Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature
ISSN: 2732-4605
Global Talent Academy

Langston Hughes's Insights into Communism

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Received: 04/02/2025
Accepted: 27/05/2025
Published: 30/05/2025

Volume: 6 Issue: 3

How to cite this paper: Idowu, S. O. (2025). Langston Hughes's Insights into Communism. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, *6*(3), 76-81
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v6i4.371

Abstract

This paper examines Langston Hughes's involvement with communism by analyzing his poetry and political works. As a prominent African American literary personality of the twentieth century, Hughes grappled with the reality of racial and social oppression, perceiving communism as a possible remedy for the systematic imbalances inside American society. The paper analyzes how Hughes's early poems demonstrate significant affinities for communist principles, especially the commitment to social equality and racial justice. Significant writings like "Let America Be America Again," "Goodbye, Christ!" and "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." exemplify Hughes' critique of American capitalism and his advocacy for a classless, inclusive society. The study examines Hughes's interest in communism due to its repudiation of racism, its global perspective, and its resonance with underprivileged groups, particularly during the Scottsboro trials he portrayed in *Scottsboro Limited*. However, Hughes's association with communism changed. During the McCarthy era (1953), facing the prospect of career devastation, Hughes officially repudiated any affiliation with communism and progressively transitioned from radical critique to a more tempered commemoration of Black historical personalities and accomplishments. This withdrawal, although securing his survival in a politically hostile environment, also signified the repression of his prior revolutionary expression. This paper illustrates that Hughes's brief affiliation with communism was driven more by a desire for justice, solidarity, and acknowledgment in a racially fragmented America than by ideological conformity. His renunciation does not diminish the significance of his prior work; instead, it exposes the complexity of political expression under a hostile cultural context. This paper shows Hughes' dual role as a poet of protest and a pragmatic survivor of American ideological conflict.

Keywords: Communism and Literature, African American Radicalism, Protest Poetry, Marxism, Race, Ideology

1. Introduction

Hughes was an American poet, activist, writer, dramatist, and columnist from Missouri (1901 – 1967). He was a socially conscious poet who wrote on the issues of the day. At a time when African American art and culture began to blossom, Hughes was regarded as a significant literary figure. When it comes to incorporating jazz and native language in his poems and his concentration on Negro tradition, Hughes is widely considered to be a crucial twentieth-century poet. African American concerns, such as identity, ambition, and independence, are among the numerous humanitarian topics that he cares greatly about. His commitment to the African American community and his desire for social and political equality have made Hughes the poet and laureate author cherished by many African American readers. As both a patriot and international writer, Hughes had a genuine love of freedom, particularly for black Americans. As Rampersad (2001) notes, "radicalism is one of the main points of pressure on Langston Hughes ' reputation, like for example the question of whether or not he believed in God, or whether or not he was a communist" (p. 34). This comment shows the burden encountered by Black intellectuals like Hughes,

who were always subjected to public scrutiny over both their political connections and personal convictions. Hughes's receptiveness to radical political ideologies, including communism, together with his critiques of religion's role in perpetuating social inequity, rendered him vulnerable to suspicion, censorship, and character attacks, particularly during the McCarthy era. Rampersad's insight reveals the cultural and ideological challenges that Hughes had to navigate. Despite these pressures, Hughes's accomplishments remain unmatched.

Rampersad (2001) affirms this when he claims that Hughes, "was maybe the most creative of African-American poets, and the range of his writing was unquestionably the greatest" (p. 30). Hughes did not confine himself to literary standards of the high class only. He incorporated the language of black folks, jazz rhythms, and working-class perspectives, producing a body of work that directly addressed the everyday experiences of Black Americans. His creativity resided in his style, his audacity to address taboo topics, ranging from racial brutality to social inequality, and his ability to move seamlessly between lyricism and polemic.

This paper focuses on Hughes's involvement with communism as a literary, political, and ideological influence throughout the challenging early twentieth century. The main objective is to examine Hughes's poetic and dramatic texts, specifically "Let America Be America Again," "Goodbye, Christ!" "One More 'S' in the U.S.A.," and *Scottsboro Limited*, to reveal how communism functioned as both a political sanctuary and a rhetorical tool for challenging racial capitalism and American hypocrisy. This research specifically examines the causes underlying Hughes's engagement with communist ideals, encompassing his pursuit of racial justice, his internationalist inclinations, and his alignment with the working-class struggle. The study evaluates Hughes's final rejection of communism during the McCarthy period, seeing it not as a betrayal of his convictions but as a pragmatic reaction to political repression. This action underscores the constraints of ideological expression for Black intellectuals in Cold War America. The paper's relevance is in its reevaluation of Hughes's communist time, viewing it not as a divergence from his literary objectives but as a vital manifestation of his political ideology and creative bravery. This study enhances the comprehension of how African American writers navigated conflicting allegiances to race, class, and nation by situating Hughes within the broader context of Black radicalism, American labor movements, and the global Left. This study argues that Hughes's affiliation with communism should not be viewed as a trivial historical detail or a youthful folly, but rather as a significant expression of a fleeting period when Black liberation appeared attainable through international solidarity and socialist revolution.

2. Langston Hughes and His Communist Ideology

Communism is the systemic oppression and suffering of a socially marginalized group as a consequence of capitalism. Fredrick Engels (2020) describes communism as a socioeconomic class made up of manual laborers and wage earners. The proletariat is the target of communism (p.2). Historically, racism and economic inequality have both played significant roles in the persecution of black people in the United States, while certain organizations have done so under the pretense of religion. It was in the 1930s that the scale and ferocity of the American labor movement expanded noticeably. As a result of the 1930s' interest in the American Communist Party's left-wing amongst several Harlem dwellers, the Party's membership increased. The Communist Party was only one part of the larger left activism of the period, which also included the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other Marxist organizations that pushed for social and democratic reform. The Communist Party faction supplied the most concrete form to the goals that marginalized Blacks had been urging for so years, namely the elimination of racial disparities in the United States and the progress of the underclass. It is clear from the tremendous turnout and dedication that residents of Harlem were interested in this emerging political arena (Foster, 1952).

On March 6, 1930, the Communist Party organized nationwide rallies for International Unemployment Day (Foster, 1952, p. 281). A lot of people participated in marches around the nation. As the first major outburst of the Great Depression, it was also the first time that jobless people of many races marched together for their rights in several places. Protests and public demonstrations increased in frequency and size with the growth of the Harlem Communist Party. There was widespread support for the Soviet Union among black American intellectuals as early as the 1930s, and the African American press gave extensive coverage to the Soviet Union's rejection of racism, as well as the many cases of African Americans leaving the United States to work as artisans, laborers, or engineers in the Soviet Union during that time (Foster, 1952). Between 1928 and 1935, the Party achieved great success in its attempts to gain and develop African American leadership.

By the mid-1930s, the Communist Party's ideas had made an indelible mark on African American universities and think tanks, shaping the minds of many writers and activists. The interest shown in communism stimulated many Black activists and authors, like Langston Hughes, to call for the overhaul of the current system in their books and public remarks. They believed that communism could bring individuals of different backgrounds together. For Hughes and other African-Americans, communism was the sole hope for equality and freedom (Fountain, 2009, pp.135-137). Hughes saw the Communist Party as a tool against racism backed by a coherent democratic platform that might assist the masses in awakening, mobilizing, and acting in line with an economic solution to the capitalist order, the working class's parasite

Hughes saw communism as an opportunity to unite people regardless of their beliefs. In addition, he thought that Communism would be the only means of attaining equality, liberty, and his aspirations, as well as the hopes of other black people. According to Hughes, "the common laborer must stand up against capitalist masters since the latter denied them individual liberties and justice" (Saalam, 2021, p. 226). Then they may establish a new civilization independent of White domination. To him, communism demonstrates that a revolution will topple the economic and political systems of capitalist

nations. Hughes saw Communism as a savior framework that promotes equality and seeks to eradicate social differences. In addition, Hughes said that black people must struggle for their privileges as American residents and no longer serve as Whites' slaves and that they should have control over their businesses (Hughes & Berry, 2012).

In an essay written in 1946, he recalls his first perception of the Soviet Union's relative paucity of a color barrier and makes a comparison to the color bias still prevalent in the United States at the time, highlighting the fact that the Soviet Union had totally eradicated any racism both towards Jews and blacks after the Soviet Revolution in 1917. To paraphrase, he claims, "so there is a clear example in the globe to explain to our American specialists in racial issues that it does not take centuries, it does not take generations to get rid of nasty, horrible, outmoded, foolish Jim Crow practices if a society genuinely wants to get rid of them," (Hughes & Berry, p.86). Hughes wants to persuade Americans that Communism, not the mirage of the American Dream, would provide them the liberties and freedoms they want.

Hughes, convinced of the merits of communism's focus on equality and the abolition of social divides, urged for its adoption. Aside from that, Hughes said that black Americans should resist and that they should no longer be compelled to labor as slaves for white people. Hughes was also drawn to communism because of its liberal attitude on racial equality in comparison to the more conservative beliefs of the American political elite. Although Hughes testified during the McCarthy Hearings that he had never embraced the Communist Party, the fact that the direction his poetry took in the early 1930s and the breadth of his open adherence to the doctrine made that claim seem implausible. Some of his poems began to take on a more radical tone, and he began writing on more complicated and sometimes darker subjects to express the plights of Black Americans.

Hughes's commitment to and admiration of Communism are evident in a number of his poems, but the first essential step is to examine some of them. "Let America be America Again" (1936) is an excellent example of a poem highlighting Hughes' political stance as a minority in the United States. At the poem's beginning, Hughes declares that the United States should once again exemplify the ideals upon which it was founded. “Let America be America again / Let it be the pioneer on the plain / Seeking a home where he is free” (Hughes, 1936, Lines 1-4). Hughes feels nostalgic for a bygone era of equal American opportunity- he is quick to renounce the claim of a past when everything was rosy and sunshine when he says, “America never was America to me” (Line 5). Hughes sees himself in a long line of historically disadvantaged groups in the United States, such as poor white people, African Americans tormented by the horrors of subjugation, Native Americans who were driven from their land by colonizers, and immigrants hoping for a better life in a land where the rich and powerful trample all over the weak and powerless, “…Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme, That any man be crushed by one above” (Lines 8-9).

From the poem, Hughes tries to show that there are many organizations in America today that were formerly loyal to American ideals but are now repressed because of their beliefs. One remembers that it was European immigrants who built the cultural basis for the American Dream when they fled persecution and sought fresh chances in America. According to Hughes, it was these people, together with the enslaved Africans, who constructed the "homeland of the free" from the ground up in the New World. “Yet I’m the one who dreamt our basic dream / Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true, That even yet its mighty daring sing / That’s made America the land it has become” (Lines 38-43).

He concludes with a call to action that the United States should return to its roots. He believes that the United States has fallen short of its pledge so far. He calls on marginalized groups, Native Americans and African Americans, those who were used to build the country, to rise up and recreate America in accordance with its great foundational values of liberty and fairness for everyone.

His leaning towards Communism meant he rejected not just socialist and capitalist models, but also cultural and religious standards that historically saw black people as inferior. His poem "Goodbye, Christ!" (1932) clearly illustrates this rejection of traditional morality. After visiting the Soviet Union in 1932, Langston Hughes had a firsthand look at how Communism works, and he was quick to point out the many ways in which it differs from the system he had grown up in, the United States. He said that Black folks should query the prevailing American ideals and instead embrace the Marxist worldview since, in the Soviet Union, people of different backgrounds were recognized as citizens, and there was little to no racial segregation. Even though the poem's title and subject matter imply a rejection of Christianity, the major themes are really a rejection of Capitalism and a rejection of the unethical and dishonest usage of Christianity.

Many orthodox Christians, having missed the point of the poem, found it insulting because they misread Hughes's criticism of mountebanks in the first stanza, who use Christian teachings for their own advantage. These deceivers come under closer inspection in the second stanza. In the second stanza, Hughes elaborates on the first by detailing the reasons why he thinks Christ is no longer revered in modern culture. “Kings, generals, robbers, and killers / Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks / Even to Rockefeller's Church / Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST / You ain't no good no more” (Lines 10-14). Hughes claims that the preachers and popes have "pawned Christ / till he has worn out" (lines 15-16), and that they symbolize the "dark" side of capitalism. Rockefeller's church deserves special attention because of its reputation as the "Socialist Church," a label given to it by those who were offended by the billionaire philanthropist's habit of citing Bible verses and Christian doctrine to defend his every action and obscure what they saw as the church's socialist leanings.

While the final line may seem to be addressed at Christians and Christ, the terms God, Jehovah, and Christ really stand in for all other faiths, and Hughes says goodbye to all faiths along with capitalism as he implores society to embrace a new order where religion doesn’t exist. He claims, “Make way for a new guy with no religion at all / a real guy named / Marx, Communist, Lenin, Peasant, Stalin, Worker / I said, ME” (lines 20-22). He presents the communist ideology's primary intellectual influences. Hughes was deeply influenced by Marx and the Marxist worldview that he and his fellow communists (Marx, Lenin, and Stalin) advocated. Plus, the communist pillars of society, the “peasants and workers,” are acknowledged by the character.

Although African-Americans in the United States served as the obscure and victimized workers, commoners, and slaves, in a communist society there are no commoners serving those in the top echelons; instead, everyone is considered equal as a member of the working population that adds value to the overall economic development, and the government all equally values their contributions.

Hughes emphasizes the first person singular, 'me' because the communist atmosphere he prefers is one in which his labor and that of his ancestors are equally acknowledged, without regard to race which is exemplified by all the significant persons he has listed, and the peasants and laborers. To make his point that he is not only explicitly tearing down Christianity but other belief systems, he urges the rejection of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the world-famous leaders for his endeavors in India and his encouraging words of non-violent demonstrations, which were embraced by several advocates for racial equality, such as Martin Luther King Jr. "You're getting in the way of things, Lord. And please take Saint Gandhi with you when you go" (Lines 25-26). While it may seem strange that Hughes would reference Gandhi in a poem in which he attacks the dishonesty of everyone else, Hughes accepts Gandhi as a person but rejects Gandhi's idea of nonviolent resistance. In the last lines of the poem, Hughes declares, "The world is mine from now on — And nobody's gonna sell ME To a king, or a general, Or a millionaire" (lines 34-37), to emphasize once again that the misappropriation of Christianity that is selling it to the affluent, will no longer occur as a result of communism's rise to power.

In "One More 'S' in the U. S. A" (1934), Hughes's desire for the racial class and government in the United States to be overthrown and replaced with something comparable to the Soviet Union is made clear. The expression, "Put one more s in the U.S.A.," is repeated throughout the poem to show Hughes' desire for an urgent revolution to happen in America where racial segregation would be thrown into extinction. Hughes predicted that African-Americans would one day have the same legal protections as whites. To be biased against and poor was no longer an option; he was confident that the issue would be rectified, and the social position of the black man would be transformed. Some readers saw Hughes's omission of Whites who were also trapped in the labor force or were not employed as a slur on all Whites and interpreted the poem as a call to revolt against the government and its policies. But Hughes appreciated the aims of Communism, which demonstrate inclusivity to all levels of society, and thus he trusted in Communism, if not as an ideology. The communist spirit was clearly on his mind, as shown by his choice of words and delivery.

Hughes's advocacy for a system of shared prosperity and equality reflects the ideals of the Communist Party. Although Hughes was condemned for being a communist and an unbeliever because of his usage of communist elements in his poems, Hughes claimed that he was drawn to Communism by the feeling of exclusion it brought him on a personal and political level. We would agree that his idea of a perfect society is one where there is equality and fairness but it is clear that such a dream of a perfect society is unrealistic as long as humans exist.

Langston Hughes's inclination to communism was also reflected in his work, which portrayed the controversial Scottsboro Case. In 1931, nine black adolescents named the Scottsboro Boys were wrongfully convicted of raping two white ladies on a train in Scottsboro, Alabama. While the prisoners spent years fighting the courts and suffering the brutal circumstances of the Alabama prison system, the court hearings of the Scottsboro Boys generated a worldwide controversy and resulted in two historic U.S. Supreme Court judgments. "Eight of the accused were condemned to the electric chair, while one mistrial was declared in the case of the youngest prisoner, Roy Williams" (Leach, 2004, p.66). The communist party was hesitant about getting involved in the case but through its International Labor Defense (ILD) organization, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) took up the issue because it saw it as a recruitment opportunity among African-Americans in the United States (p.67). Despite initial opposition from the NAACP, the ILD assumed control of the appeal. This increased the party's standing and popularity among African-Americans like Hughes throughout the United States. The involvement of the communist party in the trial motivated Hughes to write a text titled, *Scottsboro Limited.*

The Communist Party's support of the Scottsboro Boys is the central theme of *Scottsboro Limited* (1932), a drama and four poems. The revolutionary proletarian theatrical style used in the performance effectively links the plight of the eight black defendants with that of other workers. Even if the story itself isn't all that great, *Scottsboro Limited* manages to bring together black and white under the red flag style (Thurston, 1995). In the first scene, eight black boys seem to be handcuffed together at the right foot and march down the middle aisle. A white guy who walks slowly and silently beside them suddenly stops and demands to know the reason for their presence. Hughes dramatizes the injustice bluntly:

Man: What are you doing here?
1st Boy: We come in our chains, to show our pains
(Hughes, 1932, lines 117-118).

A white man plays many roles in the play, beginning as the sheriff and ending as the judge, jail warden, and clergyman at the boys' execution. Scenes follow scenes, the stage also undergoes a series of transformations. To simulate being atop of a passing train, the guys sit on the deck and rock back and forth before being detained and ordered to form a line next to the chair. According to Thruston (1995), "devices like the spare set, the shifting scene, and the white man's multiple characters frequently appeared in the proletarian theater of such groups as the Theater Guild" (p. 42).

Towards the conclusion of *Scottsboro Limited*, the black youths have joined forces with white Communist workers, and the audience, which represented the frenzied mob in previous scenes of the play, has become a throng of revolutionary workers (Thurston, 1995) who encourage the black lads to fight back, leading them to break down the electric chair and join forces with the white employees, making it clear that the author sympathizes with their cause. Hughes received laudation from many African Americans after this play together with other poems was published but "many whites were incensed over two

controversial pieces related to the Scottsboro incident that was published in *Contempo,* an unofficial student publication, on the day of his scheduled lecture" (Leach, 2004, p. 67).

3. Langston Hughes's Official Renunciation of Communism

Langston Hughes (accompanied by his counsel, Frank D. Reeves) before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, Tuesday, March 24, 1953, was questioned amidst the anti-communist hysteria of the day. After enlightening the committee on what it means to be Black in America, he repudiated his revolutionary views and avoided being banned and having his profession destroyed by the threats. When asked by Mr. Cohn, a member of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee, "Have you ever been a Communist?" Hughes responded, "No, sir, I am not. I presume by that you mean a Communist party member, do you not?" Cohn questions directly, "Have you ever been a believer in communism?" Hughes showed his renunciation when he claimed, "I have never been a believer in communism or a Communist party member" (Testimony of Langston Hughes, 1953). Consequently, he was able to maintain his profession and passport for another decade despite being criticized for being politically agnostic in his work. A part of him was lionized, while another was muzzled by anti-communism and pessimism. In fact, his writing was banned, its revolutionary underpinnings excised, and its political ferocity muted. The writings that followed after the interrogations and threats depict a shift from communist ideologies to a gentle approach to the oppression of Blacks in his poems and the celebration of famous Black men as seen in his book, *Famous American Negroes*, brief biographical writing about seventeen African Americans who made significant contributions to the founding, growth, and advancement of the United States.

4. Conclusion

Langston Hughes's engagement with communism is one of the most misinterpreted parts of his literary and political life. Hughes did not uncritically embrace communist theory; rather, he regarded communism as a tactical reaction to the racial and economic inequality affecting African Americans in the early twentieth century. In poems like "Let America Be America Again," "Goodbye, Christ!" and "One More 'S' in the U.S.A.," Hughes expressed a vision of social equality, economic fairness, and interracial unity that was predominantly missing from the American political discourse at that time. His works in the 1930s and early 1940s demonstrate a purposeful effort to leverage the revolutionary potential of communism to draw attention to the shortcomings of American democracy and to promote a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Hughes's subsequent renunciation of communism during the McCarthy period shows the challenging decisions confronted by Black intellectuals in a politically oppressive society. His testimony before the Senate, sometimes seen as a withdrawal, should also be regarded as a survival tactic in response to ideological persecution. Despite distancing himself from communism, Hughes persisted in advocating for the rights of the oppressed through literary expressions that honored Black cultural accomplishments and historical perseverance. Notably, Hughes's fleeting affiliation with communism was not centered on ideological purity but on acquiring methods to convey truth to authority. His writing exemplifies how literature may serve as both protest and prophecy, as well as witness and weapon. Upon reexamining Hughes's works, we are reminded that the pursuit of justice frequently necessitates both radical imagination and pragmatic navigation, qualities that Hughes exemplified throughout his enduring dedication to the dignity and freedom of Black people.

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