Red Migrations

Transnational Mobility and Leftist Culture after 1917

EDITED BY PHILIP GLEISSNER
AND BRADLEY A. GORSKI

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6 "Syphilis, Dirt, and the Frontiers of Revolution": Langston Hughes and Arthur Koestler at the Borders of Disgust

BRADLEY A. GORSKI

Langston Hughes and Arthur Koestler met on the outskirts of the Soviet revolutionary project, in Tashkent in 1932, where they soon struck up a friendship. Together they drank tea with locals, picked cotton, attended a show trial, and travelled to the farthest southern frontier of Soviet territory. Each came to Central Asia for his own reasons: Koestler to report on agricultural developments, and Hughes to see the Soviet region that he thought most resembled the American South. Both were also interested in probing the outer limits of the Revolution, "the backward regions of Central Asia" (in Koestler's words) at "the dark frontiers of progress" (in Hughes's). Those outer frontiers repelled Koestler, but to Hughes, they suggested expansive, transgressive opportunities. In both authors' memoirs – Hughes's *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956) and Koestler's *The Invisible Writing* (1954) – these boundaries, along with the desire and danger inherent in transgressing them, are expressed in terms of disgust.[1] In their retrospective accounts, each written more than two decades after their travels, both authors deploy disgust as an aesthetic means of drawing boundaries, of reconfiguring the geography of the Revolution not only for themselves but also for the Cold War–era reader. In this way, disgust traces a transnational geography of the Revolution, one that, contributing to the larger discussions in this volume, is not defined primarily by economic need and political persecution, but rather by the affective and aesthetic impulses of desire and repulsion, community and difference.

For both Hughes and Koestler, disgust conjures the affective desire for boundaries, suggesting the need to separate inside from outside, one's own from foreign. In this way, disgust stimulates in the reader a *counter*-revolutionary impulse: it induces the rejection of internationalism and instead pushes the reader to desire stricter borders. At the same time, the very feeling of disgust suggests that those borders remain permeable. In order for disgust to be activated, after all, the object of disgust must

Figure 6.1. Langston Hughes and Arthur Koestler in Soviet Turkmenistan. Photographer unknown. Source: Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

threaten to transgress boundaries, which in turn provokes the desire for borders to be more fully drawn. In this way, disgust imagery allows both memoirists to suggest the contours of their own revolutionary geography without drawing the borders in a firm hand. Instead, they encourage readers to trace those lines themselves. In other words, aesthetically mobilized disgust allows boundaries to remain emergent, always almost drawn. But while Koestler induces his readers to trust their disgust, to firmly draw the boundaries it suggests, Hughes deploys disgust to sketch a revolutionary geography that invites transgression, indeed requires it.

Disgust and Revolution

Involuntary but difficult to ignore, disgust has the power to reconfigure experience both in the moment and in retrospect, and for both Hughes and Koestler, the potent affect begins to blur and redraw boundaries – of

ideological, revolutionary, and interpersonal natures – within and among the timelines of their travelogues.[2] It is perhaps unsurprising that this extraordinarily intercultural and interracial encounter – involving an African American poet, a German-speaking Hungarian Jewish journalist, ethnically Russian Soviets, and local Turkmens (and all of their respective customs, practices, and hygienic rituals) – might produce, among some of its participants, "the fundamental schema of disgust," or "the experience of a nearness that is not wanted," to quote from Winfried Menninghaus's theory of disgust.[3] Indeed, the particular conditions of Hughes and Koestler's travel brought them into close and unavoidable contact with Turkmen culture, which was itself undergoing enforced integration with the new norms of Soviet modernity. Hughes and Koestler ate, drank, and slept in close quarters with each other and with their hosts. Koestler makes multiple references to "grimy" and overcrowded conditions, to "squalor and decay" (136), and to the ironic juxtaposition of ubiquitous Soviet hygiene propaganda and manifestly unhygienic practices. Hughes mentions food prepared by cooks with dirty hands, "runny eyes and scabby faces"; he writes of melons cut with "dirty knives" and describes drinking tea from "grimy bowls" passed from hand to hand, lips to lips (148). Each traveller also describes sexual escapades alongside fears of sexually transmitted diseases, figuring sex and its inherent dangers as a powerful locus simultaneously of attraction and of disgust.

The pervasiveness of such images of disgust suggests that their place in these accounts is more than incidental. If, according to Mary Douglas's classic study, *Purity and Danger*, "where there is dirt, there is a system," then perhaps where there is this much disgust, we might say that there is not so much one system as a clash of systems – systems in various stages of transition, conflict, or negotiation.[4] Disgust can be a powerful means of making sense of such uncertainty. Disgust draws boundaries. It demarcates the world, separating the acceptable from the unacceptable or, in Douglas's terms, purity from danger.

For Julia Kristeva, in her theory of the abject, *Powers of Horror*, the social world and the very notion of the self are defined by boundaries drawn in lines of disgust. The abject, the source of all disgust, is that which is at once unnameable and unapproachable. It forms the frontiers of the verbal self, "the border of my condition as a living being."[5] Taboos, prohibitions, behavioural expectations are founded on and reinforced by disgust impulses, by the need to separate the abject from the self. The threat of defilement, of pollution, of the outside, provides stability to the inside, erecting and reinforcing the walls of the known world. Disgust is at once social and primordial. It is both reproducible

and involuntary, part of both mimesis and reality, of both the symbolic and the real. It is simultaneously a deeply aesthetic (or perhaps anti-aesthetic) sensation, and one that transcends aesthetics to infiltrate the physical world. A successful representation of the disgusting, in other words, quickly moves beyond the bounds of its medium and makes audiences wince, recoil, experience nausea in the physical spaces of their own bodies and surroundings.

According to Daniel Kelly's survey of empirical psychological research, the sensation of disgust – whether invoked by physical stimuli or by aesthetic representations – triggers a powerful "affect program" that immediately sets off physiological and behavioural responses. The heart rate drops, salivation increases, and the subject experiences "an immediate aversion or withdrawal response" as well as a "motivation to get rid of the offending entity in [any] way."[6] Another set of more cognitive-based responses follows: a "sense of offensiveness, and contamination sensitivity," which in turn lead to "downstream effects," including moral judgments and social behaviour.[7] Poised "between conscious patterns of conduct and unconscious impulses," to quote Menninghaus again, the disgust response can bring "eminent affective powers" to bear on establishing social taboos, boundaries, and other sorting mechanisms.[8] The involuntary physical disgust response, in this way, is directly connected to ethical and moral judgments about the offending object and its sources, such that aesthetically induced disgust can be intimately connected (often unbeknownst to audiences) to normative rejection. Travelling lightly and powerfully across aesthetics, emotion, physicality, and ethics, disgust is perhaps the ultimate affect. It allows aesthetics to trace lines through the contours of the real world and encodes those boundaries in the realm of the symbolic order.

But disgust also invites the breaching of those boundaries. It is not simply a turning away (as the Russian word *otvrashchenie* would suggest); it can also be a source of attraction. It is "a vortex of summons and repulsion," in Kristeva's words.[9] William Ian Miller's *Anatomy of Disgust* further suggests that the pleasure of sex comes, at least in part, through "the mutual transgression of disgust-defended barriers."[10] The taboos around sex, often limned in terms of disgust, are "not just there to prevent pleasure, but [are] needed to heighten it."[11] Not incidentally, for both Hughes and Koestler, the pleasures and perils of sex play alongside images of disgust, suggesting simultaneously an invitation to and an interdiction against breaching the boundaries of disgust.

Although disgust might feel natural, instinctual, unlearned, the boundaries of disgust are historically and socially conditioned. They are imprinted on the symbolic order through ritual, culture, and tradition,

which suppress sources of disgust from everyday experience – to flip the causal vector, as Kristeva suggests, that which culture suppresses *becomes* the source of disgust. When the symbolic order breaks down, those boundaries are breached. No longer contained, dirt is released, previous pollutants infiltrate the previously pure, and, in this absence of culturally enforced boundaries, the importance of disgust itself, disgust as an affect, is heightened. "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection," writes Kristeva, "but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[12]

In this way, disgust can play an outsized role in times of upheaval, tracing the bounds of social acceptability, the subject's place in society, and the self. The period immediately following the Russian Revolution was one such time. The turmoil, violence, and confusion of the revolutionary years activated precisely the symbolic uncertainty Kristeva highlights, intentionally disturbing "identity, system, order." Early Bolsheviks recognized such disturbances and turned to disgust in their attempts to stabilize the symbolic order. In a 1921, for instance, Lenin mobilized disgust to stamp out heterodoxy within the party. On the front page of *Pravda* under the title "On Party Purges," Lenin appealed to the "working masses," whose "fine intuition is able to comprehend the difference between honest and devoted Communists and those who arouse disgust."[13] The healthy, proletarian disgust Lenin ascribes to the working masses is meant not only to justify but also to *produce the desire for* the purges he sought. Disgust, however, has no inherent political or ideological valence, and it also proved useful for the opposite political ends. In a pamphlet that appeared the same year as Lenin's *Pravda* editorial, for instance, Bolshevik leader Aleksandra Kollontai framed disgust as a counter-revolutionary affect, accusing the petty bourgeoisie of unjustified "revulsion at and fear of revolutionary acts." For Kollontai, disgust was not a healthy attribute of the working class, but a bourgeois relic, evoking a desire for boundaries that should be overcome.[14] That disgust could be mobilized in such opposing directions (and by members of the same party in the very same year) shows just how unstable the symbolic order had become and how attractive the affective power of disgust was as a rhetorical tool for imposing some sense of stability.[15]

Beyond the symbolic order, physical disgust stimuli also proliferated in the post-revolutionary years. As early Soviet efforts at urbanization, mobilization, and communal living breached previous boundaries, more bodies crowded into smaller spaces. The destruction of the First World War, the Revolution, and the Civil War – along with Soviet ambitions for the total reorganization of society – had brought many

public services to a standstill, at least temporarily. Many urban spaces recovered only in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Meanwhile, rural areas underwent collectivization, which drove even more citizens to the cities. Dirt, grime, and filth were prominent features of the revolutionary years by nearly all accounts. The grime, general overcrowding, and faulty public services combined to raise the spectre of infection and disease. To stem contagion and concomitant public health problems, Soviet authorities launched aggressive propaganda campaigns aimed at getting citizens to observe basic personal hygiene, at times invoking disgust imagery.[16]

Travellers to the early Soviet Union often commented on the grime that seemed to coat everything. Even sympathetic travellers, like Anna Louise Strong, could not ignore the filth. An American reporter who travelled to Russia as part of a delegation of the American Friends Service Committee, Strong volunteered in a Samara orphanage, where she worked with "starving children by thousands, sick with cholera, typhus, dysentery; they had no soap nor change of underwear or clothing; they littered the floor with filth."[17] For others, like Theodore Dreiser, the dirt became central to their travels. "The huddled masses gave me a sense of nausea," he wrote in his diary on 4 January 1928. "Russia is permanently spoiled for me by the cold and dirt."[18] Strong saw the grime as evidence of poor conditions to be overcome, the mark of a society in transition, striving for something better. For Dreiser, dirt became so essential to the Soviet experience itself that, when asked to speak to VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries; *Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi sviazi s zagranitsei*), he devoted much of his time to lecturing the young state on hygienic practices.[19]

Unlike in these accounts, however, the disgust explored in Hughes's and Koestler's travelogues is not used primarily to express something about the internal workings of the Soviet Union. Rather, it works to probe the travellers' own relationship to the frontiers of the revolutionary society they encounter. They experience grime, risk infection, and face disgust at the outer limits of the Revolution, where the reach of the Soviet project is more tenuous. Equally important, both travelogues are retrospective accounts and, in more than simple chronology, Cold War documents. Koestler's hard right turn away from his youthful Marxist ideals had culminated in the publication of *Darkness at Noon* in 1940 and his participation in *The God that Failed*, a 1949 collection of essays by prominent intellectuals renouncing their earlier interest in communism.[20] Hughes, while maintaining his commitment to progressive poetics and politics, had his own difficulties negotiating Cold War life. He had been persecuted and threatened for his "social" poetry already

in the 1930s and 1940s and was called in front of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) in March 1953, at a time when his memoir, which spends some two hundred pages in the Soviet Union, was already in the works.[21] At the same time, Hughes was involved in the developing Civil Rights movement, a dramatic shift in US race politics that found reflection in Hughes's poetics. This historical context suggests something of the stakes of these two pieces of writing. If Koestler and Hughes travelling in 1932 are probing the frontiers of revolution with their own experiences (of disgust, among other emotions), then the writers of the 1950s sketch a different – and still shifting – revolutionary geography, as leftist politics, social justice, and internationalism resonate differently with their post-war Anglo-American readerships. For this reason, it is essential to understand that disgust in these memoirs is not only – indeed not primarily – experienced. It is also deployed. Disgust becomes a literary technique that both authors use to inscribe themselves and their own ideological journeys on the contours of the revolution, to draw and redraw the boundaries of twentieth-century politics in lines of grime, syphilis, and nausea.

Hughes on the Borders of Disgust

Hughes travelled to the Soviet Union in 1932 as part of a group of twenty-two African American artists, writers, and performers invited by Mezhrabpom Film Studio and organized by Louise Thompson in order to make a film about race relations in the American South called *Black and White*. After the group arrived in Moscow, it became clear that the film would not be made, either because the material was unworkable or because of US government pressure – likely a combination of the two.[22] With the film shoot cancelled, the group dispersed. Some headed for Europe, others opted to stay in Moscow long term, and about half the group accepted an offer to tour whatever region of the Soviet Union they chose. Hughes was among the latter group. "It did not take us long," Hughes recalls in *I Wonder as I Wander*, "to decide among ourselves that the portions of the Soviet Union we would most like to see were those regions where the majority of the coloured citizens lived, namely Turkmenistan in Soviet Central Asia" (123). Beyond race relations, Hughes was also interested in the emergent revolutionary society that the peripheries of the Soviet project promised. Central Asia, he writes, "was said to be a land still in flux, where Soviet patterns were as yet none too firmly fixed" (123). His travels through Turkmen and Uzbek territories – his meetings with these Soviets of colour whose position in society would illuminate Soviet race relations – would

simultaneously be encounters between those cultures and the outer edges of Soviet modernity.

Hughes's trip has been analysed before, notably in several studies in recent decades that consider encounters between African Americans and the Soviet experiment. The account in Kate A. Baldwin's 2002 book *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain*, for instance, concentrates on Hughes's fascination with the Soviet program of compulsory unveiling of Central Asian women. Drawing a connection to Hughes's long-term interest in W.E.B. Du Bois's metaphor of the veil as representative of the "double consciousness" of Black Americans, Baldwin argues that "unveiling became the representative means of establishing the extent to which the new Soviet freedom contrasted with the inequities of the color line back in the United States."[23] Central Asian unveiling became not only equivalent of breaching the colour line but also a means for Hughes to push beyond the heteronormative assumptions underlying Du Bois's original metaphor. For Du Bois, the metaphor of the veil and the understanding of double consciousness appear when he is rejected by a white girl among his schoolmates.[24] Rending the veil, then, would provide access to whiteness, not least on heteronormative sexual terms. But Hughes sees the veil differently. He identifies with the unveiling women he sees in Soviet Central Asia and not only with the male gaze he occupies. For him unveiling becomes less about sexual access and more about revelation of self. Citing a 1934 essay by Hughes in which unveiled women reveal a spectrum of skin tones, Baldwin argues that the unveilings do not primarily work to provide access to the unveiled women, nor do they allow (or compel) Central Asian women to join a normatively homogeneous Soviet world. Instead, they invite the revelation of difference.

In this light, Hughes's Central Asian trip becomes even more revolutionary, not only opening the way for racial inclusivity but also implicitly arguing for a broader spectra of differences, including, as Jennifer Wilson suggested in a later essay, "Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent," the place of Black queer identities within the larger revolutionary project.[25] Such accounts infuse Hughes's Soviet travels with both expansive liberatory hopes – that the Soviet Union would be able to abolish race-based restrictions while simultaneously celebrating difference – and an intimate connection to domestic US race relations. As Steven Lee has argued, Hughes's travels inspired his hopes for the Revolution as a global project that could transcend the Soviet south and might even breach the American colour line.[26]

It is perhaps no surprise that after Hughes returned from the Soviet Union – and in the same years he published the essays about his trip

that figure prominently in both Wilson's and Baldwin's analyses – his poetry took on more explicitly pro-communist and pro-Soviet valences. In poems like "Song of the Revolution," "Ballads of Lenin," and "Let America Be America Again," Hughes connected his Soviet sympathies directly to the fight against Jim Crow in the US. Perhaps more straightforwardly than any other, his 1934 poem "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." makes the connection explicit:

> Put one more "S" in the U.S.A.
> To make it Soviet.
> One more "S" in the U.S.A.
> Oh, we'll live to see it yet.
> When the land belongs to the farmers
> And the factories to the working men
> The U.S.A. when we take control
> Will be the U.S.S.A. then.
> […]
> But we can't join hands together
> So long as whites are lynching black,
> So black and white in one union fight
> And get on the right track.
> By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led
> Come together, fellow workers
> Black and white can all be red.[27]

The liberatory hope emphasized here characterizes the expansive geography of the Revolution that Hughes developed during his time in Soviet Central Asia and that he brought back to 1930s America. This is the revolutionary geography at the centre of Hughes's contemporaneous accounts: a utopian vision of a truly world revolution – inspired by and distilled in the image of Central Asian unveiling, a metaphor of boundaries breached – that could prove capable of erasing the colour line in the US, not only for the respectable Black culture imagined by Du Bois but even for gender-fluid and queer Black identities that were so important to Hughes's experience.

When Hughes returned to his Soviet travels for his 1950s memoirs, however, something had changed. His fascination with unveiling, although not entirely absent, had significantly diminished. Instead, disgust came to the fore, and – in a related shift – a large part of Hughes's narrative was focused on Arthur Koestler. Koestler had been absent from earlier accounts, but he had gained international stature since the two had met in the 1930s, and Koestler's 1954 memoir had mentioned

Hughes, so by the time *I Wonder as I Wander* appeared in 1956, it would have been difficult for Hughes *not* to include him. Hughes casts Koestler as a foil for himself: as the two travel together, they experience a similar world, including plenty of disgust stimuli, but react entirely differently. Images of dirt and grime, nearly absent in Hughes's earlier accounts of his trip, play a central role in his 1956 narrative.[28] If tearing away the veil defined Hughes's contemporaneous experience, then by 1956, "a nearness that is not wanted" – Menninghaus's "fundamental schema of disgust" – most forcefully characterizes Hughes's remembered Soviet Central Asia.

"Turkoman hospitality," Hughes writes, "is based on sharing," which meant sharing everything, from space to spoons to bowls of tea and large vats of soup. Invited to a home-cooked meal in Ashkhabad, Hughes describes how "the food kettles had cooled enough for our hosts to reach in with bare fingers and pick up chunks of meat and tear them into smaller bits which they dropped back into the soup" before the international guests were invited to "put our hands into the warm liquid and fish around until we found a nice piece of mutton, pulled it out and ate it" (144). The evident pleasure with which this scene is described suggests that the potentially disgusting also carries an attractive charge. Similarly, both revulsion and a homoerotic undercurrent infuse the sharing of tea, which was drunk "from bowls that went from mouth to mouth, around and around in the customary ritual," and that, Hughes does not fail to mention, "dozens of strange moustaches had touched" (142).

Conditions only get grimier as the travellers make their way from Ashkhabad towards the southern border to a small village called Permetyab, a "fantastic desert community, inhabited by evil-appearing sore-covered, dirty people" (147). Invited to tea again, Hughes notes:

> There were three or four bowls, which about twenty men shared. The water had been scooped up from a filthy irrigation canal, and there was mud in the bottom of each bowl after the tea was drunk.
>
> "Koestler," I said, "we are all going to die of cholera germs."
>
> "I wouldn't be surprised," said Koestler, although he had scarcely touched his lips to any of the bowls. (147)

Their destination in this outpost of the revolution happens to be a health clinic, where they meet with a nurse just after lunch, who tells them of her troubles introducing hygienic practices, especially during childbirth: "Some of the women bite off the umbilical cord themselves, as their mothers and grandmothers did before them. Since water is scarce

in this desert land, it's an old custom to wash a newborn child in sand. I have trouble with babies' eyes festering. Sometimes children lose their sight" (148). After the meeting, Hughes recalls that

> the food we had eaten had been handled by Baluchis whose hands were none too clean and some of whom had runny eyes and scabby faces. They had cut our melons with the same dirty knives with which they cut tobacco. We had drunk from their grimy bowls [and] the nurse at the clinic told us that all of the health problems there were aggravated by the fact that ninety per cent of the population of Permetyab had syphilis. (148)

If one were tracking the intensity and concentration of disgust stimuli in Hughes's account, this moment would mark its peak. Understandably, "Koestler almost keeled over," but Hughes's own response is remarkable for being so muted: "I was a bit upset myself" (148).

In fact, throughout the account, Koestler is portrayed as reacting more strongly than Hughes to the ample disgust stimuli. "Koestler was particularly perturbed at the unsanitary tea-drinking customs of Central Asia," writes Hughes, and quotes Koestler: "'Slobbering in each other's bowls,' said Koestler, 'a bloody disgusting filthy habit!'" Hughes, on the other hand, "simply went ahead and drank and re-drank with the others, and forgot about it" (134). Koestler "had a German sense of sanitation … And every time he came back to our hotel he would wash. I had not known him long before I heard him say what I was often to hear him repeat, 'If the Revolution had only occurred in Germany, at least it would have been a clean one'" (134). Fulfilling the implicit promise, Hughes has Koestler repeat the line – which, it bears acknowledging, takes on a newly sinister hue in the post-Holocaust era when Hughes writes it – at least twice more.[29] Hughes himself – his 1932 self, the traveller, not the memoirist – seems to experience very little disgust even as he (writing in 1956) packs his prose with descriptions and images that seem designed to evoke disgust. In fact, the calm reaction to the syphilis statistic ("I was a bit upset myself") is one of the only times Hughes allows his past self to experience anything approaching a normal disgust reaction.

The incongruence between description and reaction suggests that Hughes is using disgust deliberately, so that revulsion becomes a literary technique: affect as device (to paraphrase Viktor Shklovsky). As the descriptions work on the reader, they evoke the involuntary disgust "affect program" outlined above, while Hughes himself remains impervious. If we understand disgust to be a potent means of proscribing taboos, encouraging the demarcation of boundaries, and inducing the

desire for limits, then Hughes's prose suggests those borders only to show Hughes the character breaking through them. Indeed, Hughes's descriptions often suggest an attraction to the disgust stimuli, an acknowledgment that, to quote Miller, "the disgusting itself has the power to allure."[30] For Hughes, disgust not only evokes a desire for boundaries but also suggests the pleasure of breaching them.

Hughes's revolutionary geography becomes one of limits surpassed, visceral reactions overcome, and boundaries crossed. This is what he calls seeing the revolution with "*Negro* eyes" – Hughes's native optic and one that he specifically tries, in vain, to get Koestler to understand (135). "To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (135). Just as he wants to make Koestler see the revolution this way, his poetics in *I Wonder as I Wander* are intended to make the Cold War reader see the revolution through the hopeful eyes of a Black American coming from the Jim Crow south. The tramcars in Tashkent, Hughes notes, used to have a "Jim Crow section for Asiatics … The old partitions were still there now, but segregation itself had gone since the Uzbeks [now] control[led] the affairs of their autonomous republic" (160). For Hughes's image of the Revolution, it is important *both* that the partitions are still visible *and* that they have become obsolete. His Cold War readers too should feel boundaries being drawn, indeed they should feel the visceral desire for those boundaries – evoked through images of disgust – and then they should see those boundaries immediately overcome.

Koestler, on the other hand, cannot overcome his disgust. Hughes titles the visit to Permetyab "Koestler Washes His Hands," and some of the last words exchanged between the two are (at least in Hughes's account): "'Dirty and ugly and dusty,' he said, head down over our meal. 'This disgusting part of the world! In Germany at least we'd have a *clean* revolution'" (158). Hughes concludes, "Were I a socio-literary historian, I might hazard a guess that here in 1932 were Koestler's crossroads … – his turning point from left to right that was to culminate a few years later in his bitter attacks on communism" (159).

But if the key difference between Hughes and Koestler (in Hughes's account) is in their disgust responses, then the difference is one of degree rather than kind. Hughes's conspicuously calm reaction to potential infection ("I was a bit upset myself") comes right before the enigmatic line used for the title of this chapter, and it is a line uttered by Hughes in his own voice: "Syphilis, dirt, Permetyab, and the frontiers of revolution, ugh!" (148). Although he elaborates no further, directly after this exclamation, Hughes turns back from the southern border and joins

Koestler in their hotel room. Perhaps for post-HUAC reasons, perhaps as honest truth, the Cold War memoirist Hughes seems to locate the frontiers of his own revolutionary geography in the only exclamation of disgust he will allow himself, this solitary "ugh!"

Koestler's Bellyaches

Koestler's memoir, *The Invisible Writing* (1954), largely corroborates Hughes's account, but it spends less time on the relationship between the two travellers. Unlike Hughes, Koestler was more than a "fellow traveller" of the revolution. He had joined the Communist Party before his visit to the Soviet Union and had even worked briefly as an intelligence officer for the Comintern. As much an activist as a writer, Koestler spent the summer of 1932 canvassing, pamphleting, and agitating for the Communists before petitioning the Party to sponsor a writing visit to the Soviet Union. "The idea for the book" – his first book on the Soviet Union, *Of White Nights and Red Days*, published in 1934, which he recalls here in his 1954 memoir – "was to describe a journey across the Soviet Empire from its most northerly to its most southerly point" (78). The proposed book was to end with "the development of the backward regions of Central Asia." Like Hughes, Koestler was explicitly interested in the geography of the Revolution, in drawing an imagined map of development – social and technological – over the vast territory, unknown to his imagined readers, of what he calls the "Soviet Empire."[31]

When he revisits that journey in 1954, his memoir is shot through not only with hindsight but also with the wholesale renunciation of his previous communist convictions. Thus, in the memoir analysed here, a right-wing Koestler describes the experiences of his travelling leftist younger self. The narrating Koestler recalls meeting Hughes on the southern frontier of that empire, picking cotton together, and travelling with him and a writers' brigade through the Turkmen SSR. But the memoir does not openly use Hughes as a foil for the young Koestler's experiences. Nor does it emphasize Koestler's own disgust quite so elaborately as Hughes does. Disgust stimuli, however, are rife, both in descriptions of the physical world and in the choice of metaphors. The book opens with the lines (the first half borrowed from Picasso): "I went into Communism as one goes to a spring of fresh water, and I left Communism as one clambers out of a poisoned river strewn with the wreckage of flooded cities and the corpses of the drowned" (20). The Communist Party cell that Koestler joins in Berlin is described as nothing so much as a vector of infection. "The term 'cell' is not purely

metaphorical; for these are living, pulsating units within a huge, sprawling organism, co-ordinated in their function, governed by a hierarchy of nervous centres, and susceptible to various diseases – to the Titoist virus, to bourgeois infection or Trotskyist cancer" (26). When Koestler gets to the Soviet Union, and especially Central Asia, the potential sources of disgust proliferate: the customs house at the Soviet border is twice described as "grimy," Central Asia is characterized by "squalor and decay," and dust and dirt are everywhere. But even as Koestler describes the dirt of the Revolution, he does not allow his younger self to express disgust explicitly at these moments. Amidst the disgust stimuli that frame his account, Koestler's narrator is apparently much more tolerant of dirt than, say, Theodore Dreiser, although he notes its existence nearly as often.

Instead, when Koestler uses words like "repellent," "revolting," and "disgust," they are in reference to something else – an internal feeling, a nausea portrayed as an ethical response rather than as a reaction to external stimuli. "Every communist," he writes, meaning his past self as much as others, experiences "disgust with Russia or the Party, when the fraudulent character of Utopia becomes temporarily apparent" (88). These moments of doubt, he writes, can be overcome only by "some repellent aspect of capitalist society" (88). In this way, the dialectic of the Revolution, for Koestler, is one of disgust, in which counter-disgust overcomes revulsion at Soviet crimes: "The show trials of 1936–38 disgusted many European Communists, but the Fascist menace, symbolized by the Spanish Civil War, disgusted them even more" (88).[32] "Party jargon," Koestler writes, "calls attacks of doubt 'bellyaches'" that must be overcome by good communists (89). Although these "bellyaches" are not explicitly connected to the dirt and grime Koestler constantly describes, more than coincidence motivates their adjacency. By describing his ethical doubts in terms of nausea and disgust alongside representations of dirt and metaphors of infection, Koestler subtly mobilizes readers' revulsion. In other words, the low-level disgust readers might well feel at Koestler's descriptions seems implicitly connected to a moral revulsion that readers are meant to sense in themselves and that they are in turn asked to associate with the revolutionary project itself.

In case the proximity of physical dirt and political nausea fails to make the point clearly, Koestler mobilizes another chain of connections that link his leftist doubts to another realm often intimately connected with disgust: sex. Sex, which shares almost all of its characteristics with disgust stimuli – closeness, boundary breaching, fluid exchange, potential for infection – is central to theories of disgust.[33] "What else, after all," writes Miller in *Anatomy of Disgust*, "makes sex so difficult,

so frequently the basis for anxiety, neurosis, and psychosis?" Sexuality, in this way, might be seen as the obverse of disgust, a transgression of boundaries that evokes attraction more than repulsion. For Hughes, as noted earlier, the breeching of boundaries, whether in unveiling or the evocation of disgust, often carries an erotic charge.[34] But in Koestler's account, sex and disgust are connected not through boundary-breaking but rather through political uncertainty, and his bellyaches diminish rather than enhance his libido.

In an early chapter, Koestler assures the reader that before his political doubts creep in "the one 'diversion from the class struggle' that did not make me feel guilty was love … With most men, at least in the Anglo-Saxon countries, sex is the main source of guilt and anxiety. In my case it was the only pursuit exempt from guilt – perhaps because my attitude to women remained basically naïve and romantic" (41). However, he quickly relates two "episodes concerning women with whom I was not personally involved" that show anything but a "naïve and romantic" relationship towards sex even before his trip to the Soviet Union. In Berlin, a colleague "whose name has slipped my memory" meets a woman with "a large swastika brooch on her breast" (42). He goes home with her and finds her (agreeably) sexually aggressive. But "at the climactic moment," he writes, this "ideal *Hitler-Mädchen*" "raised herself on one elbow, stretched out the other arm in the Roman salute, and breathed in a dying voice a fervent 'Heil Hitler.'" Koestler's colleague "nearly had a stroke" (43). In the same Berlin Communist cell, a certain "Comrade Hilda" of Koestler's own Party cell feared for her safety. The reason once again connects politics and sex: "a man from the [Communist Party] District Committee … had wanted to sleep with her; … she had refused; [and] subsequently he had been accusing her of some unnamed crime against the Party" (44). "The hysterical Valkyrie and Comrade Hilda," Koestler concludes, "do not represent German womanhood; but they do represent, as extreme cases, the 'politically awakened' part of it, anno domini 1932" (44). In these two anecdotes Koestler reveals a deep anxiety about how radical politics might disturb his previously "naïve and romantic" relationship to love and sex.

But it is not until he arrives in Soviet Georgia that Koestler's own relationship to sex – previously "exempt from guilt" – wilts under the influence of political doubt. Among the peaks of the Caucasus, Koestler reports a dream in which he "was climbing up a bare rockface, when I suddenly felt a slackening of the rope to which I was attached … I woke up trembling, still waiting for the headlong fall to begin" (76). Helpfully, he interprets the dream: "The sudden slackening of the rope with … its terrifying implications, stand for the unconscious fear of losing faith in

Russia and the Communist ideal. At that date, this would indeed have meant for me a headlong fall into the physical and spiritual void" (76). He returns to the image a few pages later, when describing the book he wrote immediately after his trip, *On White Nights and Red Days*, and his retrospective dismay at its complete omission of references to Stalin: "obviously the political libido is also subject to inhibitions and repressions, which come from the same source as the dream of the slackening of the alpinist's cord" (83). The use of "libido" might seem odd here, but it comes into focus in the next scene. On a train from Tbilisi to Yerevan, Koestler invites a young peasant woman to share his first-class train compartment:

> The girl took it for granted that she was expected to pay in the approved manner for the favour bestowed upon her. She was a peasant girl whose grandparents had probably been serfs; I was a member of the new privileged class which had replaced feudal landlords. The only difference between then and now was that in Czarist days these privileges were exercised a little less crudely, or, at least, with a certain seigneurial style.
>
> She was pretty, tipsy, and desirable. Her surprise at the wonders of a sleeping compartment was pathetic and embarrassing. When I tried to explain that I had been merely acting in a "comradely" way and that she ought not to feel under any obligation, she obviously regarded me as an even greater fool than before. To end the absurd situation, I tried to overcome the inhibiting feeling of guilt, which by now had become physical, and made an even greater fool of myself. Such incidents are merely grotesque in retrospect, but very disturbing to a vain and complex-ridden young man. The girl's undisguised derision was an echo of the healthy proletarian's contempt for the bourgeois intellectual, under which I had suffered in my early Party days. At the same time my humiliation was also a symbolic punishment, the revenge of the starving peasants on the hated bureaucracy with which I had become identified. I thought that I had become permanently impotent, and the dream of falling off the mountain assumed yet another sinister meaning. (85)

As the last line makes clear, the loss of Koestler's political convictions – a loss still inchoate, subconscious, and several years from explicit acknowledgment – already causes the loss of his erection. The experience is "very disturbing" to Koestler as a young man, not just because it impugns his masculinity but because it does so in a way that is deeply connected to his own political insecurities. In his companion's "undisguised derision" he discerns not a suspicion of his softening communist principles but rather "contempt for the bourgeois intellectual." It seems

that the encounter stokes not so much his political doubt (although he frames it as such in retrospect) as his fear that he might not fit in to the vision of masculinity of a newly revolutionary society. Put differently, Koestler's fear seems to be that radical politics – the Revolution itself – might disturb his social position, his sense of self, in such a way as to interrupt his otherwise agreeable relationship to sex.

Koestler does not, however, analyse his impotence as a response to his own social and sexual uncertainty. Nor does he ever connect it to the dirt and grime he constantly describes in close proximity to his ethical queasiness at communism's crimes. Instead, he represents political doubt as something at once subconscious, essential, and deeply moral, whereas the physiological manifestations – both his impotence and his "bellyaches" – are epiphenomena, emerging from ethical concerns rather than from physical stimuli or social insecurity. Just as in Hughes's account, the encounter with the Revolution is figured in physiological and affective terms, according to which new experiences generated by the Revolution produce physiological impulses of disgust and (here, although not in Hughes) impotence. Physiology once again produces counter-revolutionary affect, and good Party members, in Koestler's telling, are supposed to ignore or overcome their discomfort.

But for Koestler, the boundaries drawn by impotence and disgust are more essential than is their overcoming. In fact, the Revolution's push to overcome boundaries is often figured as false. In an echo of Hughes's interest in unveiling, for instance, Koestler writes: "The women of Turkestan have shed their black veils, but only physically. One feels that, when looked at by a stranger, they still feel naked without the veil that used to hide a woman's most intimate features" (122). Setting aside the fact that Koestler here imaginatively appropriates the subject position of these voiceless women (a masculinist prerogative Hughes also assumes), we can nevertheless see Koestler's clear distinction that unveiling is "only physical," while something internal and, by implication, more essential persists. Koestler portrays his own disgust similarly – as essential, as something that might be overcome, but only superficially, never entirely. In this context, it is important that Koestler's disgust, while figured physiologically (as "bellyaches," nausea, etc.) comes not from external stimuli – not from the grime, squalor, or social reconfigurations he observes – but from an internal source much more closely aligned with ethical or moral centres. For Koestler, at least Koestler the memoirist of 1954, the frontier of the Revolution is a line drawn in nausea, not grime, and it should not be crossed.

Boundaries and Breaches

These two memoirs map the frontiers of the Revolution for the Cold War–era reader, each tracing boundaries in lines of disgust. Recalling the earlier discussion of disgust as affect, it is perhaps no surprise that in this era of rising tensions, Red Scares, and Iron Curtains, disgust imagery might be effective in sketching the contours of the communist world for readers in an inherently inimical capitalist West. But what is perhaps more surprising is that the same (or very similar) devices work for two writers with very different agendas, one – Koestler – insisting on boundaries, the other – Hughes – celebrating crossings. Especially among audiences who might be hostile to the Revolution, disgust proves effective *and* flexible at sketching revolutionary geographies for at least two reasons. First, disgust is emergent. It does not draw boundaries, it suggests them. It is never a line on the map, but the desire for one, the idea of a boundary always almost drawn. It can thus be mobilized to reinforce that desire or to overcome it. Second, as mentioned earlier, disgust moves quickly and powerfully among (representations of) stimuli, physical reactions, and moral judgments, without set directionality. Physical stimuli can lead to moral revulsion; but as Koestler tries to show, ethical doubts can also lead to physiological feelings of nausea. While Hughes questions some of the links along this chain of connections, Koestler insists that disgust, the boundaries it suggests, and their ethical valences should not be ignored.

But should they? Koestler builds a strong case against transgressing lines of disgust. Just before his first mention of his own nausea, he is travelling through Soviet Armenia, where he hears much about the Armenian genocide. He is shown a directive from Talaat Pasha, the Vizier of the Ottoman Empire who oversaw the massacres. The directive, which he quotes in full, ends as follows: "However regrettable it may be to resort to the means of extermination, it is nevertheless necessary to put an end to their existence without regard for women, children or sick people, without listening to the voice of conscience."[35] In the post-Nuremberg years when Koestler is writing, this directive takes on even more resonance – indeed, the Armenian genocide was cited at Nuremberg as among Hitler's favoured precedents.[36] By mentioning his own communist "bellyache" on the very same page, Koestler implicitly aligns his own nausea with the Turkish exterminators' "voice of conscience." If that is disgust, then – of course we can agree unequivocally – disgust should never be ignored. But Koestler's disgust is more slippery than that. Although he mentions in passing some of the atrocities perpetrated in the Soviet Union

(the show trials occupy half a sentence, for instance), the images more likely to activate the reader's sense of disgust are his descriptions of the grimy world, its squalor and decay. Koestler's account seems to conflate three things: a low-level disgust at the environment he encounters (mostly directed at the reader), his developing nausea at communist ideology (aligned with his impotence), and that "voice of conscience" experienced and disregarded by genocidal war criminals. This conflation seems slightly disingenuous. Not all disgust is created equal. Moreover, not all disgust reflects something internal and essential. For all its physiological potency and affective immediacy, disgust, we know, is also a learned reaction. Anyone whose tastes in food have changed since childhood knows that the previously repulsive can become acceptable and even enticing. Overcoming disgust can often open up new horizons, while always heeding disgust might limit development or progress and protect the status quo. In this way, disgust is a conservative affect; to borrow from Menninghaus again, it "consists in a spontaneous and especially energetic act of saying 'no.'"[37] And while that "no" might at times be the correct response, it should not be accepted uncritically. Koestler's affective poetics suggest that the spontaneous "no," which spreads uncritically from Central Asian grime to Ottoman war crimes, is more than likely correct, whatever its source.

Hughes's account, by contrast, encourages his readers to experience disgust (even more strongly than Koestler's), to see his and Koestler's responses, and to think critically about how they might align their own reactions. This is not to say that Hughes never associated disgust and moral repulsion. Quite the contrary: in the decades following his return from the Soviet Union, and as civil rights battles heated up, he experimented with images of both moral and physical revulsion in his poetry. His poem "The Bitter River," for instance, which he wrote in response to the October 1942 lynching of two fourteen-year-old boys in Mississippi, uses the title image as a metaphor for racism and also as a way of evoking physical and moral disgust simultaneously:

There is a bitter river
Flowing through the South.
Too long has the taste of its water
Been in my mouth.
There is a bitter river
Dark with filth and mud.
Too long has its evil poison
Poisoned my blood.

I've drunk of the bitter river
And its gall coats the red of my tongue,
Mixed with the blood of the lynched boys
From its iron bridge hung,
[…]
Oh, water of the bitter river
With your taste of blood and clay,
You reflect no stars by night,
No sun by day.[38]

The physicality of the description, which concentrates on the taste and the feeling of the river's water in the mouth and over the tongue, seems calculated to evoke the physiological disgust reaction, meant here to reinforce the moral thrust of the poem. In its use of physical disgust and moral revulsion, Hughes's river of racism is an apt (if entirely unintended) echo of the "poisoned river [of communism] strewn with the wreckage of flooded cities and the corpses of the drowned," which Koestler evokes at the beginning of his memoir. In both cases, aesthetically mobilized disgust buttresses moral repugnance.

But in contrast to Koestler, Hughes represents the filth of the river as something that he has to ingest, that becomes a part of him as a Black American faced with unrelenting racism. Similar motifs of dirt as the defining African American experience arise throughout Hughes's anti-racist poetry. "The angels wings is white as snow," he writes in "Angels Wings," "But I drug ma wings / In the dirty mire."[39] More directly, in "White Man," he draws the distinction between Black and White – the colour line itself – in terms of dirt:

Sure I know you!
You're a White Man.
I'm a Negro.
You take all the best jobs
And leave us the garbage cans to empty
and
The halls to clean.
You have a good time in a big house at
Palm Beach
And rent us the back alleys
And the dirty slums.[40]

Within the confines of the poem, the dirty slums and the garbage cans define the Black experience. If these images evoke disgust for the reader,

they ask the reader to understand the source of the dirt as inequity, to overcome any disgust reaction, and to see the denizen of the dirt not as disgusting, but as human.

This anti-racist poetics of dirt, it seems to me, has much in common with the vision Hughes wants to induce in the reader of *I Wonder as I Wander*. For the Cold War and Civil Rights–era Hughes, lines drawn in dirt are artificial boundaries, constructed out of social inequality. They are frontiers to be questioned, borders to be crossed. In a line quoted above, Hughes writes that he wanted to get Koestler to see the Revolution through "*Negro* eyes." Explicitly, Hughes connects this vision with the newfound freedoms accorded the "colored" people of Soviet Central Asia (tramcar integration and others). Seeing the Revolution in this way means paying attention to both borders and breaches. But it also requires reframing dirt and disgust. In Hughes's poetics of dirt, social upheaval exposes dirt, releases grime, and evokes disgust. But that disgust should not be taken as a signal to forcefully put the dirt back in place, to turn away from the abject exposed. Instead, it should be an invitation to examine the source of the dirt, to question the justice of previous boundaries, and to expand the limits of the self and society. Although Hughes does not seem to succeed in getting Koestler to see the Revolution from his perspective, his memoir, through the careful deployment of disgust, gives readers the chance to try on this optic in sketching their own geographies of the Revolution and to think critically about how borders are drawn and which should be – and which should not be – transgressed.

Notes

1 The relevant memoirs are Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* [1956], in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 14, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); and Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing: An Autobiography* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954). The quotes above come from Hughes 147 and Koestler 78. Subsequent references to both memoirs will be in parenthetical notes in the text.

2 I define disgust primarily as an affect. Although disgust can be evoked through images (representations) and can cause more complex feelings, emotions, and ethical and moral responses, it is at its base a physiological response. On the difference between affect, feeling, and emotion, see Silvan Tomkins, "What Is Affect?" in *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 33–74.

3 Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 1.
4 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 44.
5 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
6 Daniel Kelly, *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 16. For a full discussion of the disgust response, both physiological and emotional, see chapter 1, "Toward a Functional Theory of Disgust."
7 Kelly, *Yuck!*, 17.
8 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 4.
9 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.
10 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 137.
11 Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 113.
12 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
13 Vladimir Lenin, "O chistke partii," *Pravda*, 21 September 1921, 1.
14 Aleksandra Kollontai, *Rabochaia oppozitsiia* (Moscow: 1921), 11, qtd. in Eric Naiman, "When a Communist Writes Gothic: Aleksandra Kollontai and the Politics of Disgust," *Signs* 22, No. 1 (Autumn 1996): 13. As Naiman shows, Kollontai does not always figure disgust as a counter-revolutionary affect. Indeed, in the same pamphlet, the worker's opposition is called a "swamp of opportunism," suggesting that a good party member – and not only the petit bourgeoisie – should at times experience politically induced disgust.
15 Such quotes hardly scratch the surface of revolutionary disgust, which would require a dedicated study of its own. A third type of disgust – disgust at poverty and suffering under capitalism – was widespread among revolutionary activists, artists, and thinkers. Perhaps most exemplary of this type of disgust is Maksim Gorky's tribute to Lenin, in which he ascribes this feeling to his subject: "I have never met, do not know a person, who with such depth and strength as Lenin, would feel hatred, disgust and contempt at the misery, woe, suffering of people." *Pis'ma, vospominaniia, dokumenty. V.I. Lenin i M. Gorkii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 311.
16 See, for instance, Vladimir Mayakovsky's 1919 Okna ROSTA illustrations warning of the danger of typhus, which features enlarged ticks visibly infecting unhygienic citizens. Mayakovsky et al., "Hey Citizen, do you understand / That typhus is coming back stronger?," *Okna ROSTA*, 1919.
17 Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), 111–12; qtd. in Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 95.

18 Theodore Dreiser and Ruth Eppersend Kennell, *Dreiser's Russian Diary*, ed. Thomas P. Riggio and James L.W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 264.
19 Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127–41.
20 Arthur Koestler et al., *The God That Failed: A Confession* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949). The collection, edited by Richard Grossman, included contributions from Louis Fischer, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and Richard Wright.
21 See Hughes, "My Adventures as a Social Poet" and "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ,'" in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 9: *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 207–9 and 269–77.
22 Accounts differ on this point. For Hughes's own (retrospective) take, see Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 113–14; for corroboration of unworkable material, see Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 99; for an alternate explanation that focuses on US pressure, see Steven S. Lee, "Langston Hughes's 'Moscow Movie': Reclaiming a Lost Minority Avant-Garde," *Comparative Literature* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 185–206.
23 Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 89.
24 He writes that when the girl rejected an exchange with him, "it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others, shut out from their world by a vast veil." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Penguin: New York, 1995), 8.
25 Jennifer Wilson, "Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent: Langston Hughes's 'Boy Dancers of Uzbekistan,'" *Slavic Review* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 637–46. See also Dzhennifer Uilson, "Opisyvaia 'sovetskii Iug': otzvuki postrabovladel'cheskoi Ameriki v etnograficheskikh zametkakh Lengstona Kh'iuza o Srednei Azii" [Jennifer Wilson, "Writing the 'Soviet South': Inflections of Post-slavery America in Langston Hughes's Ethnography of Central Asia"], trans. Mariia Kozlova, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 141 (5/2016): n.p., https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/141_nlo_5_2016/article/12188.
26 Steven Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 2015), esp. 119–48.
27 Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 176–7.
28 Understandably, disgust is absent from Hughes's account commissioned by the Soviet Union, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*. But disgust and dirt (and Koestler) are also entirely absent from more candid accounts,

including essays published in the US in the 1930s and even in letters back home. See, for instance, Hughes's letter to Noël Sullivan dated 31 January 1933, in which he describes his Central Asian trip in detail, mentions unveilings, and even a sickness he attributes to "eating camel meat." No images of dirt, no disgust, and no Koestler are to be found (*The Selected Letters of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015], 138–44).

29 Depending on how you count. "'This filthy hole!,' said Koestler. 'It will take more than a revolution to clean up this dive. I can't wash in this stinking water'" (138); "'In Germany,' Koestler said, 'strangers would be told what they'd be getting into before commencing anything like this. What a hell of a part of the world to have a revolution!'" (145); "'What a hell of a place to have a revolution,' said Koestler, or words to that effect" (149); "I asked Koestler how he found Tashkent. 'Dirty and ugly and dusty,' he said, head down over our meal. 'This disgusting part of the world! In Germany at least we'd have a *clean* revolution'" (158).

30 Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 111.

31 The resulting book, *Of White Nights and Red Days*, was published in German by a Soviet press in Kharkiv. Arthur Koestler, *Von weißen Nächten und roten Tagen. 12 Reportagen aus den Sowjet-Peripherien*. (Kharkiv: Ukrainischer Staatsverlag für die nationalen Minderheiten in der USSR, 1934).

32 Although this is the only mention of show trials in Koestler's memoir, Hughes includes a description of the trial of Atta Kurdov in Ashkhabad, which he attended with Koestler. According to Hughes, it was the first show trial Koestler witnessed and he was clearly "disturbed." Hughes even speculates, "I guess that was the beginning of *Darkness at Noon*." Hughes himself is surprisingly cavalier: "I did not care much about Atta Kurdov because I didn't like his looks," he writes, adding, "I knew mine was not proper reasoning … and had nothing to do with due process of law. But when I saw that it upset [Koestler], I repeated that night just for fun, 'Well, anyhow Atta Kurdov does look like a rascal'" (135–6).

33 For Freud, the connection between disgust and sex lies at the very foundation of human civilization, when humans "adopted an upright posture," separating "olfactory stimulation" from the genitals. "From that point, the chain of events would have proceeded through the devaluation of olfactory stimuli and the isolation of the menstrual period to the time when visual stimuli were paramount and the genitals became visible, and thence to the continuity of sexual excitation, the founding of the family and so to the threshold of human civilization." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 54.

34 Central Asian sexuality, Hughes learns, depends on tightly enforced boundaries. Hughes describes a failed sexual encounter with a local

woman that goes awry when he meets violent resistance to his advances. Later he learns that not only was the resistance conventional, his local (male) friends are horrified at the thought of American women *not* resisting. The erotic attraction, it seems, comes from the forced breaching of boundaries (170–8).

35 Koestler's version, on pages 87–8 of *The Invisible Writing*, is signed "Talaal," not Talaat, and is footnoted as "Quoted from Nansen, *Betrogenes Volk, Eine Studienreise durch Georgien und Armenien als Oberkommissar des Völkerbundes*, Brockhaus, 1928."

36 A version of Hitler's "Obersalzberg Speech" (1939) obtained by prosecutors at the Nuremberg trial ends with a promise to "send to death mercilessly and without compassion men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language," and justifies the "physical destruction of the enemy" by invoking the Armenian genocide: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" See Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "Who Still Talked about the Extermination of the Armenians?," in Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark, eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 199. Thank you to Philip Gleissner for pointing out this connection.

37 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 2.

38 Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 242–3.

39 *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1: *The Poems: 1921–1940*, 96.

40 *Collected Works,* vol. 1, 247–8. "White Man" concludes by once again connecting anti-racism directly to Marxism: "I hear your name ain't really White Man. / I hear it's something / Marx wrote down / Fifty years ago – / That rich people don't like to read. / Is that true, White Man? // Is your name in a book / Called the *Communist Manifesto*? / Is your name spelled / C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T? /Are you always a White Man? / Huh?"