to the measures we should take to defend our country.'¹⁶

The war saw the CP turn back to its Popular Front stance of unity against fascism, only in a far looser capacity, using a political stance "designed to include everyone and everything in between American Communism and J.P. Morgan"¹⁷ The Soviet Union was now an official ally of the United States and the Party's allegiance to the former informed its relationship to

¹¹ For the impact of the Pact on Jewish Communists see Irving and Coser, pp.401-405.

¹² Third Period (1928 -1935) when Comintern decreed that the world was in a period of revolutionary upsurge. See J Degras, *The Communist International* Vol. II, EECI Resolution on the Negro Question, 28 Oct. 1928p.555.

¹³ *Duberman*, Paul Robeson (New York: The New Press, 1989) p.243.

¹⁴ Foner, *Organised Labour and the Black Worker* (New York: Praeger, 1974) p.278.

¹⁵ Isserman p.103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.113.

¹⁷ Michael Torigian, "National Unity On the Waterfront: Communist Politics and the ILWU During the Second World War" *Labor History* Vol. 30 no. 3 (Summer 1989) p.412.

the latter. All struggles, including the black struggle, were secondary to the war effort.

While black membership of the Party did not dramatically decline during the war years, many black comrades, including Richard Wright, were thoroughly demoralised by what they saw as the betrayal of the CPUSA, the feeling that African American were, in Ellison's words, "wartime expendable."¹⁸ Wright resigned from the Party in 1942 when the Party refused to support legal action against discrimination in the war industries. The Party had signed up to the no-strike pledge, which ensured that black workers who took industrial action in the extremely segregated war industries were effectively labelled as scabs. Leading black Communist Ben Davis stated baldly: "We cannot temporarily stop the war until all questions of discrimination are ironed out" going on to urge the "Negro people to be ready to sacrifice."¹⁹ Another prominent black Communist, whilst insisting that the battle against discrimination should continue, stressed that "it would be equally wrong to press these demands without regard to the main task of the destruction of Hitler, without which no serious fight for Negro rights is possible."²⁰ This point became paramount as the Party insisted that the cause of black Americans was inextricably linked to the plight of European Jews and consequently to the war effort. Increasingly, the question of American interests became indistinguishable from those of black Americans, as *The Communist* in 1942 declared: "The Negro people cannot be true to their own best interests without supporting the war."²¹

This prioritisation of the national interest, at the expense of the 'Negro question,' was illustrated most clearly in the Party's refusal to support the March on Washington Movement.²² In 1942 the proposed March was deemed by the CP to be an attack on the war effort.²³

Given the later allegations of "racism" levelled at the CPUSA it is significant to note that it was not only black workers who had to "sacrifice" for the sake of national unity. The Party didn't raise its voice against the "relocation centres" that were set up for west-coast Japanese-

¹⁸ Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues" in *Shadow and Act* p. 89.

¹⁹ Foner, *Organised Labour* p.279.

²⁰ James Ford quoted in Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* p.119.

²¹ Quoted in Garfinkel, *When Negroes March* p.42.

²² According to Isserman the M.O.W.M was "the most powerful nationally organized black protest movement to appear since the decline of the Garvey movement." p.118.

²³ Naison *Communists in Harlem* pp. 310-12; Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis* p.132.

Americans and Japanese-American Communists has to politically embrace their own interment.²⁴ The Party also adopted a dangerously selective approach to civil liberties, when 29 Trotskyists were indicted under the Smith Act in 1941 there was barely a murmur of protest from the CPUSA, indeed, the *Daily Worker* could “find no objection to the destruction of the fifth column in this country.”²⁵

So the abandonment of fundamental Party principle was not confined to the Party's black politics. Class struggle itself was now seen as an anathema to being a good Communist. Earl Browder stated the Party's changed policy in the most explicit terms:

We frankly declare that we are ready to co-operate in making capitalism work effectively in the post-war period...we are now extending the perspective of national unity for many years to come.²⁶

Despite the later charges of “un-American activities,” the CPUSA's commitment to national unity was absolute.²⁷

Bizarrely, the cause of the Soviet Union was now the cause of American capitalism. The shared interests of the CPUSA and the American war effort saw the Party in this period enjoy unparalleled popularity as their membership rocketed to between 75-85,000 members. In spring 1943 almost a third of new members were black, as opposed to one tenth a few months previously.²⁸ The cynicism that African Americans felt at the onset of the war had been replaced by a guarded optimism that the war against Nazism would open up the possibility of racial equality at home. The Party were at the forefront of characterising the conflict as a “people's” war of “national liberation.” The CPUSA was single-minded about the nature of the war as fight against *racial* hatred for democracy and equality, and therefore appealed to many black Americans, despite the consequent deprioritisation of specific black demands.²⁹

The CPUSA's relative inaction at pushing for black civil rights during the war was less a capitulation to racism than a retreat from their earlier

²⁴ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* p.144.

²⁵ Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party* p.418. The successful conviction of 18 of the Trotskyists set a dangerous precedent as the Smith Act served as the legal basis for the McCarthyite witch-hunts.

²⁶ Quoted in Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974)

²⁷ Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis* p.45.

²⁸ Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism* p.3.

²⁹ Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party* p.419; Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* p.167.

vanguard position on race. However, by the end of the war, it became clear that the hopes invested in the belief that the fight against fascism would usher in change at home were brutally dashed. Thanks to the efforts of the March on Washington Movement, there existed a sizable and credible nationally organized anti-Communist black civil rights movement around A Phillip Randolph, and a generation of black intellectuals and activists for whom the Party represented opportunism and deception. As CPUSA member Harry Haywood recalled “In the thirties, the Communist Party had often been looked upon as “the Party of the Negro people;” in the forties however, our line led to repeated *betrayals* of the struggle.”³⁰

The Party did not completely abandon its struggle for black rights, but like all other areas of its work, it often limited its battles to those which benefited the war effort.³¹ The attempt to abstract the CPUSA's strategy on racial issues from its general politics during this period must be done at the expense of the Party's history and its record in the 1930s. The proposition that Communist Party sold out black workers for reasons of opportunism and an underlying racism (best articulated by Record and Cruse) isolates the Party's racial policy from the tragic history of Stalinism in general. It is against this background that Himes's representation of the Communist Party can be productively placed.

For Himes, (and indeed, Ellison and Wright) the wartime activities of the Party amounted to a betrayal of black Communist supporters who had trusted the Party to prioritise black struggles. The dominant tone of *Lonely Crusade* is bitter disillusionment with Communism. The aggressive political commitment and militant discipline, which had attracted these writers to the CPUSA while the Party was at the forefront of anti-racist struggle, were now seen as a threatening barrier to black liberation.³² Rather than dismissing the Party out of hand, Himes called it to account. In 1942 Chester Himes argued in *Opportunity*:

³⁰ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik* p.534 (my emphasis).

³¹ As Marable points out, due to a consistent push on the labor front by the CP and CIO the number of black Americans in unions soared from barely 150,000 in 1935 to 1.25 million a decade later. See Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois* p.167.

³² Himes arrived in Los Angeles in 1940 with a list of contacts from Langston Hughes “most of them were connected with the Communist Party.” See Himes interview in John A. Williams & Charles F. Harris (eds.) *Amistad I* (Vintage Books, 1970) p. 55. Himes also helped out in raising funds for Spanish Civil War veterans and in 1940 he wrote articles on the CIO for the *Cleveland Union Leader*. See James Sallis *Chester Himes: A Life* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000) p.73.

One of the unfortunate aspects of the Negro Americans' fight for freedom at home is the discovery that many organizations, humanitarian ideologists, and realistic political groups, Americans who have long been in the front ranks of the Negro Americans' slow march toward equality, are now deserting them, advocating that this fight be set aside until the greater fight for freedom is won.³³

Anger rather than cynicism was the immediate response to perceived Party betrayals. Ellison berated the Party leadership in 1945 in precisely the contradictory terms which mark post-war black American fiction:

I believe we should serve them notice that they are responsible to the Negro people at large even if they spit in the faces of their members and that they must either live up to their words or face a relentless fire of mature, informed criticism³⁴

Simultaneous to the anger expressed at Party betrayals is the idea that Communists "must live up to their words" this is an active call for Communist intervention in black politics, not the cynical resignation of anti-Communist scepticism.

Lonely Crusade contains pointed and frequently hyperbolic criticism of Communist betrayal of black struggle and black life. These criticisms are de-historicized by literary critics placing of the novel within a generic anti-Communist paradigm. Below I wish to re-visit the site of Himes hostility to Communism in the context of the contemporary relationship to the wartime activities of the CPUSA.

Lonely Crusade and Communism

Lonely Crusade was published in 1947. *The Daily Worker* published a cartoon with Himes carrying a white flag, and the critical reception led to personal appearances on radio and in bookstores to promote the book being cancelled.³⁵ *The New Masses* suggested: "The issuance of this book ought to be met with more than passive anger, more than contempt. It should call for action. It should be buried deep beneath a rising mountain of protest, boycott and condemnation."³⁶ The novel was criticised for its

³³ Quoted in Chester Himes, *Black on Black: Baby Sister and selected writings* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1975) p.218.

³⁴ Quoted in Benston, *Speaking For You* p.204.

³⁵ Himes, *The Quality of Hurt* pp. 99-100.

³⁶ Quoted in Stephen F. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976) p.132.

“hate,” its politics, its literary style, its anti-Semitism and, ironically for an “anti-Communist” text, its crude protest polemics. While this novel provoked a variety of responses from Socialist, Communist, Liberal and Conservative critics, most of the reviews are marked by a negative recoil from the “hate” in *Lonely Crusade*.

Atlantic Monthly held that “hate runs through this book like a streak of yellow bile.” While the *Saturday Review of Literature* maintained that “gall and wormwood have gone into this book, the bitterest we have come across in a long time.”³⁷ Many of the reviews see Lee Gordon as a hyperbolic symbol of Himes’s “bitterness.”

Communist critics despised the novel. In the 1930’s black “hate” had been constructed as a revolutionary position from which to build Communism.³⁸ Yet Himes’s hatred was now read as an obstacle to black political identity in the wake of Communist Party’s quest for national unity during the war. Former president of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Langston Hughes, refused the publishers invitation to write an endorsement of the novel as: “Most of the people in it just do not seem to me to have good sense or be in their right minds, they behave so badly, which makes it difficult to care very much what happens to any of them.”³⁹

Communist reaction to the novel is an indicator of how the Party had shifted its race politics during the war. The Communist Party that Himes distrusts is a Communist Party which now distrusts black hate.

In *Lonely Crusade* Himes’s anti-Communist invective is not the expression of frustration at the *inability* of Communists to comprehend black anger, but the expression of a sense of betrayal at their *refusal* to do so. Himes’s objection to Communism is not at all the same as the more general contention from *Wilson Record* in the 1950s through to Robert Young in the 1990s that Marxism *per se* is philosophically and historically alien to black experience and black struggle.⁴⁰

³⁷ Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* p.100.

³⁸ Cathy Bergin “Race/Class politics: the Liberator (1929-1934)” in *Race and Class* 47:4, April 2006 pp. 86-104

³⁹ Quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* Volume II (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 134.

⁴⁰ For example Robert Gorman contends that Marxists in America: “always reduced concrete experiences of racial bigotry directly to capitalism...When capitalist economic exploitation died, so would bigotry. Blacks, therefore, needed to mute or disregard entirely racial issues, and emphasize instead interracial working-class solidarity. They had to mobilize for socialism rather than against

Himes presents us with a sprawling political invective, which can be, paradoxically, radical in its posture and profoundly conservative in its politics.

In *Lonely Crusade* it is the *duty* of the black American man to fight his oppression. The black man is alienated from this duty by his inability to function as a “man” in American society. The targets for his anger are numerous: black women who reap the benefits of his oppression, white bosses who profit from his exploitation, Communists who manipulate him, white women who betray him, racist white workers who humiliate him and docile black workers who shame him. In the ferocity of its cynicism *Lonely Crusade* is at core an intense indictment of American society. The negative critical reception of the novel acknowledges the sheer scope of its invective.

The Communist Party in *Lonely Crusade* is corrupt, sexually degenerate, hypersensitive to race and ruthlessly utilitarian in its practice. However, whilst Himes's representation of the Communist Party is scathing, the sheer scale of his onslaught reveals a fascination with the Party as a powerful pole of attraction for black Americans. Far from being dismissed as insignificant to the struggle for black liberation, the Communist Party is engaged with at every level. Communists play a considerable role as both the emasculating co-opters of black manhood and the ideological bearers of black self-determination. There is a tension throughout *Lonely Crusade* between the political ideology of Communism and the political practises of the Communist Party, which creates an unusual dynamic in the text.

Most significantly, although Communism is engaged with in *Lonely Crusade*, it is the Communist Party of the 1940s that is being attacked in the novel, rather than simply Communism itself. *Lonely Crusade* consistently draws attention to its contemporary setting - the novel is published in 1947, set in the spring of 1943, spans 50 days, and the text makes numerous references to the policies of the CPUSA during the Second World War. Lee, Luther, Rosie, Bart and Jackie all reflect on the changed Party emphasis since America's entry into the war. That questions of race are now considered divisive, is underlined by the very first textual reference to the organisation, as Joe warns Lee:

The Communists will be after you. Just be prepared... they'll try -to recruit you. Anyway, they'll try to control you. But as long as they don't catch you agitating on discrimination, they'll help. *They got that unity*

crap going and they won't want you around agitating. Now take their help. It can be good. (24, my emphasis)

The Communists of Himes's Los Angeles are omnipresent, they are present in Ruth and Lee's previous job as well as in his current one. Lee's distrust of Communists is founded upon his direct experience, specifically his experience of the vacillating positions on race engendered by the war. Initially head-hunted by the Communists to front an anti-discrimination committee during the Party's "isolationist" period, his attempts to challenge racism at work are rebuffed when the war breaks out:

After June 1941, when Germany attacked Russia, [the anti-discrimination committee] was disbanded. The Committee to Aid Russia took its place. The ones who had let the fight against the discrimination of minorities in America now called for unity in an all-out effort to defeat Nazism. They urged that petty racial differences and factional fights be forgotten until the Soviet Union emerged victorious over Germany. Their isolationism had changed overnight to rabid interventionism. (43-4)

However, this oscillation does not initially engender anger, in fact, Lee "was more bewildered than hurt" and "in the end he and Ruth laughed about it" (45). It is only when Ruth is targeted by Communists that he begins to see them as a threat. They become another target in his ongoing struggle to attain mastery in his domestic space:

Lee felt that the Communists were taking her away from him, and he began a slow, losing struggle for possession of her. It was then he studied Marxism to combat the Communists' arguments. (48)

In fact, Lee becomes *obsessed* with Communists - he suspects everybody in the novel of being one at one time or another. He initially assumes Lester McKinley is a Communist because he has a white wife and continues to suspect him of being one right up to his last meeting with him. Lee also wrongly suspects union organisers, Joe Ptak and Smitty, of being possible Communists throughout the text. He assumes Mollie is a Party member, when in fact she is a barely tolerated fellow traveller who is around Party circles purely because of Luther, according to Smitty's secretary, Sophia "they won't have her in the Party" (93).

Lee's obsession with the Communist Party in *Lonely Crusade* is fraught with contradictions. There are a variety of utterly opposed representations of the Party in the novel. Elsworth's "truth" telling and Bart's lies, McKinley's interracial domestic harmony and Mollie's decadence, Joe's single-mindedness and Luther's role playing, are all read