

# A FEMINIST BECOMING? LOUISE THOMPSON PATTERSON'S AND DOROTHY WEST'S SOJOURN IN THE SOVIET UNION

## ¿UN DESPERTAR FEMINISTA? LA ESTANCIA SOVIÉTICA DE LOUISE THOMPSON PATTERSON Y DOROTHY WEST

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### Abstract

This article follows the socialist activist Louise Thompson (later Patterson) and the writer Dorothy West on their infamous journey to Soviet Russia to shoot a film about North American anti-Black racism in 1932. The film about the US history of racial oppression was ultimately never made, but the women stayed in the Soviet Union for several months, travelling to the Soviet republics, meeting famous Soviets, and experiencing Soviet modernization. Looking at the travel writings, correspondence, and memoirs of Thompson and West through the lens of intersectionality, this article analyses the women's distinctly gendered experiences and their experience of socialist women's liberation movements. It argues that a close reading of the literary writing, travel notes, letters, and memoirs and their biographical trajectories after they returned to the United States reveals how their experiences in the Soviet Union created a feminist consciousness within the two women that crucially altered their political and personal views of Black women's agency and significantly altered their life trajectories.

**Keywords:** African-American; Russia; USSR; Communism; Feminism; Women's liberation; Sexuality; Literature; Harlem Renaissance.

## Resumen

Este artículo sigue a la activista socialista Louise Thompson (después Patterson) y a la escritora Dorothy West en su viaje a la Unión Soviética para filmar una película sobre el racismo contra la gente de color en Norteamérica en 1932. La película sobre la opresión racial nunca se hizo, pero las mujeres viajaron unos meses por la URSS y las Repúblicas Soviéticas, juntándose con famosos y experimentando la modernización.

Evaluando las descripciones del viaje, correspondencias y memorias de Thompson y West desde un punto de vista interseccional, el artículo analiza sus experiencias –claramente marcadas por su género– y encuentros con el movimiento de liberación de mujeres socialistas. Argumenta que sus obras durante el viaje y después del regreso revelan cómo sus experiencias en la URSS crearon una conciencia feminista en ambas que cambió radicalmente su visión sobre la agrupación de mujeres de color y alteró la trayectoria de sus vidas.

**Palabras clave:** afronorteamericano; Rusia; URSS; comunismo; feminismo; liberación de las mujeres; sexualidad; literatura; Renacimiento de Harlem

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article follows the educator and activist Louise Thompson (later Patterson) and the writer Dorothy West on their journey to the Soviet Union to participate in a film about North American anti-Black racism, tentatively titled *Black and White*. These two female members of the Harlem Renaissance and their twenty African-American travel companions were curious about the USSR and its promise of racial equality, which in 1920 Lenin had declared one of the core concerns of communist internationalism (Haas 113). The film, meant to illustrate the racial oppression of African-Americans and propagate the Soviet Union as a model of racial equality, was never produced. Yet, the group stayed in Russia for several months and travelled on to Central Asia, collecting first-hand experiences of Soviet modernization.

### 1.1. Research Focus and Methodology

Scholarly work on the travel narratives about the trip to shoot *Black and White* has often focused on its most famous member, the poet Langston Hughes (Haas; Lapina; Baldwin), and on issues of racialization. These analyses frequently conclude that the African-American visitors evaluated their Russian

experience solely through their colour consciousness and not necessarily a class consciousness (Haas 120). Moreover, such studies largely ignore aspects of gender and sexuality (Haas; Gilyard). If they look at all at the subsequent effects that the group's sojourn in Russia had upon their return to the United States, what they most emphasise is the surge in US anti-communist tendencies that forced members of the group to distance themselves publicly from communism back in their homeland (Haas 122; Carew 138). Scholars who have provided detailed descriptions of the travel writings of the women in this group and have analysed the gendered and sexual aspects of this travel (Mickenberg; Sherrard-Johnson) have not explored how visiting the Soviet Union and Soviet Central Asia may have influenced the female travellers' subsequent feminist politics.

I offer a close reading of Thompson's and West's travel writings that focuses on the women's gendered, racialised and sexual experiences, based on the approaches of feminist intersectional historiography that follows the legacies of scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins and Jennifer Nash. Drawing on Vivian M. May, I use intersectionality «as a historiographic tool, [and] a metahistorical lens through which to lay bare issues of power and inequality» (May 19) with a special focus on oppression as well as female empowerment and agency.

My understanding of «travel writing» in this article is very broad: it includes private letters, journal articles, fictional writing that draws on real life experiences as well as political pamphlets, interviews and memoirs. My reading of these documents addresses the interdependencies of racialisation, gender, and class as oppressive forms that forced the two female writers West and Patterson to highlight certain aspects of their experience, while demanding the omissions of others. To analyse how the oppressive social, cultural and political structures forbade a certain clarity in writing, or a deferral of expressions of homosexual and female agency and communist politics, I follow David Van Leer's approach in *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*. There, Van Leer argues that oppressed people during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century «speak most volubly between the lines» (Van Leer 19), often mimicking the oppressive language and tropes to communicate something other than what is on the surface. I open Van Leer's focus on issues

of oppressed sexualities to the oppression of female agency and communist leanings.

Additionally, I analyse the findings of my reading against the two women's individual biographies and writings before and after their sojourn to find out what effects their journey had. I rethink previous evaluations of the effects of the Russian journey and the connection between the ontology (and discourses) of Soviet Russia and Central Asia, feminist consciousness, and the fight against racism in the United States. To contribute to a deeper understanding of the historic role of Soviet-American encounters and African-American leftist women, a comparative analysis of West and Thompson is especially interesting, given the two women's stark differences in terms of politics, interests, and character. While West was focused on the arts and had no interest in political participation per se, Thompson was a dedicated political activist. The two women's very different testimonies speak to the multifaceted impact of the Soviet-American encounter.

### 1.2. The Harlem Renaissance goes to the USSR

In 1931 the Soviet-German film company Mezhrabpom invited African-American actors and actresses to Russia to play Southern sharecroppers in a film about the history of US racism. The Black communist James W. Ford took up Mezhrabpom's proposal but left the logistics to Louise Thompson, who took it upon herself to make the project a success.

The Chicago-born Thompson had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1923 (Crawford and Patterson 122), where she developed a deep race consciousness inspired by the sociologist and leftist activist W. E. B. Du Bois (Gilyard 38; Crawford and Patterson 123) and where she slowly began her anti-racist activism. After teaching in the US South she moved to New York City in 1928, was hired as a stenographer for Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and became a member of the social circle known as the Harlem Renaissance. She became close friends with Hughes, Claude McKay and others and was briefly married to the novelist Wallace Thurman.

After losing her job as a stenographer, Thompson intensified her work for the Left. She aligned with the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the

Communist Party's national civil rights initiative, and worked tirelessly side by side with communist leaders, such as her future husband William Patterson, the above-mentioned Ford, and Harry Haywood, to save the Scottsboro Boys. This group of young men had become victims of racist injustice after being falsely convicted of raping white women and were awaiting their death sentences.

Thompson was very interested in Soviet progress and its anti-racist discourses. In 1931 she «formed a chapter of the Soviet Friendship Society» (Gilyard 76) in Harlem and when Ford proposed the idea of the *Black and White* movie, she was immediately supportive of the project. She recruited the actors and actresses among her friends and acquaintances, the young and adventurous writers and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance. Most of these African-Americans came from a middle-class background, had never done manual labour, and had never performed in front of a camera (Hughes 70). Among the group were Thompson's lover at the time, Loren Miller, and her close friend Hughes, the art student Mildred Jones, and the poet Dorothy West.

The bourgeois and very young West and the down-to-earth activist Thompson were never close. West was the daughter of a former slave who became a successful businessman and a Boston University and Columbia University graduate. Encouraged to write from an early age, she published her first short story in the *Boston Post* at the age of fourteen (Jones 120). In 1926 her story «The Typewriter» tied for second place with Zora Neale Hurston's in a contest sponsored by the journal *Opportunity* and the National Urban League (Sherrard-Johnson 60). After that, the Harlem Renaissance writer and anthropologist Hurston became West's mentor and close friend. Influenced by Hurston and other members of the Harlem Renaissance, West developed a deep race consciousness, which is reflected in her writing.

What exactly made West decide to go to Russia in the summer of 1932 is unclear. West herself frequently rejected the idea that her trip to Russia was politically motivated. In interviews and writing she joked that Hughes and her other friends «tried and failed to make a communist out of [her]» (McDowell 271), and insisted that for her communism «was not the solution to man's dilemma» (West, *The Richer* 206). She explained her interest in Russia with her love for the «gods of good writing» (West, *The Richer* 206), such as

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who taught her «that salvation lay in the soul», and in order to «re-examine [her] own soul» (West, *The Richer* 207) she left New York. Dostoyevsky was certainly an influence on West's own writing, and it is likely that she was also interested in Pushkin, who was known and admired by the poets of the Harlem Renaissance for his consciousness about his African heritage and his ironic but sharp criticism of Russian serfdom (Hasty).

## 2. IN THE USSR – FREEDOM FROM RACIAL HATE

With the exception of how Pushkin and his African heritage were celebrated, people in the USSR saw Blacks and particularly African-Americans as exotic and foreign. In communist thought «Negro comrades» were romanticised as «a separate black nation of serfs in the United States with whom the Bolsheviks were in solidarity» (Sherrard-Johnson 98). Anti-racism and solidarity with African-Americans was one of the patriotic duties of Soviet citizens, along with gender equality. Accordingly, the delegation of Black Americans received a very warm welcome.

There is much evidence of the strong impressions that were left on the visitors by the very positive reception they got from the Russians and the general absence of racist hatred. A welcome committee greeted the group wherever they went (Lapina 2018) and they were provided accommodation in exquisite hotels, «living like royalty» (Thompson, *Trip to Russia* 18). Such treatment could not have been more different to the US context, where racial segregation was a common practice everywhere and in the South was legally enforced through state and local laws, also known as the Jim Crow laws.

Although the well-educated Northerners with their varied and in most cases very light skin tones probably «did not fit Russians' romanticised stereotype of the oppressed black sharecropper» (Sherrard-Johnson 85), Mezhrabpom never failed to pay them 400 roubles each per month from the day of their arrival. The film script, however, ultimately proved problematic and in need of revision, and this postponed the start of the movie indefinitely. In an interview with Katrine Dalsgård, West called the script a «Russian version of American life» (West in Dalsgård 35), which meant that the Soviet writers had underestimated American racism. Thompson (Lapina 229) and West highlighted one particularly ludicrous scene that involved a wealthy

young white gentleman from Alabama and a black servant: «[The] black maid would enter, and the young scion would start dancing around with her. That would never happen in America.» (West in Dalsgård 35). While Hughes was hired to help with re-writing the film script, the rest of the cast were free to enjoy themselves.

In mid-August and after several weeks spent doing leisure activities, swimming naked in the Moscow River and hanging out at Culture Park, the group was ordered to Odessa to start filming. They lodged in one of Odessa's finest seaside hotels, which offered them a kind of luxurious environment that on US soil African-Americans were banned from (Hughes 93). The steady income of 400 roubles each gave the group a kind of economic and social freedom most of them lacked at home. But it was not just the elite consumerism that made them feel free; it was a more general sense of freedom from the boundaries of racial and gender oppression. In the Soviet Union the members of the group could experience «being carefree» (West in Dalsgård 36) and truly enjoy themselves, as West's and Thompson's frequent use of the words «joy» (West, *Where the Wild* 192) and «enjoy» (Thompson to her Mother, September 4, 1932 qtd. in Gilyard 91) in their letters show. This «prompted a profound shift in consciousness» (Sherrard-Johnson 87).

Even though Thompson was concerned about the racial representation and lack of good behaviour of her fellow travellers, her complaints show this very same shift in consciousness. In her private correspondence to her mother, she complained about Moon's and Poston's behaviour and compared their freedom in Russia to their lives in the USA:

Here we come from a country where everything is denied us, work, protection of life and property, freedom to go where we will and to live where we will – where we are despised and humiliated at every turn. And here we are, accorded every courtesy – free to go where we will and are eagerly welcomed – given every opportunity to enjoy ourselves and to travel – free to pursue any work that we choose. And these boys play right into the hands of American newspaper men who of course do everything they can to turn Negroes against the only land that gives them perfect equality. (Thompson to her Mother, September 4, 1932 qtd. in Gilyard 91)

Thompson was concerned about the implications that their visit to the USSR could have, and being more a politician than a free-spirited artist like some of

her colleagues, she expected a certain level of etiquette that the others were glad to get rid of, or at least that's what she claimed in writing. That she was not the prude her letters to her mother make her seem, and that she, too, experienced in Moscow not only the freedom from racism but also sexual freedom is evident from the fact that she had an abortion after the trip to Odessa (Gilyard 92). Although she wrote little about her private matters, beneath Thompson's rather dry praise for the experience of freedom from racism and gender equality, which I will come to in a later section, there lies a general pleasure and enjoyment of life that speaks to the sexual freedom that Russia allowed her.

### 3. THE FREEDOM TO LOVE

Like Thompson, West reported enthusiastically about the privileges she was enjoying as an official guest of the Soviet Union in her correspondence to her family and friends back home. In a letter to her mother Rachel West from July 1932, for example, West beams about the acknowledgment and recognition she received from Muscovites: «It's grand to go into a place and know you are welcome. The head waiters [of Moscow's finest French restaurants] know us now and greet us with such heartwarming bows» (West, *Where the Wild* 187). Not surprisingly, West stayed in Moscow for several more months after the filming was cancelled, living «the most carefree year of [her] life» (West in Dalsgård 36).

In addition to the positive recognition, the «free love atmosphere of the New Russia» (Sherrard-Johnson 95) gave West and her fellow travellers a freedom from bourgeois and racialised sexual and gender boundaries. From today's perspective the openness to female sexuality in Russia might seem relatively tame, but for middle-class African-American women in this group the Soviet discourse seemed revolutionary because even the distribution of information about birth control for women was illegal in the United States. While in Moscow Dorothy West received a letter by an unknown friend, begging her to «soak up all the Russian birth control rules and share them with [her] friends» (anonymous friend qtd. in Mickenberg 77).

Freed «from the constraints of New Negro womanhood and New England restraint West felt [liberated] to explore her sexuality in a way she never had



before» (Sherrard-Johnson 95). On the boat to Europe, West had already set her sights on Langston Hughes. How serious she really was in her relatively public pursuit of Hughes is unclear. She confessed her love in several letters, and even asked him to impregnate her (West, *Where the Wild* 194).

After her return to the USA, West published the «Russian Correspondence» in the *Challenge* under the pseudonym Mary Christopher<sup>1</sup>, which has been read as a fictional reflection of West's real life enchantment with Hughes (Mitchell and Davis 144). The series of letters is written by «Beta», an American woman living in Moscow, to her absent American lover «Tack». Beta is suffering from some kind of sickness and longs for her absent lover, who is a free-spirited artist, travelling to Baku to paint and be «wild» (West, *Russian Correspondence* 16, 18). In the first few letters, Beta writes supportively, encouraging Tack to not hold back and collect as many experiences as possible. In the later letters, however, she grows more and more bitter and desperate. «I'm leaving Russia. I can have a career almost anywhere» (15), Beta finally threatens Tack.

Interestingly, and arguably more revealing than the big love that Beta describes, is that she calls Russia Tack's «salvation» (15), where he can «[g]row and expand [and l]ive without women for two years. Live selfishly and succeed» (15). This passage is cryptic and there is no further explanation why Russia is the only place where Tack can be free to do what he wants. Against the background of American homophobia, however, this description of a free Russia can be read as a hint to Hughes' homosexuality and the freedom to live it there. Moreover, against the knowledge of widespread American anti-communist sentiments, the frequent mentioning of Tack wearing a «red shirt» (14, 15) in combination with this identification of Russian freedom can be interpreted as reference to Hughes' communist leanings. The brevity of this description and the subsequent return to heteronormative jealousy can accordingly be understood as covering up what had just been revealed about Hughes' sexual and political preferences.

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1. West probably published «Russian Correspondence» and «A Room in Red Square» under this pseudonym to protect herself from the coming red scare. In an interview with Deborah McDowell West said that she changed her name «because as the editor of the *Challenge* she did not want to appear as if she had written too many of the articles that appeared in each issue» (West qtd. in Sherrard-Johnson 89).

I am bitter today. I love you, and I don't want to leave you, but even you could not persuade me to stay. And Nadya, how she will inveigle herself into your very soul during this trip. [...] And the little French girl, well, have her too. And that silly Tania. All your bright birds. (15)

On the surface, Beta loses her composure in this passage, giving into her heteronormative jealousy. However, an intersectional analysis that recognises the historically gendered, sexualised, and racialised social constraints under which the correspondence was written and later published (in the US context of the Jim Crow laws and McCarthyism) and further includes biographical testimony, opens itself up to other interpretations.

I favour a reading of the «Russian Correspondence» that reveals West's thought's about Hughes' experience of a freedom to live without sexual, racial and political constraints, rather than focusing on the love confession that lies on the surface. Such a view is supported through the logical gaps in the letter's narrative. What does it mean that «[o]ccasionally some woman comes along and for a period stabilizes [him]. And when she is gone [he] sigh[s] with relief, and [is] [him]self again» (18)? If Tack wants to live without women, why enumerate all these women that are interested in him? Why the heteronormative jealousy? I read the heteronormative elements of the fictionalised letters as a strategy to disguise the equally present hints to Hughes' homosexuality and his socialist politics.

Furthermore, I suggest that West's text negotiates her own possibilities to live her bi- or homosexuality in Russia. In parallel to her enchantment with Hughes, she started a lesbian relationship with Mildred Jones (Sherrard-Johnson 95; Mickenberg 699; Mitchell and Davis 144) and the two women lived and travelled together over the course of the entire eleven months. It is possible that this lesbian affair was evidence of the atmosphere of free love in which pursuing several love interests was common, and which West could only hint to through codes under the constraints of homophobia and racism in the USA. The mentioning of Russian freedom in «Russian Correspondence» supports this free love theory, as does the fact that West and Jones were not the only lesbian lovers among the group<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, Jones, West's lover, was

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2. Sylvia Garner was in a relationship with Connie White, who even attempted suicide when White left her for a Russian lover (Gilmore 141). Garner's affair with this Russian translator «resulted in that woman's deportation to Siberia» (Sherrard-Johnson 96).

involved with several other people during her stay in Russia, including the «chief of the Press Division of the Foreign Affairs Commissariat, Constantine Oumansky» (Mitchell and Davis 144) and the Russian writer Boris Pilnyak (Mickenberg 721) among others.

Taking Van Leer's suggestion to look for what is not said but only insinuated or which lies between the lines one step further, both «Russian Correspondence» and the love letter to Hughes from October 27, 1932 (West, *Where the Wild* 189) can be analysed as West's at times emotional negotiation of the constricting power of external and internalised racialised heteronormativity. The latter letter describes how she followed Jones and Hughes to Baku, where they had gone with most of their group earlier: «I wanted terribly to see Mil[dred] and [Langston], and I did not know whom I wanted to see most» (West, *Where the Wild* 189). Arriving in Baku and realising that Hughes had already left the group to travel further into Central Asia, she describes a sudden sense of clarity about her feelings towards him:

I never stopped loving you [...] and after my first feeling for M[ildred] had passed, my love for you grew very steadily and sturdily, and it was like a sudden flood of light when I found you were not on that train bound for Tiflis. Where before I might have been still somewhat uncertain, then I was completely sure. (189)

She also writes that she was planning to leave Jones and Russia, apparently to go to Paris with Mollie Lewis (Mitchell and Davis 144). Yet, West did not leave but instead stayed in Moscow and roomed with Jones for several more months after her return from Baku.

In a letter to friends, written shortly after, West announced her decision to stay in Moscow, saying: «I have been living furiously [...]. This has been an invaluable experience. [...] If fortune continues to favor me I'll stay in this grand, experimental country until I have absorbed all its virtues and cast aside all my vices» (West to Grace and Marie Turner, Nov. 22, 1932, qtd. in Mickenberg 721). In this letter, there is no mentioning of the love to Hughes anymore. Moreover, her usage of the term «vice» is very ambiguous. In a Christian and homophobic context, homosexuality has historically been described as an «unnatural vice» (DeYoung 79-81; 146). It is possible that West used «vice» as a stand-in for her lesbian desires, which she sought to get rid of. West was not only sexually inexperienced at the time, but also she

had been taught to restrain her desires and save herself for marriage, as is documented in a letter from her friend (and Thompson's first husband), the gay author Wallace Thurman from 1929. It is likely that in Moscow her sexual orientation became clear to her for the first time. Whether she discovered her bisexuality and had difficulty deciding between her two love interests or was confused and had trouble coming to terms with her lesbian desires, it is possible that she «wanted Hughes to rescue her from her first lesbian relationship» (Mitchell and Davis 144). This reading is supported by the brief line in «Russian Correspondence»: «I'm glad leaving everything except leaving Peg» (20), who could be identified as Mildred Jones, who West called Mil.

Given the aforementioned letter by Thurman, however, I favour another reading of the term «vice», where it is understood as ironic. In 1929 Thurman criticized West's stories and claimed they «lacked passion» and he blamed this on her «virginal state» (104). He suggested that she «get rid of the puritan notion that to have casual sexual intercourse is a sin» (104) and advised her to neither «repress herself, nor violently suppress [her] sex urge, just because [she is] Puritan enough to believe that hell fire awaits he who takes a bite of the apple» (105). Thurman wanted to help West to emancipate herself sexually, likely sensing that she shared his same-sex inclination. Accordingly, and referring to Van Leer's thesis that a mimicking of heteronormative language can be understood as code and ironic hint to homosexuality (19), «vices» can be read to mean the opposite of the religiously informed derogatory signification of homosexuality. It could be a self-ironic reference to Thurman's advice to shed her internalised Puritanism, to emancipate herself from the boundaries of American gender and sexual repression, and to find her place as a writer within Black literary production.

That West's contemplation about her romantic and sexual relations was equally a reflection on her literary production is also evidenced by the «Russian Correspondence», where she writes that «[i]f you are a true artist, poetry and prose [...] are simply word substitutes for people. You continually thirst for knowledge of your neighbour. And when you know your neighbour and yourself, you can splash your colors like God» (18). Reading West's letters as a discussion of her writing is further supported by the title of yet another story about her Russian journey «A Room in Red Square». It can be read as reference to Virginia Woolf's feminist essay *A Room of One's Own*, published in

1929, where Woolf claims a space for female writers within a literary tradition dominated by men. What supports this interpretation further is that West never married but had a long and successful career as an editor and writer.

A reading of the letters West wrote and received during the first half of the 1930s that envision a future heterosexual marriage and family supports the theory that she had to come to terms with her non-normative sexuality over the course of these years as much as she had to come to the decision to be primarily a writer, and not a mother and wife. Still in Russia with Jones, West, for example, wrote to her mother, announcing her return to the United States and seemingly trying to convince not only her mother, but also herself, that this return will mark the start of a proper and normative life style.

Don't think I mind coming back to work hard [...]. Because I've had enough joy and fun this past year to last me the rest of my life [...]. [I] have had infinitely more than the average person has from birth to death. I knew, as I know so many things, I would never be so carefree again as I have been since I've been here. My life has been one long hour[?] of continuous blessed joy. [...] Life can give me nothing now except a child. I am really ready to settle down. All I want in life is to work [...] marry within a year and start to make a baby. That is my fortune that was told in the cards long ago [...]. (West, *Where the Wild* 192)

With respect to West's Black consciousness, her insistence on her future return to a proper bourgeois heteronormative life (and on loving Hughes) can be read as her way of keeping up appearances and complying with what was expected of her as a racially conscious Black woman at the time. In this light I would cite Sherrard-Johnson's brief suggestion that West's «interest in Hughes may have been performative, not unlike Hughes's back-and-forth flirtation with [Silvia] Chen» (Sherrard-Johnson 95), a Moscow-based dancer «of Caribbean and Chinese background» (Mickenberg 700). Some researchers have suggested that Hughes' interest in women was a distraction from his homosexuality (Nero, *Re/Membering*; McClatchy).

In Isaac Julien's seminal film *Looking for Langston* from 1989, Stuart Hall points out that African-American discourses deemed homosexuality «a sin against the race, so it had to be kept a secret, even if it was a widely shared one» (Allen 220), and he sets this sentiment in relation to Hughes' silence around his sexual practices. Proclaiming her love for a man who, she knew, would never desire her in a romantic and sexual way, could have been West's

way of avoiding committing «a sin against the race» by *coming out* as a lesbian, rather than it being an attempt to suppress her desires. It was common practice for Black and white lesbians in early 20-century America to marry men, sometimes ones who were sharing a non-normative sexual orientation themselves. Jones had briefly been married to W. A. Scott, the founder of the magazine *Atlanta World*, in 1929 (Teel 158), and other lesbians close to West in New York, such as her agent's lesbian partner Elsie de Wolfe, were also married to men (Mitchell and Davis 135). In this light, her declaration of love could have been her public and failed attempt to make a marriage pact with Hughes, which would have been a concession to her upbringing in «Boston's black middle class» (Sherrard-Johnson 95) and its conservative emphasis on family and marriage. She had previously tried to convince Countee Cullen and Bruce Nugent to marry her, who were both known for being gay (Schwarz; Nero, *Gay Rebell*).

Drawing on Julien's film and Emilio Amideo's scholarly analysis of it, and departing slightly from Sherrard-Johnson's view, I read West's letters and especially her «Russian Correspondent» not as a cover for her sexual and romantic relationship with a woman but as a performative act intended to confirm her commitment to the Black movement. I read the love declaration to Hughes as West's coming to terms with her class background, which demanded marriage, and as a way of working through American and especially African-American homophobia and expressing her dedication to the Black cause by making a personal alliance with an anti-racist Black writer. Accordingly, I read West's wish to become the mother of Hughes' child, as she wrote in the above-mentioned letter to Hughes and in letters to her mother (West, *Where the Wild* 192), as both a concession to her class and upbringing as well as a recommitment to Black liberation.

West's letters to her friends and family foreground her immense enjoyment of experiencing freedom from racial discrimination in Russia. This already indicates her anew commitment to the anti-racist cause, which visibly manifests in her fictional writing after the sojourn, where she addresses issues of racialised class discrimination more directly than before. The refusal to call her social critique socialist in fiction and real life needs to be read as a concession to the increasingly anti-communist atmosphere in the United States that made her even more careful not to embrace socialism publicly.

Even more carefully disguised than her socialist leanings are West's sexual and romantic desires towards women in her writing. West never spoke or wrote about homosexuality in her writing, and never self-identified as a lesbian. She only ever mentioned Jones as «a woman whom I loved very much» (West in Dalsgård 36). Yet, «the many unhappy couples in her fiction [...] may well function as coded references to the hegemony of heteronormative relationships» (Mitchell and Davis 145).

It is possible to read her emphatic declarations of love to Hughes and her attempt to reinsure herself and her mother about her plan to return to a bourgeois heteronormative life as an attempt to disguise her non-normative sexuality. Reading her letters and fiction against her personal biography however, equally allows for the conclusion that the experience of freedom from gender-based expectations and the liberty to live out her sexual and romantic desires in Russia may also have opened her up to seeing a new horizon, not only for her personal future but also for her commitment to the Black cause. Upon returning to the United States she abandoned her search for a husband and instead founded the magazines *The Challenge* and *The New Challenge* with the money she had earned from participating in the failed film project. Moreover, she spent many years in a lesbian relationship with her female co-editor and fellow writer Marian Minus. And although her relationship with Minus was never publicly announced, it was never a secret either (Garman).

#### 4. EXPERIENCING GENDER EQUALITY

Thompson was a political activist through and through. Convinced that socialism would be able to transform society into a racially just one, she was willing to cast aside or ignore the violent sides of Soviet modernisation. Even if she knew about the Gulag labour camp system, the late Czarist inheritance that Lenin Sovietised and Stalin expanded excessively, she never spoke about it. Hence, when Henry Moon arrived in Odessa with the news that the film had been cancelled, Thompson was intent on believing that the cancellation was only temporal and not a plot against the anti-racist cause (Thompson, *On Her 1932 Visit*)<sup>3</sup>.

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3. The most likely reason for the cancelation was the intervention of an American colonel named Hugh Cooper, who threatened the Russian government with not finishing the

The apologetic Mezhrabpom offered the group members either expedited exit or unlimited work visas. Additionally, they could join an organised trip to Uzbekistan to see more of socialist progress. Most of them chose this trip because, as Thompson explained, they wanted to get a picture of how the situation had improved for those within the Soviet project who were «brown and black» (*On Her 1932 Visit*). So on September 20, 1932 Thompson, together with Hughes, Jones, and some others, went on a government-sponsored trip to Central Asia to study Soviet national minorities. Along the way Thompson learned not only about the improvements that the Soviets had brought to the different regions in terms of racial equality, but also about women's liberation. Her letters to her mother and others at home are full of her experiences of these improvements in the areas of gender equality and women's liberation, as is her recollection of the trip in her *Unpublished Memoire* chapter «Trip to Russia». She had already been impressed in Moscow by the way women carried themselves in public spaces and how they held jobs that were considered men's work in the United States. «Many of the conductors and motormen [sic] are women», (Thompson to mother, July 14, 1932 qtd. in Mickenberg 695) she reported about the Moscow streetcar operators. «In fact, women do everything here» (695), she wrote, «[w]ork on building construction, on the streets, in factories of course, and everywhere» (695). Additionally, she described how women were present in the Red Army, calling them «truly a splendid sight» (696). As inspiring as it was to see women's equality in Moscow, it was the excursion to Soviet Central Asia that proved to be a «turning point in her life» (Mickenberg 710), as her daughter Mary Louise Patterson recalled years after her death.

Her first stop was Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. In a text titled «With Langston Hughes in the USSR», Thompson describes the experience as «thrilling [...] for all of us to see new nations arising out of centuries of illiteracy, poverty, and even nomad life to the world of collective farms, modern silk factories, schools, homes and nurseries» (153). «[W]omen's liberation was selected as the crucial strategy to find Bolshevik allies among

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Dnieperstroy dam construction, a prestigious Soviet modernization project that he oversaw, were this embarrassment to the United States to be produced (Lapina 231; Gilyard 86; Sherrard-Johnson 87).



the indigenous peoples of Central Asia» (Northrop 12), and the group's guides surely emphasised this aspect of Soviet progress, showing them the Tashkent «Woman's Club, with its literacy classes, nursery rooms in which children sang for the group, and other facilities» (Mickenberg 712). A crucial part of this project, besides literacy, «was the unveiling of Muslim women, the object of a massive campaign undertaken in 1927 by members of the Zhenotdel, or women's branch of the Communist Party, sometimes at gunpoint» (Mickenberg 711).

For Thompson the freeing of women from the *paranja* that had covered their full bodies and included a veil of horsehair over their entire faces was very meaningful and important. In a letter to her mother she described the unveiling in detail, arguing that «a woman dressed like that could never work in a factory or anywhere else, for that matter» (Thompson to mother, Sept. 25, 1932, qtd. in Northrop 13). Like her friend Hughes, Thompson contemplated this unveiling in the context of W. E. B. Du Bois' articulation of double consciousness, the African-American feeling of life behind a veil, the inner conflict of «always looking at one's self through the eyes» of a racist white society, and «measuring oneself by the means of a nation that looked back in contempt» (Du Bois 2-3). To Thompson, the veil was «the symbol of [Uzbekh women's] slavery» (Thompson to mother, Oct. 7, 1932, qtd. in Mickenberg 715), of subordination under racist imperial colonial rule, but also, and importantly, of (Muslim) patriarchy. She emphasised the bravery of women who risked violence from their male relatives for unveiling, reading the process a freeing not just from outer oppression but also from internalized gendered and racialized subordination, a «being emancipated from their ancient ways» (715). Thompson interpreted the Uzbekh social transformation from a Muslim peasant culture to an industrialized Soviet workers' culture as a process that created racial and gender equality through the creation of a universal working class.

In her celebration of Sovietisation, Thompson ignored the pressure and violence involved in this unveiling. Douglas Northrop argues in his exhaustive study on gender and power in Stalinist Soviet Central Asia that «wearing a veil became more than a narrowly religious or moral matter; for many people it also became an act of political and national resistance to an outside colonial power» (Northrop 13). This aspect, however, entirely escaped Thompson

in her search for Soviet progress. Moreover, it is very likely that her hosts made sure Thompson and the group would avoid any signs of resistance to the Soviet women's liberation. They introduced Thompson, and her group to individual women, so they could learn how these women's lives had changed for the better. In her notes on the trip, Thompson wrote down all their names, ages, and life circumstances.

There was Halima Kazakova, a forty-two-year-old mother of five children, unveiled since 1925, literate for only two years; Bakhri Guliamova, unveiled in 1926, married in 1927 at fifteen, member of city Soviet, hair bobbed; and Rosa Balabaeva, unveiled in 1928, previously married at fourteen to an old man and now unable to have children. She left her husband and came to Tashkent without telling her family. After studying at the textile technicum, she found work and was later promoted to the city Soviet. Now she was «head of women's work in trade unions». (Thompson, qtd. in Mickenberg 711)

Thompson was also introduced to the Uzbek Vice President Jahan Obidava. Obidava had been sold to a man at the age of eleven. But in 1923 she unveiled, left her husband, and went to school, and «was elected to office in 1929» (Gilyard 93). Thompson was very impressed by the transformation of the lives of Obidava and other women. She made detailed notes about their newly found economic independence, education, and freedom to choose their husbands and wrote in length about it in «Trip to Russia» (38-40).

Still in Uzbekistan, she «visited a silk factory that had been built in 1928 specifically to liberate women [where several] Uzbek women were in leadership positions» (Mickenberg 712). In Bukhara, the group collectively composed a message «To the Workers and Peasants of Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic» (qtd. in Gilyard 94). They praised the successful implementation of «the Leninist national policy», through which the Soviets had managed «converting Middle Asia from a czarist colony of oppressed peoples and an undeveloped country to an industrialized country under working class rule» (94). They particularly emphasised the «emancipation of women» and «the complete elimination of national [racialised] antagonisms» (94) in Uzbekistan.

At the beginning of October, Thompson and her group reached the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku. The Soviets had made impressive strides in Baku,

socialising the «vast oil fields, once controlled by the [American] Rothschild and Rockefeller conglomerates» (Gilyard 95). Yet, Thompson was much more interested in the progress women had made. «In the fourteen years since the Revolution, opportunities had been opened up for women that had been closed to them for centuries», she wrote in «Trip to Russia» (44). The Baku Women's Club was offering literacy programs to women, sending tutors to those who could not travel to school, and offering others the opportunity to board at a dormitory during their education. Before the revolution «[t]he literacy rate among Azerbaijani women stood at 2 percent [...]; women had been beaten and in some cases killed by their husbands for trying to read. Although wrathful husbands still tried to block female education, they were beginning to be prosecuted and imprisoned for violence against women» (Gilyard 95). In an interview with Julia Mickenberg, Thompson's daughter recalled some of the stories her mother had brought back from Central Asia, including one about a man who was on trial for violence against his wife after she unveiled. «That trial symbolized the double or triple oppression [...] that [this violence] could be dealt with, very concretely» (Interview with Mary Louise Patterson October 2014, Los Angeles, Mickenberg 714).

Before returning to Moscow, Thompson and her peers went through Georgia and Ukraine. Somewhat ironically, they also visited «the Dnieprostroi Dam, the facility built by Cooper» (Gilyard 95), who was very likely responsible for the cancellation of the film. At the dam «[t]hey met the head of an all-woman concrete brigade that held some sort of production record» (Gilyard 95). In her enthusiasm about Soviet progress, especially the emancipation of women, Thompson kept silent about the famine in many parts of the Soviet Union, «where peasants had resisted collectivization and were essentially starved by the government as retribution» (Mickenberg 693). In *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes wrote much later that the African-American Emma Harris, who had moved to Russia in 1904 and socialised with many of the *Black and White* cast, told him about the famine «around Kharkov» (Hughes 85). Maybe Thompson had not heard Harris's reports about the Ukrainian famine, or she chose to present to the United States solely the positive results of Soviet modernisation. She never talked about it and mentioned it only in her unpublished autobiography.

After the trip Thompson returned to Moscow where she received note that her mother's deteriorating health demanded her return to the United States in November 1932. Despite the abrupt end to her trip, and despite her mother's death soon after her return, Thompson would always remember her experiences in Soviet Russia and Central Asia as enlightening and defining for her political views. «What I had witnessed», she wrote in her memoirs, «convinced me that only a new social order could remedy the American racial injustices I knew so well. I went to the Soviet Union with leftist leanings; I returned home a committed revolutionary» (*Trip to Russia* 47). A great part of this new commitment was her devotion to women's liberation. Before her expedition, Thompson had never publicly agitated for women's issues in the United States or anywhere else. When she returned, however, she started addressing the «three-fold exploitation as women, as workers and as Negroes and [who were] forced through discrimination into the most menial labour under the worst conditions without organizational protection» (Gilyard 119).

She campaigned, for example, for the unionising of domestic workers, support for the housewives' league, and the organisation of a women's group at the National Negro Congress in 1936 (Gilyard 119). In the same year she published her reflections on the congress and some of her ideas about the implementation of measures to improve Black women's social and economic circumstances in an article titled «Toward a Brighter Dawn» that was published in *Woman Today* (30). There, Thompson described Black women as among the most exploited within the American working class, oppressed by racism, bearing the sole responsibility for reproductive work, and suffering most from the persistent economic crisis (Thompson, *Toward a Brighter* 14).

Together with Augusta Savage, a popular sculptor and teacher, Thompson started organising political forums that became known as the «Vanguard Club» (Gilyard 98) and which focused on the liberation of women workers. And although the women's group proved to be unsustainable within the National Negro Congress, Thompson continued to focus on gender issues and women's emancipation in her fight against the Fascism that was emerging around the world (Gilyard 121; 127-128). Years later, she together with Shirley Graham Du Bois, Charlotta Bass, and others formed the black-feminist radical civil rights organization Sojourners for Truth and Justice (McDuffie 82). The Sojourners focused on a combination of feminist rights, domestic

civil rights, and global human rights. In one of their foundational pamphlets they stated: «Our action will carry forward the tradition of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and will give inspiration and courage to women the world over, especially the colored women of Africa and Asia who expect us to make this challenge» (Thompson Patterson and Beah Richards «A Call to Negro Women» [1951], qtd. in Gilyard 171)

When her husband, the prominent lawyer and Communist Party leader William Patterson, was charged with various offenses under McCarthyism, all of which were connected to his political activism, Thompson Patterson together with «Angie Dickerson, Dorothy Hunton, and Eslanda Robeson, [...] took the lead in forming the Committee of One Hundred Women» (Gilyard 178) that organised a mass rally in his defence.

The fight for African-American women remained a fixture in Thompson Patterson's long life. She also remained quite enthusiastic about the Soviet Union, even after the horror of the Stalin terror became public knowledge in 1956. The results of her feminist and communist politics can also be seen in her daughter, Mary Louise, who became «the first African-American to complete medical studies at a university in the Soviet Union» (Gilyard 193). She returned to the United States in 1968, where she worked as a paediatrician.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Thompson's and West's letters, reports and short stories disrupt common tropes about travel writing such as displacement, alienation, (un)belonging, etc. Their experience of recognition and validation in Russia heightens their awareness about how violently they are being *othered* at home. Both women talk openly about the freedom that allows them to live their racial identity freely and on their own terms. In-between the lines, however, both also suggest that they were free to explore their sexualities in a way they never could in the USA. Freed, albeit only temporarily, from racial oppression, the two women were also to get a glimpse of what it meant to be freed from the tight gender-corsets of their bourgeois American lives. Only in Russia they could truly understand the restrictions of American gendered and racialised social structures.

Both women's letters and Thompson's detailed notes about the trip show a kind of feminist awakening: in West's case as an independent (lesbian) writer and in Thompson's case as feminist activist. Moreover, despite their very different political and personal positionalities, all their subsequent texts show a feminist consciousness that was never present in their writing before. The already committed Leftist activist Thompson became a feminist internationalist, and upon returning to the United States she joined the Communist Party and started agitating for the liberation of Black women workers in the United States and beyond. Thompson's subsequent writing as well as her political work testify to the deep political and personal impact that the trip to the USSR had on her and the enduring value she ascribed to the US-Soviet encounter. Through her trip to Soviet Russia Thompson was drawn to the plight of African-American working class women.

Dorothy West became a feminist in her own way. She only ever wrote and spoke about the Soviet encounter in personal terms and maintained all her life that her interest in the trip had been purely artistic. But her real and fictionalised letters, and her short-story «A Room in Red Square» reflect her own approach to emancipating herself as a Black female writer, inspired by the experience of Soviet sexual and racial liberation. The full impact of the Russian sojourn can only be grasped through a reflection of West's entire long career as a writer and publisher. In her last publication «Adventure in Moscow», published in 1985, West remembers herself as a young woman who was too shy to dance with the renowned filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The woman who came back from the USSR, however, felt confident enough to start the leftist literary journal *Challenge* and serve as its editor in chief. Additionally, West also found the independence to commit to a long-term relationship with her co-editor Marian Minus instead of conforming to social and class expectations that she should marry and have children.

Contrary to her insistence that she did not believe in communism, her journal was dedicated primarily to the cause of the Black working class. Moreover, many of her stories criticise the cruelty of capitalism for the Black working class and the rigidity of its class stratification, including the nuclear family structure (*Mammy* and *The Penny*). Her work as an editor and her writing «paved the way for women writers who have continued their predecessors'

interrogation of masculinist notions of modernity, identity, and community» (Wilks 25).

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