

‘Something real’: Black Bolshevism and the Comintern

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Abstract This article is an exploration of the internationalist race/class politics of black Bolsheviks in the United States. It places those politics within the context of both the Comintern’s anti-colonialism and the wider black radical tradition. Black communists and socialists living in the US were highly attuned to both racialised pasts and the racialised present and this impacted on their particularly enthusiastic response to the October revolution and its aftermath. It argues that these writers, thinkers and activists inaugurated an ambitious and influential political imaginary in which black workers were central to the dismantling of racial capitalism. Through an engagement with black socialist and communist publications of the period the article demonstrates that the Comintern’s anti-colonial politics of liberation spoke to black experiences of class exploitation and racial oppression and also to the established global imaginary of the black radical tradition. These transnational politics of solidarity had an impact both on forms of African American anti-racist class politics and on the Comintern’s understanding of the politics of race and class in the United States.

Keywords: black Bolsheviks; Comintern; transnational solidarity; racial capitalism; African Blood Brotherhood; black radical press.

Misrepresentation, libel and slander may obstruct the work of Lenine [sic] and Trotsky, but the Bolsheviks of all countries are asking searching questions today, and the train of the world’s third estate, now shunted on its journey, is speeding safely to its future heritage, so desperately clung to yet by the ‘first estate’ few.¹

This article is concerned with black radicals in the US and their relationship to Bolshevism and the Comintern. Specifically, I focus on the radical black newspapers the *Crusader* (1918-1922), the *Emancipator* (March-April 1920) and the *Messenger* (1917-1928).² Engaging with black/red relations in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution necessitates that a variety of historical and theoretical frames are mobilised to illuminate the contours of these connections. I have written elsewhere about the specific ways in which black agency was foregrounded in the radical black press in between the wars;³ and on how black left-wing publications drew upon both the black radical tradition and on Comintern anticolonialism to instantiate a powerful black working-class politics of internationalist solidarity.⁴ In fact the Comintern seemed to echo a black radical antiracist internationalism, and not just to black socialists and communists but across the African diaspora (though he was later bitterly opposed to socialism, Marcus Garvey's initial response to the revolution was enthusiastic).⁵ The connections between the Comintern and black radicals that I trace are not about embodied meetings between individuals but about *imagined* solidarities. I don't concentrate on the connections African Americans made in Russia or Mexico or London.⁶ It is not *actual* mobility but the circulation of ideas that informs my reading of the race/class internationalism of the black radical press in the early 1920s. Thus, I focus on imagined rather than 'real' border crossings. This is a question of solidarity based upon a political investment in struggles not immediately connected to the lived experience of African Americans. There is a complex dialectic between racialised experience and political solidarity, which inaugurates a powerful claim on internationalist working-class politics for an uncompromising form of anti-racism. The global imaginary of black communists between the wars forged connections between Alabama and Odessa, Harlem and Dublin, Chicago and Port au Prince. It was a project that reimagined the forces of revolutionary transformation to not only include racialised subjects but to place them at the centre of anti-capitalist resistance. In this article I trace the ways in which race and class are re-imagined for black communists and socialists inspired by the anti-colonialism of the early Comintern.⁷

My focus is on the newspapers of the black left precisely because, as a cultural and literary historian, I am interested in the manifestation of these solidarities – in the *public articulations* of black communist and socialist activists and writers and their particularly situated address to black workers. This is material directly agitational in form, seeking to speak to the lived experience of black poverty and exclusion. That lived experience is for the most part a gendered one. The most startling limitation in concentrating on these written publications is the marginalisation of women's voices in the public sphere in this period. Thus, when a focus on the press is maintained, black women activists' contribution to these politics remains neglected. As Lydia Lindsey notes, this neglect is not least because 'there is a preoccupation with text as the source of intellectual history, and less attention is paid to the spoken word'.⁸

It is crucial to remember the contributions of black women to socialist and communist politics, activists like Eslanda Cardozo Goode and Grace Campbell, 'the most prominent Black socialist woman in the 1920s'.⁹ The generally gendered language of liberation we see in these publications, and indeed in the publications of the era more generally, impacts upon the *kind* of politics which are mobilised. Ambitious, daring and impressive dreams of interracial class solidarity often leave intact the power dynamics of gender: 'the entrance of Negro women into politics will not change materially the political course of the Negro', the black socialist newspaper the *Messenger* declared in the summer of 1918, 'they, like their white sisters, will be largely influenced by their male companions'.¹⁰ Elsewhere the *Messenger* is supportive of women's suffrage but the voice that dominates, here and elsewhere, is unambiguously 'masculine'. Although the proto-communist *Crusader* had at least three women on the staff, gender remained oblique at best in the form of address of the paper.¹¹ Both the *Crusader* and later the *Messenger* often reproduced cover photographs of 'modest Negro womanhood', with the latter arguing that this was intended to show 'Negro women who are unique, accomplished, beautiful, intelligent, industrious, talented, successful'.¹² A concentration on written publications can thus contribute to the side-lining of the work of black women activists.¹³ Arguably, however, keeping focus on the gendered language that is

mobilised in these sources enables us to see that marginalisation, and the specific complications of voice when the language of liberation is tied to the recuperation of black 'manhood'. This recuperation must itself be placed in the context of the particularly gendered pathologies of white supremacism in the US.¹⁴

A concentration on the black radical press can also tempt one to emulate the somewhat breathless enthusiasm with which internationalist anti-racist class politics is sometimes vaunted in their pages. Without the anchoring of some this material to the important historical work done by others in this field, it would be easy to overstate or simplify the fascinating discursive strategies that are adopted in the pages of the *Crusader*, the *Emancipator* and the *Messenger*. To take one telling example, the reluctance of white American communists to take the question of race seriously which Jamaican writer Claude McKay and others report to the Comintern and beyond is barely evident in the black radical press – save for one or two unspecified allusions to the limitations of white radicals which I will discuss below.¹⁵ In general, black socialists and communists used their newspapers to proclaim the gains of the Russian revolution and what it meant for black subjects, rather than foregrounding limitations within the domestic white left on the question of race. Yet those limitations are central to the politics inaugurated here; the pervasive pleas for black workers to sign up to revolutionary class politics in these newspapers are themselves a recognition of the virulent racism experienced by their readers.

Notably, unlike Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* (1917-1933) or George Padmore's *Negro Worker* (1928-1937), which each had a form of address that was itself transnational, the newspapers I am looking at were inaugurating internationalist visions to a *domestic* readership. Thus, internationalism in this case is not about speaking on a transnational register, but rather about reinscribing racism in America within a wider anti-colonial, anti-capitalist framework; it is also about facilitating forms of race/class solidarity which spoke to the local through the paradigm of internationalism and vice versa. The relentless oppressions of global capitalism on its racialised subjects are reported in these papers side by side with national and local news, and exhortations to the reader to recognise themselves in the forms of address.¹⁶ These newspapers, like all

revolutionary newspapers, sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice, but they also sought to place the black worker as the vanguard of internationalist revolutionary politics.¹⁷ They did this through appeals to class politics, through the proud rendering of black radical history, and through a sober acknowledgement of the grip of white supremacy on American society – not excluding elements of the labour movement. If the newspapers of the radical left more generally posit a comparator here in terms of the language and form these publications take, so too do the newspapers of the black radical tradition. To understand the discursive address made to African Americans in the early 1920s we need to place these newspapers within a longer backwards trajectory.

The legacy of earlier radical black radicals

The first black newspaper in the US was the abolitionist *Freedom Journal*, which published its first issue in March 1827 and ceased publication in March 1829. In that first edition the free black editors Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm insisted that they wished 'to plead our own cause,' not least because: 'too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations'.¹⁸ This insistence on wresting back the narrative of blackness from its mobilisations by both white supremacy and white liberal paternalism is also apparent in newspapers like Frederick Douglass's more radical *North Star* (1847-51) and T. Thomas Fortune's even more radical *New York Age* (1880-84).

We are opposed to all tyranny, because we have and do now feel its blighting influence. We are with the people. Nihilism in Russia, Communism in Germany and in France, Irish contention in Great Britain, and Abolitionism (another term for Communism) in the United States, are only synonyms for resistance by the people to the tyranny and corruption of the Government.¹⁹

In addition to allying abolitionism to communism, Fortune also stressed the necessity of black self-determination in a very particular context,

that of 'the *commercial instinct* of the Anglo-Saxon [which has] blunted his every sense of honesty, fair play, and humanity'.²⁰

This naming of forms of whiteness in relation to capital is a relatively complex rhetorical move. It is the 'commercial instinct' which is the source of the dehumanising impulses that reside in 'the Anglo Saxon'. This implies both a de-essentialised source of racism and a black subject untainted by the deadening impact of embracing racial hierarchies. This grim acknowledgement of the dehumanising effects of white supremacy is keenly articulated two decades later. Writing in Garvey's *Negro World* in 1921, the peerless black socialist Hubert Harrison noted pointedly that 'people of the darker races are the ones that have suffered most' and moreover that:

In addition to the economic evils under which the others suffer they must endure those which flow from the degrading dogma of the color line, that dogma which has been set up by the Anglo-Saxon peoples and adopted in varying degrees by other white peoples who have followed their footsteps in the path of capitalist imperialism.²¹

For both Fortune and Harrison, black workers have been brutally oppressed on the basis of race but they have also escaped complicity with 'capitalist imperialism'.

There is a very particular address to black readers here, which is notable in its subtlety. Readers are constructed as they are addressed, sometimes quite overtly. The *Freedom Journal's* imagined reader is explicitly defined in that 1827 first editorial. The paper addresses itself to the 'five hundred thousand free persons of colour one half of whom might peruse, and the whole be benefitted by the publication of the journal'.²² For the black radical press that I am looking at, in the 1920s, the imagined reader cannot be so easily identified (beyond the plethora of Harlem located services that advertise in their pages). Yet we can – from the form of address, the tone and the exhortations to sign up to revolutionary forms of politics – trace a clear attempt to speak to the specificity of black history and the materiality of black working-class life. For example, in its encouragement to black workers to join unions

in March 1920, the *Emancipator* recognises and validates the suspicion their readers may feel at such a prospect. The paper clearly states that 'for many years a majority of Negroes have looked askance at labor unions' and that:

This attitude was in many cases a natural reaction to the prejudiced conduct of the unions themselves. The average colored worker felt that until the unions controlled by white labor were willing to let down the color bar they should be regarded as bitter foes, as checks upon the progress of his race.²³

The nineteenth-century journals I have briefly engaged with here were campaigning newspapers – publications specifically set up to advance the cause of black freedom – and the black radical press in the early twentieth century are following this trajectory. We can't understand the nature of the powerful and esoteric class politics of black Bolsheviks by *only* concentrating on the impact of the Russian revolution and the politics of the Comintern.²⁴ To understand the ways in which Comintern anti-imperialism spoke to black activists, we also need to understand how it intersected with the legacies of black radical traditions. Indeed, the depression-era black communist newspaper the *Liberator* (later renamed the *Harlem Liberator* and the *Negro Liberator*) explicitly places itself in the tradition of black abolitionism. In a special issue dedicated to Douglass it insisted:

the life of Douglass exemplifies the life of a fighter and organizer for the complete Negro liberation. The completion of this fight, begun by Douglass and the abolitionists can only be continued by those who today fight against every form of Negro oppression, discrimination and lynch justice.²⁵

Furthermore, the paper elsewhere insisted that it must 'reflect an intensified struggle against the new forms of slavery, until wage slavery, like chattel slavery, is completely wiped out'.²⁶

As I have argued elsewhere, this rhetorical position and mode of address signals a discursive struggle to root the black communist present

in the black radical past.²⁷ It is worth noting here the mobilising of 'wage slavery' in relation to chattel slavery. 'Wage slavery' is a widespread term in the *Crusader* and the *Messenger*. This is not so much an uncomfortable denial about the nature of enslavement; it is more an insistence on the importance of black labour in the making of the modern world.²⁸ In the context of the Black Codes and the explosion of convict labour in the aftermath of Reconstruction, the term 'wage slavery' has a particular purchase for black communists.²⁹ According to the *Messenger*, 'our change from chattel slaves to wage slaves has benefitted no one but the masters of industry.'³⁰ Elsewhere the *Crusader* insisted that the 'slave system was whipped but not wiped out'.³¹ This is a refrain across the newspapers of the black left and beyond. It is an intervention into the idea that emancipation meant freedom. As Frederick Douglass noted, emancipation endeavoured: 'to put the new wine of liberty in the old bottle of slavery'.³² In W.E.B. Du Bois's famous formulation, 'the slave went free; stood a moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery'. More specifically, in relation to the radical potential of the black worker, for Du Bois, the formerly enslaved person 'was not as easily reduced to be the mechanical draft horse which the northern European laborer became'.³³ The *Crusader* tells the story of the civil war as one of warring capitalists where:

the Northern Capitalists won and chattel slavery in the South was abolished with lurid speeches and glamor about Liberty, Democracy, etc. But the Negroes were not to have even the comparative liberty which the great Capitalist Czars tolerate under the wage-slavery system.³⁴

This rendering of 'capitalist czars' to create connections between the Russian revolution and the condition of African Americans workers also stresses the wretched working conditions of post-enslavement America. The article goes on to illustrate wider frames of white violence by referencing the 'years of terror exercised' by 'white cracker societies' that left the African American 'totally subjugated ... Peonage is the lot of many today in the Southern States'.³⁵ African Americans were denied, but themselves also rejected, the forms of 'freedom' and 'free labour' prof-

ferred in post-Reconstruction America, which ushered in the homicidal racist backlash of Jim Crow.³⁶ As Brian Kelly notes, 'everywhere across the US South the dream that had animated the slaves' jubilee died, or was stillborn'.³⁷ To use Saidiya Hartman's term here, these newspapers were dealing with black labour after emancipation as an 'afterlife' of enslavement, rather than blithely destroying lines of demarcation between enslavement and forms of free labour.³⁸

The mobilisation of the term 'wage slavery' is one of the myriad ways in which black communists and socialists were highly attuned to both racialised pasts and the racialised present in the US. The meaning of black labour for the making of the modern world was central, and the necessity of addressing black workers *as* black workers is pervasive in these newspapers and beyond. Black Bolsheviks articulated this to their new friends in Russia. Frustrated with the class reductionism of many white American communists in the run-up to Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924, the prominent African American communist Lovett Fort Whiteman had insisted that: 'The negroes are not discriminated against as a class but as a race.' He stated unambiguously that the lack of progress made in recruiting African Americans to communist ranks resided in the complacency of the white left in matters of race. Moreover, he insisted that racism was cross class, and that black culture and history needed to be addressed:

Even the wealthy bourgeoisie among the Negroes suffer from persecution, and a peculiar Negro culture and peculiar psychology have developed. The ideas of Marx have spread only slowly among the Negroes because the Socialists and even the Communists have not realised that the problem must be dealt with in a specialised way. The same newspapers do not satisfy the needs of the Negro worker which suit the needs of the white. The same speeches, propaganda, literature, will not suffice. The Negro feels no antagonism to Communism but wants to know where it will satisfy his peculiar needs ... The negroes are destined to be the most revolutionary class in America. But Communist propaganda among the negroes is hampered by the lack of publicity carrying a special appeal.³⁹

Black Bolsheviks

In fact, it was not until 1929 that a specifically Communist Party publication which carried this 'special appeal' in addressing black workers emerged. That newspaper was the above cited *Liberator*, which was published under the auspices of the American Negro Labour Congress.⁴⁰ The editor of the *Liberator* was Cyril Briggs, who also edited the *Crusader*. Briggs was a founding member of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a black radical organisation formed in 1919 which joined the CP *en masse* in 1921 but didn't identify their publication as specifically allied to American communism.⁴¹ It was to Russia and the Comintern they looked. The foundational document of the Comintern in 1919 famously proclaimed: 'Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia! The hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of your own liberation!'.⁴² The second congress in 1920 saw Lenin's *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions*, which insisted that:

... only the Soviet system is capable of granting real equality of nations, by uniting at first the proletarians and then the whole mass of the working population in the struggle against the bourgeoisie; and, secondly, it is necessary that all Communist Parties render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and subject nations (for example, in Ireland, among the Negroes of America, etc.) and in the colonies.⁴³

Lenin's naming of African Americans as a particularly oppressed minority was important here, and James is correct to stress 'the importance of the first two congresses of the Comintern in shifting Black radical opinion and attitudes toward Bolsheviks'.⁴⁴ Indeed some of the most powerful black Bolshevik sympathies in the radical press are in response to the hope that resided in the Comintern's anti-imperialist promise. In a period of vicious white supremacist violence in the post WWI US, the black press constantly points to white Soviet supporters who are committed to black and brown liberation and who have stood up against antisemitism in Russia.⁴⁵

As Hakim Adi notes, it was the fourth congress in 1922 which

particularly named African Americans as central to the struggle against capitalism.⁴⁶ Indeed, according to Robin Kelley this was the moment which signalled that 'black workers' struggles were now considered inherently anti-imperialist.⁴⁷ The *Theses on the Negro Question* that emerged from that congress was thoroughly informed by the interventions by African American delegate and ABB organiser Otto Huiswoud and 'special fraternal delegate' and ABB member Claude McKay.⁴⁸ The *Theses* insisted that it was 'the longing, the blood, and the tears of the "emancipated"' African American that had built capitalism in the US. It was stressed that 'the history of blacks in the United States has prepared them to play an important role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race', not least because their 'history tells of rebellions, revolts, and underground techniques of winning freedom'. The *Theses* further insisted that 'the international struggle of the black race is a struggle against capitalism and imperialism'.⁴⁹ The important centring of anti-racism in the *Theses* came from the demands of black communists, and those demands spoke both to black experience and to the longer reach of elements of the black radical tradition.

The Comintern of the early 1920s was eager to get information about the ways in which racialised subjects understood their oppression.⁵⁰ The anticolonial internationalism of the early Comintern is of a quite different nature than the later internationalism of the Stalinised Comintern.⁵¹ The Russian Bolsheviks balked at their dominance in the early Comintern, and insisted on the importance of understanding the contingencies of local conditions in all the nations that made up the communist international.⁵² This is in stark opposition to Stalin's Comintern, where Soviet foreign policy aims dominated.⁵³ Whilst it is in the 1930s that the Communist Party of the United States was most attractive to African Americans in terms of size of membership and influence, the CPUSA's politics of race was indebted to the black Bolsheviks of the 1920s and their engagement with the Comintern commitment to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.⁵⁴ The well-documented and impressive anti-imperialism of the post-revolutionary Comintern fires the black imagination in the US.⁵⁵ It is an anti-imperialism which intersects with forms of internationalism within the black radical imagination.⁵⁶

Race is central to the terms of the international solidarity proffered in the pages of the *Crusader*, the *Messenger* and the *Emancipator*, and it is a politics of race with very specific contours. What we see in these pages is a commitment to addressing the lived experience of race for black subjects as a way to stretch the meanings of class that were bound by forms of whiteness. As Olúfemi O. Táíwò puts it in the context of a later black left-wing organisation, the primacy of race ‘wasn’t an alternative to a political coalition but an enabling condition of it’.⁵⁷ Indeed, the politics of race and class that we see in various forms across the publications of the early twentieth century are remarkably prescient and relevant for later race/class politics. Reflecting on black activists in the UK in the 1970s and their approach to discriminatory trade unions, Arun Kundnani notes that solidarity involved:

not the intersection of identities or oppressions but of movements; not a hierarchy of oppression but an opening out to other struggles while maintaining the specificity of one’s own. Understood in this way, what some people still insist on calling ‘identity politics’ does not fragment class struggle but radicalises it.⁵⁸

It is precisely this ‘radicalisation’ of class struggle that drives the politics of black Bolsheviks. Their newspapers are drenched with a constant refrain that international anti-racist class solidarity is a complex necessity in the struggle against racial capitalism. ‘Racial capitalism’ is not a term that is used in the press but the capitalism that is rendered is precisely this.⁵⁹ According to the *Crusader*, ‘since it is under the capitalist-imperialist system that Negroes suffer, we must boldly seek the destruction of that system’.⁶⁰ Not only is the term capitalist regularly referred to as ‘capitalist-imperialist’, the histories narrated, the contemporary examples of racist oppression offered, and the solution of black working-class agency that is demanded – all point to an insistence that capitalism is thoroughly racialised and that racialisation itself is a function of capitalism. In this context Justin Leroy’s formulation is particularly relevant:

Racial capitalism, then, is more than an analytic to consider questions of labor and capital. It offers itself as a black philosophy of history, a rebellion against strict periodization, against facile distinctions between slavery and freedom, and against the idea that movement forward in time must also mean moral or humanistic progress.⁶¹

In the black radical press, African Americans have a dual position within this racialised structure of exploitation. As I will argue below, they are seen as the most revolutionary subjects, but that is connected to the fact that they are also the most oppressed. As Charisse Burden-Stelly notes in her paraphrasing of the African American communist Oliver Cox:

In a general sense, racial capitalism in the United States constitutes 'a peculiar variant of capitalist production' in which Blackness expresses a structural location at the bottom of the labor hierarchy characterized by depressed wages, working conditions, job opportunities, and widespread exclusion from labor unions.⁶²

The *Crusader* expresses this hierarchical structure of race and class in the US with its signature perspicacity: 'In a country whose government and resources are completely controlled by the white man, the Negro plays the game of life against a rival whose every cast is with loaded dice'.⁶³ The 'loaded dice' in this period included the labour exploitation noted above but also the savagery of the 'red summer' of 1919 and its aftermath.⁶⁴ In the context of pervasive lynchings and pogroms against African Americans, it is impressive indeed that these activists seek a politics of international class solidarity in their visions of an anti-racist liberated future.⁶⁵

Anti-colonialism

It is clear that the African American left were deeply impressed by Bolshevik revolutionary praxis and anti-colonialism, but it is also important to note that the foundational anticolonialism expressed through the early Comintern was also indebted to radicals from outside the

metropole.⁶⁶ The black radical press stresses Bolshevik anti-colonialism repeatedly, and enthusiasm for a new anti-colonial internationalism abound in the pages of the *Crusader*, the *Emancipator* and the early issues of the *Messenger*. The domestic communist sphere offered a less impressive exemplar in this regard.⁶⁷ Though less colour-blind than some of their Socialist Party forbears, the warring factions of American communism in the early 1920s were marked by apathy, and sometimes hostility, in relation to the 'Negro question'. Zumoff argues that without the intervention of the Comintern (itself informed by reports from black activists), American communists 'would have remained aloof from the struggle for black freedom'.⁶⁸ The Comintern was a beacon for racialised subjects around the world in a context where domestic Communist Parties were at best anaemic and at worst plain racist in comparison.⁶⁹ As has been widely documented, it is hardly surprising that black activists in the US looked to the Comintern and *not* to US communists. James has recently emphasised that: 'when African Americans joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, they largely viewed themselves as, first and foremost, becoming members of Lenin's Comintern ...'.⁷⁰

As I noted earlier, the resistance of many whites in the American socialist and communist parties to making race central is not widely reported in these newspapers, but there are instances where the limitations of race-blind radical politics are pointedly noted. W.A. Domingo called 'white radicals' to task for their apathy in relation to colonialism and racism in explicit comparison to the Bolsheviks:

They must understand more profoundly what they themselves preach so eloquently: that capitalism is as deeply rooted in Africa as in Europe and that this system cannot be eliminated in England and continue to exist on the island of Haiti. This the Russian Bolsheviks understand very well and use to good effect by supporting and encouraging the oppressed of all races, creeds, and nationalities. They have no scorn for Tartars, Mongols, Koreans, Hindus, Persians, or Negroes.⁷¹

Here the Bolsheviks' commitment to anti-colonialism is a clear rebuke to domestic 'radicals'. The Comintern's own understanding of the race/

class question in the US was deeply indebted to these black radicals (as opposed to white communists in the US).⁷² In McKay's Moscow meeting with Trotsky, the latter 'effectively supplied McKay with the assurance that Russia would support blacks in the diaspora in their actions'.⁷³ As the recent historiography of this period attests, it was Huiswoud and McKay's presence at the Fourth Congress – demanding a targeted engagement with the conditions of African Americans – which informed the anti-racist enthusiasm of the Comintern.⁷⁴ In the face of the early Comintern's (understandably) somewhat fuzzy grip on the actual condition of African Americans in the US, it is even more notable that they took their lead from these marxists of colour as opposed to the seasoned white communists of the American left. The ABB were *the* authority on this question for the Comintern. The *Theses the Negro Question* that emerged from the 1922 congress strongly echoed the ABB's 1921 'Summary of the Program and Aims of the African Blood Brotherhood' in relation to the possibility of black independent trade unions and the necessity of United Front work against racism in black communities.⁷⁵

The black radical press had no *official* relationship to the Comintern, indeed direct references to 'the Comintern' are generally few in the newspapers. The *Crusader* wrote a rare article citing the Comintern specifically (as opposed to Russia or Bolshevism) in early 1922:

The revolutionary element which is undermining the imperialist powers that oppress us must be given every encouragement by Negroes who really seek liberation. This element is led and represented by the Third Internationale which has its sections in all countries.⁷⁶

The relative rarity of references to the Comintern is hardly surprising given the commitment in these newspapers to addressing black workers in the US, to whom Russia remained somewhat oblique.⁷⁷ But their articulations of a black Bolshevik sensibility attested to a shared set of political understandings of the primacy of anti-imperialist anti-capitalism. Revolutionary Russia was rendered as a nation wholly sympathetic to anti-racism:

In this number of THE CRUSADER we present for the information of our readers a few of many facts concerning Soviet Russia's friendly and fair-minded attitude towards the darker races and her concrete acts of friendship to them. Of all the great powers Soviet Russia is the only power that deals fairly with weaker nations and peoples. She is the only power that has no skeleton of murderous subjugation and wrongdoing in her national closet – no spectre of a brutally oppressed Ireland or Haiti ... Soviet Russia, who in the past has treated the darker peoples so magnanimously and so boldly championed their rights against the land-hungry imperialist powers – Soviet Russia, the friend of the weak and oppressed.⁷⁸

Soviet Russia here is rendered as a new nation, which, unlike the anti-semitic Tsardom, is posited without that racialised and racialising past, without the 'spectres' of oppression on the basis of race.⁷⁹ Similarly, Bolshevism is a clean term, a term that can encompass black subjects, it is a term delightedly appropriated in all these newspapers, and this deployment of the term against both white supremacy and moderate black politics can be seen across the publications despite variations in politics: 'If to fight for one's rights is to be Bolsheviks then we are Bolsheviks and let them make the most of it'.⁸⁰ Indeed these black left publications often presented themselves as a unified black Bolshevik voice. When addressing the readers of the first edition of the *Emancipator*, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen of the *Messenger* named the black radical press of the period in specific and fraternal terms:

The new journalism is born ... With the *Messenger*, the *Crusader* and the *Emancipator* the New Negro will be equipped to hurl defiance into the teeth of the Old Crowd Negro, on the one hand and the Old Crowd of whites on the other ... the new journalism of the New Negro proclaims to all the world its allegiance to the flaming and revolutionary cry, as formulated by the prophets Marx and Engels, 'Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains, you have the world to gain'.⁸¹

This concept of the 'New Negro' is key for the mobilisation of a discursive black working-class subject in these papers. Unlike the 'Old Negro', who stood for a respectable and moderate politics of accommodation, the 'New Negro' was a disruptive radical and often an anti-capitalist activist.⁸² The *Messenger* sets itself against established black politics and vows: 'to lift our pens above the cringing demagoguery of the times and above the cheap peanut politics of the old reactionary Negro leaders'.⁸³ The determination to forge a language adequate to the task of speaking for and to the New Negro unites these journals, as does their lack of sectarianism towards each other. The *Crusader*, *Messenger* and *Emancipator* carried advertisements for each other's papers and favourably cited each other's content.⁸⁴ Yet the papers were different in focus and form. The short-lived *Emancipator* was particularly concerned with international events, especially in the Caribbean, insisting that: 'we shall not insult West Indians by rigidly excluding matters pertaining to them from our front page, nor shall we publish such news on a segregated page'.⁸⁵ The *Crusader* was declamatory, pithy and more focused on anti-colonialism than the more wordy and domestically focused *Messenger*. In part this is explained by the Afro-Caribbean editorship of the *Emancipator* and the *Crusader* (and the Afro-Caribbean makeup of the ABB). These were colonial subjects for whom questions of anti-colonialism were a more urgent immediate issue than for their African American counterparts. Afro-Caribbean migrants also had a more transnational lived experience, and an encountering with vitriolic levels of US racism that was estranging and shocking.⁸⁶

Black radical internationalism

Key to my argument about black Bolsheviks is that, historically, black radical traditions have precisely been marked by internationalism. Indeed, this fomented the enthusiasm for the Comintern's global politics of liberation. From the call of Haiti to the enslaved on plantations from Charleston to Kingston, to David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, to the global imaginary of the Panthers, to the current manifestations of solidarity between African Americans

and Palestinians, the black radical tradition has always made a host of connections that inform a global understanding of race and power. As Brent Hayes Edwards notes, 'black radicalism necessarily emerges through boundary crossing – black radicalism is an internationalization'.⁸⁷ African American and Afro-Caribbean migrant activists in the US were drawing upon a powerful tradition of transnational connections, echoing Douglass's insistence that the cause of black workers in the US was 'one with the labor classes all over the world'.⁸⁸ The Comintern's anti-colonialism spoke strongly to an already established internationalist framing of race and labour. The challenge was to make the gains of the Russian revolution speak to a readership without European allegiances (unlike the immigrants from Europe who constituted the American left).⁸⁹

W.A. Domingo excelled in this respect. Domingo was a Jamaican migrant who is a ubiquitous presence across the pages of these newspapers. In addition to editing Garvey's *Negro World* for a period and setting up his own paper the *Emancipator*, he also wrote for the *Messenger* and the *Crusader*. Domingo is the only member of the ABB who did not join the communist party, though his commitment to Bolshevism was fervent.⁹⁰ In the pages of the *Messenger* in July 1919 he told his readership:

Today, it is the revolutionary Socialist, Lenin ... as leader of the Communist Congress at Moscow, who sent out the proclamation: 'Slaves of the colonies in Africa and Asia! The hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will be the hour of your release!'⁹¹

On a similar theme two months later in the same paper, he insisted that the: '... Bolshevik government succeeded in making Soviet Russia unsafe for mobocrats, but safe for Jews and other oppressed racial minorities'. To drive this point home in relation to his African American readers, Domingo insisted that Russia had succeeded in this task only 'after a few executions of lynchers and race-rioters', in order to become 'a country from which the lynch rope is banished and in which racial tolerance and peace now exist'.⁹² Here as elsewhere these references to lynching bring national and international registers

together to mobilise an internationalist vision where the horrors of white supremacy in the US are tethered to the horrors of racist and colonial injustice in far-off lands.

This melding of the domestic and the global is central to the mode of address in these papers in relation to Russia and beyond. The *Crusader*, particularly its early editions, makes it crystal clear that the African diaspora is connected through a powerful form of race solidarity which places the African American within the nexus of a global anti-imperial struggle:

Those of us who have advocated a free Africa have done so in recognition of the fact that the status of one section of the race surely affects the status of all other sections, no matter what ocean rolls between ... we cannot be slaves in one part [of the world] and expect to be recognized as free men in another part.⁹³

In addition, for the *Crusader* in particular, this Pan-Africanist vision is linked to a wider anti-colonial struggle, specifically, the Irish liberation struggle, where they insist that the Irish are somewhat outside of the category of whiteness, and that both African and Irish 'are engaged in deadly war against the Anglo-Saxon'.⁹⁴ Anglo-Saxonism is defined in relation to the British Empire as well as white America, and the end of whiteness is unambiguously willed:

And while the white world is in the final stage of its period of world dominion its cupidity and flaming color hatred are still sufficient to spur it on to further aggressions against the colored races, unmindful that such aggressions are hastening the inevitable rising of the tide of color that shall bury in the slime of the depths the now soaring ambition of the white races.⁹⁵

To hasten the 'final stage' of white supremacy, the *Crusader* draws upon a mixture of afro-centric pride and race-conscious class solidarity, where 'workers of all races have but one enemy, Capitalism'.⁹⁶ Whilst always insistent on the primacy of race, Domingo also stresses the importance of international class solidarity, declaring in the *Messenger* that:

'Labor is the common denominator of the working class of the world. Exploitation is the common denominator of oppressors everywhere'.⁹⁷ These internationalist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist calls for solidarity are far from exceptional in the press of this period.

Race and class

Similarly ubiquitous is a discursive determination to address the reality of racism within the American working class. In a letter to McKay in 1923 Trotsky noted, in relation to systemic racism, that: 'In North America the matter is complicated by the disgusting dull-wittedness and caste arrogance of the privileged elite of the working class itself, which does not wish to see in the Negro a *confrere* in work and struggle'.⁹⁸ Black Bolsheviks went further than an explicit naming of the racism which structured US life and infected sections of its labour movement.⁹⁹ Race is intimately connected to class in these pages in a way which foregrounds that the black worker has a singularly important role to play in the revolution. In the *Emancipator* the working class is *the* class of the African American: 'in America all Negroes are not lynched and jimcrowed, but over 99 per cent of them have their labor exploited'.¹⁰⁰ The reader is regularly addressed as a privileged agent of revolution as part of a 'race of toilers'.¹⁰¹ The *Crusader* clearly states the case, insisting that 'No race has less of the idle non-producing rich than the Negro race', which is 'essentially a race of workers and producers'.

No race would be more greatly benefitted by the triumph of Labor and the destruction of parasitic Capital Civilization with its Imperialism incubus that is squeezing the life-blood out of millions of our race in Africa and the islands of the sea, than the Negro race.¹⁰²

Here, as elsewhere, the materiality of race is a privileged position from which to understand the function and form of class rule. This fantastically gothic rendering of racial capitalism stresses the paramountcy of

black labour. As well as being urged to adopt forms of solidarity that keep race central, readers are invited to recognise themselves as the gravediggers of racial capitalism, to recognise their place in an America where: 'lynching, economic and social serfdom lie in the dark alleys of its mental reservations'.¹⁰³ For many of these writers and activists, the embodied experience of race as a lived experience – and not just anti-racism as a form of politics – is crucial for the creation of the revolutionary subject. This is a black revolutionary subject who is potentially already fit for revolution, unlike sections of a white-supremacy-infected working class. In a remarkable article in the *Messenger's* penultimate issue, entitled 'The disadvantages of being white', the white American is analysed as being caught in a self-defeating 'bubble' of white supremacy which 'he can hold only by ignorance, injustice [and] prejudice'. While carefully stating that 'it is only fair to say that many individuals of the white race have escaped [these] disadvantages', the article mostly delights in listing the distorting effects of racism on white America. To be white is to be:

... born an intellectual slave, ushered into the world to be presently robbed of your personal freedom in selecting your friends, harassed with the impossible burden of artificial racial worth, hampered by ignorance and lack of appreciations of the artistic and beautiful if it happens (as it often does) to be black, doomed to a futile life of fear and motivated only by the gloomy hope of 'blowing bubbles' of race superiority. We are grateful that good fortune has spared us this mishap.¹⁰⁴

Diminished and culturally impoverished by the demands of white supremacy, white Americans live thin and hollow lives. Amongst the multiple articles calling for black and white class unity and attacks on the 'negro bourgeoisie', articles like this draw sharp attention to the black worker as the pre-eminent agent of revolution *because* of their oppressed status as racialised outsiders. According to Satnam Virdee, it is precisely racialised outsiders who, 'depending upon the historical conjuncture':

helped universalize the militant, yet often particularistic, fights of the working class precisely because they were better able to see through the fog of blood, soil and belonging.¹⁰⁵

So, while these newspapers underline the importance of building a movement on the shared interests of the working class as a whole, there is little [though some] blithe sloganeering when it comes to the reality of white supremacy as a serious barrier to these imaginings. In the *Crusader*, the terms of interracial solidarity are explicitly defined by the ‘acid test of white friendship’, which is the question of whether a ‘person is willing to see the Negro defend himself with arms against aggression, and willing even to see Negroes killing his own (white) people in defence of Negro rights’.¹⁰⁶ The *Messenger* emphasises that black workers need a black newspaper if they are to be won to socialism, precisely because of their experiences of racism: ‘The Negro has so often been swindled and betrayed by the white man that he is always suspicious of him when he comes bearing gifts. He can only be reached by his own people and that is being done now’.¹⁰⁷ Keeping faith with both the emancipatory visions of the black radical tradition and the promise that inheres in the early Comintern, the black radical press produces an ambitious and original race-conscious class politics.

As McKay expressed it in his address to the Fourth Congress, he belonged to the black working class:

... a race of workers, of hewers of wood and drawers of water, a race that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and subjugated part of the working class of the world. The Communist International is for the emancipation of all workers of the world without distinction of race or colour. And this stand of the Communist International is not just written on paper, as is the Fifteenth Amendment to the constitution of the United States of America; it is something real.¹⁰⁸

Communicating this ‘something real’ that revolutionary communism offered to black workers in the US was at the heart of the radical press. Making it real. Making it speak to the specificities of black

experiences of oppression and exploitation, and at the same time stretching at the limits of experiential politics to a broader revolutionary vision of what black liberation could mean. The writers and activists on which I have concentrated here did not have the personal experience of the Comintern that McKay had, but they had a powerful political imaginary, which was part of a longer black radical tradition to which the internationalist anti-colonial promises from Russia spoke loudly.

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Notes

- 1 *Messenger*, 1 January 1918, p8.
- 2 The *Crusader* was the monthly newspaper of the African Blood Brotherhood, edited by Cyril Briggs from Nevis; the *Emancipator* was a short-lived publication (7 issues) edited by the prolific writer and Jamaican Socialist W.A. Domingo; the *Messenger* was a monthly newspaper founded and edited by African American socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen.
- 3 Cathy Bergin, 'Bolshevism and African American agency in the African American radical Press (1917-1924)', in Christian Høgsbjerg & David Featherstone (eds), *The Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2021, pp123-38.
- 4 The Black Radical tradition is a contested term but for my purposes here I refer to Cedric Robinson's definition as 'an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle' where 'the purpose of the struggles informed by the tradition became the overthrow of the whole race-based structure'. Cedric Robinson, *Black*

- Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2000, new preface ppxxx-xxxi.
- 5 The epic and often bitter debates between Garvey and black radical and liberals are beyond the scope of this article. They do however attest to the diversity of black radical politics of the period. See Cathy Bergin (ed), *African American Anti-Colonial Texts 1917-1937*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016, pp10-12; for an invigorating discussion on the impact of the Bolshevik revolution on Marcus Garvey see Winston James, 'To the east turn: the Russian Revolution and the black radical imagination in the United States, 1917-1924', in *American Historical Review*, Vol 126 No 3, September 2021, pp1032-41.
 - 6 Not only did Claude McKay spend time in Russia with Otto Huiswood, discussed below; he also arrived in London in 1919, where he wrote for Sylvia Pankhurst's *Worker's Dreadnought*. See Winston James, 'In the nest of extreme radicalism: radical networks and the bolshevization of Claude McKay in London,' in *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, Vol 15 Nos 3-4 (2017), pp174-203. Before eventually emigrating to Russia (and his tragic early death in the Gulag), the prominent African American Communist Lovett Fort Whiteman spent significant time in Mexico, where he was greatly inspired by the Mexican revolution. See Dick J. Reavis, 'Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the communist party's first African American member', in *Jacobin*, 7 April 2020: <https://jacobin.com/2020/04/lovet-fort-whiteman-black-communist-part>.
 - 7 By 'early' here I am referring to the 'revolutionary period' of the Comintern (1919-1923). See Frederik Petersson, 'Imperialism and the Communist International', in *Journal of Labor and Society*, Vol 20 March 2017, p30.
 - 8 Lydia Lindsey, 'Gendering the black radical tradition: Grace P. Campbell's role in the formation of a radical feminist tradition in African-American intellectual culture', in David Featherstone, Christian Høgsbjerg and Alan Rice (eds), *Revolutionary lives of the Red and Black Atlantic since 1917*, Manchester: MUP 2022, p94.
 - 9 Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs Robeson*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2013, pp24-26; James, 'To the east turn', p1005.
 - 10 *Messenger*, 7 July 1918, p10.
 - 11 Linsey, 'Gendering the black radical tradition', p119.
 - 12 Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: class and nation in the making of the new negro*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2008,

- p273 fn 50. Foley does note that that the *Crusader* in particular was keen to represent darker skinned women, presumably to complicate the pigmentocracy at work in dominant notions of 'beauty', p50; *The Messenger*, 'Exalting Negro womanhood', January 1924, p7.
- 13 African American women mobilised themselves in terms of the franchise and getting black women to vote as well as being involved in many important campaigns. See Lindsey, 'Gendering the black radical tradition', pp94-144; Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: black women, American communism and the making of black left feminism*, Durham & London: Duke University Press 2011, pp25-58.
- 14 Bergin, 'Bolshevism and African American agency', p125; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the politics of white supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2019, pp61-90; Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2017, pp1-5; bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, New York: Henry Holt & Co 1995, pp62-79.
- 15 Perhaps most famous in this regard is McKay's address to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922, where he noted that there were: 'still strong prejudices of this kind among the American socialists and communists. They do not want to take up the black question. In my dealings with American comrades, I have seen that, on many occasions, when white and black comrades came together, that prejudice was noticeable. And the greatest hindrance that Communists in the United States must overcome is that they must first of all free themselves from their attitudes toward blacks before they can succeed in reaching blacks through any form of radical propaganda.' Cited in John Riddell (ed), *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, Leiden: Brill 2012, p808.
- 16 There is evidence that these newspapers were read outside of the US, particularly in the Caribbean. See Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939*, London: Pluto Press 2017, pp24-30. However, I would argue that although these papers did cover issues across the diaspora, the form of address was to the experience of African American readers in the main.
- 17 Bergin, 'Bolshevism and African American agency', p124.
- 18 <https://web.archive.org/web/20150209163534/http://www.wisconsin-history.org/pdfs/la/FreedomsJournal/v1n01.pdf>. See also Jacqueline

- Bacon, 'The History of Freedom's Journal: A Study in Empowerment and Community', in *The Journal of African American History*, Vol 88 No 1, 2003, pp1-20.
- 19 T. Thomas Fortune, *New York Age*, 18 February 1884, cited in Justin Leroy, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, New York: Columbia University Press 2021, p184. Fortune would later edit Garvey's *Negro World* between 1923 and 1928.
 - 20 T. Thomas Fortune, 'Civil Rights and Social Privileges', *T. Thomas Fortune, the Afro-American Agitator: A Collection of Writings, 1880-1928*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2008, p119 [my emphasis].
 - 21 Hubert Harrison, cited in Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: the Struggle for Equality, 1918-1927*, New York: Columbia University Press 2021. p118. In addition to Perry's unflagging commitment to ensuring Harrison's legacy, see also Brian Kwoba, 'Hubert Henry Harrison: Black radicalism and the Colored International', in Featherstone and Christian Høgsbjerg, *Revolutionary Lives*, pp31-54.
 - 22 <https://web.archive.org/web/20150209163534/http://www.wisconsin-history.org/pdfs/la/FreedomsJournal/v1n01.pdf>.
 - 23 *Emancipator*, 20 March 1920, p4.
 - 24 For a considered engagement with the term 'black Bolshevik' see Christian Høgsbjerg, 'Communism and the colour line: reflections on black bolshevism', in Anne Garland Mahler and Paolo Capuzzo (eds), *The Comintern and the Global South*, London: Routledge 2022, pp96-122.
 - 25 *Negro Liberator*, 15 February 1935, p8.
 - 26 *Liberator* 21 February 1931, p5.
 - 27 Cathy Bergin, *Bitter with the Past, But Sweet with the Dream: Communism in the African American Imaginary*, Chicago: Haymarket Press 2016, p54.
 - 28 'Wage slavery' was very different to the problematic and racist trope of 'white slavery', which had been mobilised by the nineteenth-century labour movement in the US. See Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2010, p132.
 - 29 For the impact of the post-Civil War white counter-revolution see: Noralee Frankel, 'Breaking the Chains: 1860-1880', in Robin D.C. Kelley and Earl Lewis (eds), *To Make Our World Anew, Volume Two: A History of African Americans to 1880*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2000, pp236-63; David M. Oshinsky, 'Worse Than

- Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*, New York: Free Press 1996, pp13-22; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press 2010 pp26-35.
- 30 *Messenger*, July 1919, p14.
- 31 *Crusader*, August 1921, p9.
- 32 Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass on Slavery and the Civil War: selections from his writings*, New York: Dover Publications Inc. 2003, p21.
- 33 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co 1935, p30; Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*, Boston: The Stratford Co 1924, p53.
- 34 'Programme of the ABB', *Crusader*, October 1921, p16.
- 35 *Ibid*, p17.
- 36 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p673.
- 37 Brian Kelly, 'Jubilee and the limits of African American freedom after emancipation', in *Race & Class*, Vol 57 No 3, p64.
- 38 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, London: Serpent's Tail 2021, p6.
- 39 Cited in Philip S. Foner and James S. Allen (eds), *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1919-1929*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1987, p68.
- 40 Bergin, *Bitter with the Past*, pp49-88.
- 41 Robert Hill, 'Racial and radical: Cyril V. Briggs, The Crusader Magazine and the African Blood Brotherhood 1918-1922', in Robert Hill (ed), *The Crusader*, New York: Garland 1987; J.A. Zumoff, 'The African Blood Brotherhood: from Caribbean nationalism to communism', in *The Journal of Caribbean History*, Vol 41, Nos 1 and 2, 2007, pp200-26.
- 42 Manifesto of the Communist International, 6 March 1919: <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/comintern/comintern-texts/manifesto-of-the-communist-international/>.
- 43 V.I. Lenin, Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions': <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>.
- 44 James, 'To the east turn', p1041.
- 45 Perhaps most famously expressed by McKay: 'Bolshevism ... has made Russia safe for the Jew ... It might make these United States safe for the Negro', *Negro World*, 20 September 1919.
- 46 Hakim Adi, 'The Negro Question', in Michael O. West, William

- G. Martin and Fanon Che Wilkins, *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2009, p158. Holger Weiss notes that this centralising of the African Americans somewhat marginalised Africans themselves. Weiss, 'International Communist trade union organisations and the call to black toilers in the interwar Atlantic world', in Featherstone and Høgsbjerg, *The Red and the Black*, p141.
- 47 Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* New York: The Free Press 1996.
- 48 Foner and Allen (eds), *American Communism and Black Americans*, p24.
- 49 Riddell, *Toward the United Front*, pp948, 949.
- 50 Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929*, Leiden: Brill 2014, p14.
- 51 S.A. Smith, 'The Russian Revolution, National Self-Determination, and Anti-Imperialism', in Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions*, Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019, pp73-98.
- 52 Zumoff, *The Communist International*, p319, p6.
- 53 Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, London: Routledge 2019, p45.
- 54 Much rich work has been done on the CPUSA and African Americans during the Depression. Key texts in this regard are: Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, New York: Grove Press 1983; Robin Kelley, *The Hammer and the Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1990; Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African Americans 1917-1936*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 1998; Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the radical roots of civil rights 1919-1950*, New York: WW Norton 2008; McDuffie, *Sojourning for freedom*.
- 55 Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History*, London: Bloomsbury 2018, pp61-66.
- 56 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Boston: Beacon Press 2002, pp16-18.
- 57 Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò. 'Identity politics and elite capture', in *Boston Review*, 7 May 2020. Táíwò is discussing the Combahee River Collective of the 1970s.
- 58 Arun Kundnani, 23 Oct 2020: <https://www.kundnani.org/what-is-racial-capitalism/>.

- 59 'Racial capitalism is not an account of how capitalism treats different 'racial groups', but it is an account of how the world made through racism shapes patterns of capitalist development.' Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival*, London: Rowman & Littlefield 2018, p103.
- 60 *Crusader*, August 1921, p8.
- 61 Leroy, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, p181.
- 62 Charisse Burden-Stelly, 'Modern U.S. racial capitalism', in *Monthly Review*, 1 July 2020, p4.
- 63 *Crusader*, February 1920, p11.
- 64 Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*, New York: St Martin's Griffin 2012.
- 65 Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice that Remade a Nation*, New York: Crown Publishing Group 2008.
- 66 Minkah Makalani, 'Internationalizing the Third International: the African Blood Brotherhood, Asian radicals, and race, 1919-1922', *The Journal of African American History*, Vol 96, No 2, 2011, p162.
- 67 Including the factions of the Socialist Party who would split to become the Workers Party in 1921 and then the CPUSA in 1929.
- 68 Zumoff, *The Communist International*, p288.
- 69 'Whether in South Africa, the United States, France, Britain, or Cuba, Black Bolsheviks had little faith in the national communist parties and their predominantly white leaders, who often pandered to nationalist, racist, and colonialist sentiments. On racial and colonial issues, black party members everywhere turned to Moscow for redress.' West, Martin and Wilkins (eds), *From Toussaint to Tupac*, pp17-18.
- 70 James, 'To the east turn', p1020; see also Hakim Adi, 'The Negro Question', p157; Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London 1917-1939*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011, pp4-5.
- 71 Claude McKay, *The Negroes in America*, Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press 1979, p39.
- 72 Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963*, Durham: University of North Carolina Press 2002, p14.
- 73 Gary Edward Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press 2007, p38.
- 74 Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search*

- of the Soviet Promise*, Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press 2008, pp15-27.
- 75 To give one example: the ABB's insistence that 'Wherever it is found impossible to enter the existing labor unions, independent unions should be formed, that Negro labor be enabled to protect its interests' (<http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/groups/abb/1920/0600-abb-programandaims.pdf>) is paraphrased somewhat in the Theses on the Negro Question 'If [admission and promotion of black union members] should prove impossible, the Communist International will organize the Negroes in trade unions of their own'. See also Makalani, 'Internationalizing the Third International', pp172-3.
- 76 *Crusader*, Jan/Feb 1922, p16.
- 77 Makalani's observation that 'in the three-year run of the ABB's magazine the *Crusader* [1918-1922], the Comintern is only mentioned in three of its final five issues' seems a little reductive here in relation to the myriad of ways in which the anti-colonial politics of the Comintern influenced and inspired these publications. Makalani, 'Internationalizing the Third International', p153.
- 78 *Crusader*, December 1921, p8.
- 79 The Bolshevik reputation for challenging antisemitism was deeply important for these writers and activists, and many analogies are made between Jews in Russia and African Americans in the Southern States. These rhetorical connections were important for suggesting a way to break the monolith of racism. For a challenging rendering of the complexities of anti-semitism in the aftermath of the revolution see Brendan McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019.
- 80 *Crusader*, October 1919, p9; see also Bergin, 'Bolshevism and African American agency', pp129-32.
- 81 *Emancipator*, 13 March 1920, p4.
- 82 Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: class and nation in the making of the new negro*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2008, pp1-70; Bergin, *African American Anti-Colonial Texts 1917-1937* pp3-5; William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars*, New York: Columbia University Press 1999, pp30-33.
- 83 *Messenger*, August 1919, p2.
- 84 As Barbara Foley notes, in addition to 'these explicit expressions of mutual support were the multiple reprintings, borrowings, and citations in the liberal-to-Left press, black and white, from 1918 to 1922'. Foley,

Spectres of 1919, p67. However this early mutual support did not hold, and is particularly apparent in the pages of the *Messenger* in March 1923 where a letter from Domingo that points to how the *Messenger's* anti-Garveyism tips into anti West Indian sentiment is responded to with barely veiled anti-migrant sentiment. The *Messenger* March 1923, pp639-45.

85 *Emancipator*, 20 March 1920, p4.

86 Recalling his arrival in the US, Claude McKay stated: 'It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable ... I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter.' 'Claude McKay Describes His Own Life', *Pearson's Magazine*, September 1918: http://www.harlemshadows.org/supp_mckay_claude-mackay-describes.html. For a definitive account of Caribbean migrants to the US who dominated the black left in this period see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America*, London: Verso 1999.

87 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2003, p43.

88 Cited in Leroy, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, p179.

89 Zumoff, *The Communist International*, pp28-9, 44-47.

90 For an illuminating account of Domingo's politics in this period and his interest to both British and American State agents see Peter Hulme, 'Wilfred Domingo under investigation: the "Negro menace" of 1919', in Featherstone, Høgsbjerg and Rice, *Revolutionary Lives*, pp55-71.

91 *Messenger*, July 1919, p22.

92 *Messenger*, September 1919, p26.

93 *Crusader*, February 1919, p15.

94 *Crusader*, March 1921, p9; see also Cathy Bergin, "'Unrest among the Negroes': the African Blood Brotherhood and the politics of resistance", in *Race & Class*, Vol 57 No 3, pp51-53.

95 *Crusader*, December 1920, p12.

96 *Crusader*, July 1921, p9.

97 *Messenger*, November 1920, p23.

98 McKay, *Negroes in America*, Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press 1979, p7.

99 The IWW are the exception here and are cited favourably across the newspapers.

- 100 *Emancipator*, 17 April 2020, p4.
- 101 *Emancipator*, 10 April 2020, p4.
- 102 Bergin, 'Bolshevism and African American agency', p127-8.
- 103 Hubert Harrison, *Negro World*, 28 May 1921, cited in Bergin, *African American Anti-Colonial Thought*, p101.
- 104 *Messenger*, 28 April 1928, p7; Cathy Bergin, 'The Russian Revolution and Black Radicalism in the United States', in *Soundings* No 68, Spring 2018, pp74-75.
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