

Gayle Murchison

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## ***Was Troubled Island Seen by the Critics as a Protest Opera?***

### **Introduction: Anticipation and High Expectations**

The evening of 31 March 1949, William Grant Still and Langston Hughes's *Troubled Island* premiered at New York's City Center. Based on Hughes's play, *Drums of Haiti*, the opera (composed between 1937 and 1939) was Still's second but the first one to receive a fully staged production. Both men were hopeful that their opera would be a success and had made significant investments to ensure that outcome. The audience responded enthusiastically with a standing ovation for the composer. The reviewers were less excited, criticizing the music, the production's costuming and scenery, the direction, and the libretto. All critics, however, praised the singers for a fine performance.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, reviews were, Tammy Kernodle assesses, ". . . lukewarm, neither supporting the opera nor 'panning' it, or downright negative."<sup>2</sup> The opera completed its three-performance run and was then shelved, never to be performed again on any major stage. Dejected, Still returned to California before the end of its run.

Finding *Troubled Island's* failure incomprehensible, by 1953 Still and his wife librettist Verna Arvey had come to believe that a conspiracy had arisen, that the critics had banded together and decided as a group to pan the opera. The State Department had recorded the opera for broadcast over Voice of America but soon withdrew the recordings. From a friend in Belgium, Arvey learned that they were withdrawn because they were "mauvais," but in what sense "bad" was unclear. Arvey could find no other explanation for the lack of further interest in the opera and stalled efforts to bring it before other audiences. She concluded a Communist conspiracy was working against the Stills and against their opera; furthermore, she believed the critics' efforts were not confined to just *Troubled Island*, but sought to hamper Still's entire career. Arvey adumbrated:

- *TIME* magazine reported the opera as a success, but it was "mysteriously scrapped" by City Center;

- the State Department recordings for broadcast over foreign radio were mysteriously withdrawn: the opera was initially broadcast and appreciated by foreign listeners. There was interest in Still bringing a company to Europe. The Stills sent a letter to the producer in New York, but after the latter received that letter, the United States State Department withdrew the recording from cities abroad;
- George Szell, Cleveland Orchestra music director, accepted and agreed to perform *Archaic Ritual* in both Cleveland and New York and publicized this, but numerous postponements and finally no performance followed—Szell said he did not care for the music when he heard it in rehearsal, but the piece was later played at the Hollywood Bowl with great success;
- Karl Krueger was scheduled to conduct the *Afro-American Symphony* on concerts in Brazil, as advertised in the *New York Times*, but when he arrived in Brazil he found out the music had been impounded by the Brazilian customs;
- over the years many individuals, colleges, and collectors had requested recordings of Still's music and the Stills had corresponded with recording companies Victor, Columbia, and Decca about this, but this all came to no avail and the record companies were evasive.<sup>3</sup>

As Kernodle notes, Arvey based her case on three pieces of evidence: a supposed conversation between Still and a critic during one of the opera's rehearsal and letters from supporters; a remark that critic Howard Taubman made telling Still in confidence about the critics' pact; and, third, the difference between the audience's response and the critics' response to the opera. This last item especially vexed Arvey: why did the critics pan the opera when the audience loved it? Arvey quoted the stage director, Eugene Bryden, "It never happened that way before in all my years in the theater." Still himself made only one remark that indicated he believed in the conspiracy theory, in a letter dated 8 December 1949. Instead of the critics, by 1953 Still blamed the Communists. He also blamed Langston Hughes, who "opposed [him] at every turn," as Still stated in a lecture, "Communism in Music."<sup>4</sup> During rehearsals, Still read concurrent events as portentous of a conspiracy. The same week as *Troubled Island* opened, the Leftist international Cultural and Scientific Conference, organized by the Communist-front organization National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions, opened at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Hughes was a member-at-large of the Council and one of the conference's sponsors.<sup>5</sup>

While Kernodle finds no evidence of a conspiracy theory or a Communist plot, Catherine Smith puts forth another possible explanation for *Troubled Island's* troubled reception. She asks the simple question that has been overlooked for so long: is *Troubled Island* a good opera? She focuses on the libretto and finds that the drama is confused: is the opera's

real tragedy Haiti's political tragedy or the disruptive love triangle (involving Dessalines, Azelia, and Claire) and the hero's betrayal? The love relationship between Azelia and Dessalines is not fully developed; being overshadowed by the slave revolt in the first act and completely absent in the second. Azelia enters only towards the end of the third.

### **Another Possible Reading**

I do not wish to muddy the water further and put forth yet another conspiracy theory. I only suggest that if we consider the opera in the context of Langston Hughes's political career and international politics, then we can begin to understand some of the *critics'* reaction to the opera. Perhaps the critics might have read the opera as having political overtones—perhaps even as being a protest opera. Might not their reactions to *Troubled Island* have been clouded in part by Hughes's association with Communism and his involvement in Leftist politics and causes—and by national and international geo-political events? Finally, I suggest a new possible reading of the opera: critics saw *Troubled Island* as an anti-imperialist, revolutionary opera and were uncomfortable with the idea of an uprising by enslaved blacks who then posed governing themselves as a separatist nation.

### **Hughes and the Left**

Still accused Hughes and the Communists with opposing him and causing the failure of his opera. Yet, it was Hughes and not Still who had been singled out in the period immediately preceding the opera's premier for attack for his political views. Hughes was by 1949 a controversial figure and a lightning rod: he was publicly considered a Leftist. Long linked with Communist, Socialist, and Cultural Front organizations and activities, Hughes began to associate with the Left and to make his Leftist politics known soon after his return to the United States from Marine-occupied Haiti in 1931 and before he began to work with Still. He remained steadfast to his convictions during their collaboration and the premiere of the opera.

Throughout most of the 1930s and long before this collaboration with Still, Hughes publicly supported the Soviet Union, making a highly publicized trip there in March 1932 to help make a film about American race relations. Upon his return Hughes continued his involvement in the Left and support of the Soviet Union, both by producing radical poetry, participating in the Cultural Front organization, the John Reed Club, and by lending public support to political causes. Later poetry reflected his admiration for the Soviet leader in "Lenin" and "Ballads of Lenin." His most controversial poem, "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." (originally written as a song for a Scottsboro rally) was used also to mark the eighth convention of the Communist Party of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Hughes published extensively in Leftist magazines, newspapers, and anthologies throughout the

1930s and 1940s, especially in the radical *New Masses* during the 1930s. His poems were anthologized in radical collections in 1930 in such publications as *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry*, ed. by Shmuel Marcus (a.k.a. Marcus Graham). Some of Hughes's writings were published in the Soviet Union, including several articles that appeared in *Izvestia*.<sup>7</sup>

Hughes's politics extended to the theatrical stage. He wrote many leftist dramas, *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1935), *De Organizer, Harvest* (1934; an outgrowth of *Blood on the Fields*), *Scottsboro Limited* (1932), including the radical and racial one-act, *Don't You Want To Be Free?: A Poetry Play: From Slavery Through the Blues to Now—and then some!—with Singing, Music and Dancing*.<sup>8</sup> Plays like this represented a means by which Hughes could link his radical poetry and drama. *Don't You Want To Be Free?* was billed as a "continuous panorama of the emotional history of the Negro from Africa to the present." In it, the blues and spirituals were integral to the drama. In such a play Hughes understood his work to be bold and innovative: "We are doing things never done before in the Negro theater—or any other for that matter."<sup>9</sup> Hughes had also collaborated with composers to produce musical works for the stage before working with Still. *De Organizer* was Hughes's last overtly political drama. A collaboration with James P. Johnson, whose music had been used in George White and Earl Carroll revues, the play was performed as part of the 1940 convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, although not performed by the Labor Stage, the ILGWU official theatrical arm. A concert version was presented 31 May 1940 at Carnegie Hall.<sup>10</sup>

To secure performances of his plays, Hughes started his own theater company, which further solidified his ties to the Left. Aided by his longtime friend Louise Thompson and with the assistance of the International Workers Order, Hughes founded the Harlem Suitcase Theater. The troupe, affiliated with the leftist New Theatre League and linked to the Communist Party and considered a cultural arm of branch 691 of the IWO, appealed to the masses "to join the struggle against capitalism and for a system where all power belongs to the working class." It included IWO workers among its original members. On 21 April the company premiered *Don't You Want to Be Free?*<sup>11</sup>

Hughes was drawn to the Left partly because it offered him a way to engage in the global struggle against racism. He fully linked class oppression to racism, viewing leftists as one of the few American political groups that explored how issues of class and racism were interwoven. The Scottsboro incident confirmed Hughes as a Leftist and brought him his first official post in a wing of the Communist party. While the NAACP hesitated to act, the Communist Party's legal arm, the International Labor Defense, worked to build public support for the accused men. His involvement in the Spanish Civil War also reflected his understanding of the linkage between race and Leftist politics. For Hughes, the struggle against fascism was a struggle against American and international racism.<sup>12</sup>

Hughes's involvement in Leftist politics during the 1930s was not an

aberration for one of his experience and international perspective. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s numerous Americans—artists, intellectuals, workers, ordinary citizens—became interested in Communism and Socialism. It was almost fashionable during the economic crisis of the Depression years to join the Communist Party or at least express sympathy with its causes. During the 1930s the United States experienced what Barbara Zuck calls a “spectacular growth” in “leftist economics and politics.”<sup>13</sup> African American writers, artists, and others such as Hughes, Paul Robeson, a young Richard Wright, and W. E. B. Du Bois were drawn to the Left because of its expressed opposition to U.S. racism and segregation and its linkage of racial to class oppression. As the composer-writer Paul Bowles wrote, “the Communist Party had an important sociopolitical function at this time in its organized agitation against groups fostering discrimination and racial hatred.”<sup>14</sup> Or, Zuck writes, “As the only political organization actively to champion America’s minorities in these years, the Communist Party capitalized on its appeal to America’s social outcasts.”<sup>15</sup> Even in visiting the Soviet Union, Hughes did as many of his fellow writers, artists, and composers. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, American artists and intellectuals traveled to the Soviet Union to experience firsthand life in what they considered a model society free of class stratification and racism.<sup>16</sup>

### **United States Foreign Policy in the Caribbean and Latin America, 1915–1949**

In choosing to compose an opera about Haiti and Dessalines’s overthrow of French colonials, Still chose a hot and controversial subject. During the first third of the century, the country loomed large in the American political landscape and popular imagination. As one action of its “gunboat diplomacy,” in 1915 the United States Marines had invaded Haiti, and would occupy the island nation until 6 August 1934.<sup>17</sup> After two revolutions (one on 5 May 1915, a second on 28 July) to protect American business interests. President Woodrow Wilson ordered the Marines into Haiti, beginning the military occupation 28 July. Sudre Dartiguenave was elected president on 15 August and signed a treaty turning Haiti over as a U.S. protectorate for ten years effective on 3 May 1916. During the remainder of the 1910s, North American designs on island nations in the Caribbean and Latin America increased. The United States intervened in Nicaragua in 1912 (and again in 1926), occupied the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1920, and acquired the Virgin Islands by purchase in 1917.

Between 1915 and 1934 the U.S. Marines would be met with a variety of responses from the Haitians, from cooperation to guerilla resistance. African American leaders and others were not mute on the issue of the invasion of Haiti. In its late summer and early fall issues (28 August–25 September 1920) *The Nation* harshly criticized the government’s action in Haiti. Among those who voiced concerns was James Weldon Johnson.

## Haiti a Popular Topic for Hughes and in American Culture

Still and Hughes's Haitian setting and the Dessalines subject matter made *Troubled Island* topical and highly provocative, for Haiti was a subject which fascinated Americans, had entered the national discourse, and was included in debates over U.S. imperialism in Latin America and the Caribbean. While Still may have viewed Haiti in romantic terms, Hughes understood what the nation meant to both black and white Americans. Haiti as a topos for African American artists had a long association with radicalism and more than two decades of history, dating from the 1920s. In *Taking Haiti*, historian Mary Renda investigates the Haitian occupation noted above, examining not so much the officially declared U. S. foreign policy toward the island nation, but how the military occupation shaped discourse about American imperialism and race. She writes, "[b]etween 1915 and 1940 Americans redefined the boundaries of their national community in part through their discussion of Haiti."<sup>21</sup> Wilson's logic in taking Haiti rested on the adoption of "trusteeship." However, as Renda deconstructs, in actuality the United States–Haiti relationship adopted the actions and discourse of paternalism, intertwined with racism. Applying the metaphor of a father's relationship with his children to that between the United States and Haiti during the occupation, Renda characterizes the self-conscious U.S. attitude: assuming its role to be "guiding father" for the "childlike, primitive Haiti." This relationship, Renda argues, involves an assertion of authority, superiority, and control.<sup>22</sup>

One can apply Renda's argument to *Troubled Island*. Still's and Hughes's opera has subversive undertones and challenges this paternalism. It is, after all, an opera about a black revolutionary who rejected integration and effected a black separatist government during fifteen years of Haitian history. Hughes chose to treat the figure of Jean Jacques Dessalines, one of the generals in Toussaint L'Ouverture's 1791 revolution who, after the latter's arrest and deportation to France, took control of the island and expelled the French planters, seeing them as a force favoring reenslavement. When the nation of Haiti was founded on the island of Santo Domingo, Dessalines assumed the title of governor general for life. In 1806, he was murdered by political rivals. Haiti then endured a long Civil War, 1806–1820, as two other revolutionary generals, Alexandre Pétion and Henri Christophe, struggled for control. France officially recognized an independent Haiti in 1825. Historically, the United States took no sides in the revolutionary period, but feared the Haitian slave revolt posed a threat to slavery in its Southern states: despite an official policy of neutrality, American merchants privately sold arms to the rebels. Only after the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War did Lincoln's government officially recognize Haiti.<sup>23</sup>

Hughes conducted research for the play version of *Troubled Island* and travelled first to Santiago, Cuba, then on to Port-au-Prince in April of 1931. Hughes directly confronted a subjugated Haiti by landing in a country that was then occupied by the U.S. Marines and remaining for nearly two

months. While there Hughes visited the Citadel Cap-Haïtien, built by Henri Christophe on the north coast.

Haiti had loomed large in his family for two generations, taking on somewhat mythical proportions. (His mother's uncle had twice been U.S. ambassador there), and consequently Hughes was disappointed with the poverty he saw in Port-au-Prince; he was moved to write about what he found there, with a short impressionistic dispatch from Cap-Haïtien, which appeared in *New Masses* under the heading "A Letter from Haiti."<sup>21</sup>

Haiti is a hot, tropical little country, all mountains and sea; a lot of marines, mulatto politicians, and a world of black people without shoes—who catch hell.

The Citadel, twenty miles away on a mountain top, is a splendid lonely monument to the genius of a black king—Christophe. Stronger, vaster, and more beautiful than you could possibly imagine. It stands in futile ruin now, the iron cannon rusting, the bronze one turning green, the great passages and deep stairways alive with bats, while the planes of the United States Marines hum daily overhead.

As seen in this poem, Hughes set the present condition of Haiti in stark relief against the glorious Haitian military past. In this manner, Hughes linked the historical overthrow of the French to the ongoing presence of the U. S. Marines. In both cases, Haiti was a black colonial subject controlled by a rich and powerful colonizer to be overthrown.

If the Harlem Renaissance is characterized by David Levering Lewis as a period when there was a "vogue" for all things Negro, the U. S. occupation of Haiti sparked a vogue for all things Haitian. American popular culture was fascinated with the island nation. The zombie entered American novels and Hollywood films. During the 1930s Haiti was promoted as a vacation spot for Americans: it was depicted as picturesque and exotic. Both Marines and travel writers wrote about their Haitian adventures, usually in somewhat sensational accounts, exploiting race and sexuality, as did Edna Taft in *A Puritan in Vodoo-Land*. Beginning in the late 1920s—the Literary Guild book club offered three selections on Haiti, including John Vandercook's biography of Henri Christophe, *Black Majesty* (1928) and William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929). Through discourses about Haiti, Renda argues, "American racial constructs were transformed and reinforced in specific and significant ways in Haiti."<sup>25</sup>

While the popular culture was fascinated with Haiti, this did not mean that the U.S. Marines treated the Haitians with dignity, respect, or fairness. Haitian workers were forcibly engaged to build roads to facilitate military control of the countryside; although they were paid cash wages, the situation too closely resembled slavery. The Gendarmes, the police force, staffed by Haitians but captained and led by white U. S. Marine officers, committed brutal acts as they attempted to quash the Cacos, the gue-

rilla resistance fighters. James Weldon Johnson, himself a former diplomat, went to Haiti to investigate conditions there for three months in 1920. He met with Haitian leaders, traveled the country, and met and talked with the Haitian peasants and Marines. Following his return home Johnson criticized the U. S. occupation and supported Haitian self-determination, building an alliance between the NAACP and the Patriotic Union (founded by Georges Sylvain). Johnson compared the forced gang labor used to build the roads to the slave trade. He countered the diplomatic discourse of paternalism by stating that Haiti's "true" father could be found within the island's own history in the person of King Henry Christophe, who had built the Citadel which held 30,000 troops, to protect Haiti against the French should they return to retake the island.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most famous American art work about Haiti is Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*, which made both Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson stars of the theatrical stage. It is the story of an ex-convict who escapes to Haiti where he is crowned Emperor. O'Neill had researched the lives of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Henri Christophe and the Haitian revolution. Writing the play in only two weeks, he finished it at the beginning of October 1920 as news of Marine misconduct in Haiti was making the front pages of mainland newspapers. The figure that Brutus Jones represents is the embodiment of powerful manhood, in his emperor's uniform (a stand-in for Marine regalia)—even when he is stripped to his fur loincloth (the Noble Savage). Renda calls *The Emperor Jones* "the first major artistic translation of the U.S. occupation of Haiti in the United States."<sup>27</sup> According to Renda, O'Neill's play served as a radical critique of imperialism as economic exploitation. There are intriguing similarities in plot between Still's first opera *Blue Steel* and O'Neill's play. However, further exploration of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

*Troubled Island's* topos—the Haitian revolution—was used by African Americans during the years of the occupation to counter the prevailing discourse that consistently involved white supremacy and paternalism. These writers, artists, and intellectuals used Haitian history and culture to express race pride and to make black demands for rights and respect from whites. These African American statements on Haiti, Renda argues, challenged hegemonic conceptions of "America," which is to say they sought to undermine the racial status quo.<sup>28</sup> Renda argues that Haiti continued to serve as a means to negotiate domestic cultural politics in the U.S. Haiti and Haitian kings and emperors represented embodiments of "powerful manhood" for African Americans as well. Renda's thesis is borne out in the pages of the February 1920 issue of the radical magazine *The Messenger*, in which the editors proposed two plays for the Lafayette Theater: Eaton's "Dessalines" and "Henri Christopher," two historical plays.<sup>29</sup> In his UNIA movement, Marcus Garvey and his newspaper, the *Negro World*, used Haiti as an example to communicate their message of black entrepreneurship, radical self-determination, and unity to the black masses. In Haiti, Garvey, UNIA, and perhaps other unaffiliated black separatists found a



model of black independence and self-determination—and a powerful model of a black republic. Like other African American artists who turned to Haitian, and African, subjects, Hughes and Still were rejecting notions of black inferiority and submissiveness. In fact, the hero of their opera embodies virility—he has been able to endure the whippings of slavery—and showcases a shrewd political leader of a slave revolt and former head of a post-revolutionary government.

Because the country and its history represented such a theme of powerful manhood it constituted a threat to the racial status quo on the mainland. There can be no doubt that at least some members of the U.S. government perceived the anti-racist and anti-imperialist subtexts of these Haitian plays and novels. Haiti proved to be a popular subject matter for the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project during the 1930s, with no less than fourteen productions about the island nation produced during these years, including Orson Welles's production of *Macbeth* set in nineteenth-century Haiti; the Los Angeles production *Black Empire* (which focused on the final days of Henri Christophe's reign as King of Haiti and proved to be a polemic on race); *Opener of Doors*; *Toussaint L'Ouverture*; *Babouk*; *Dessalines*; *Genifrede Christophe*; *Christophe's Daughter*; *King Henry*; G.L.R. James's *Black Majesty*; and the Lafayette Theatre's 1928 production *Haiti*. To this list Hughes added his own *Drums of Haiti*, later rewritten as *Troubled Island*. At least one of these plays was considered to be so radical that it brought the surveillance of the U. S. government: *Haiti* and two other plays were labeled by the Dies Committee (later named the House Un-American Activities Committee) as "un-American" with Communist leanings. They received this treatment not because they espoused any particular political ideology, but because they challenged the association of whiteness with American identity: they were anti-colonial and represented anti-white violence.<sup>30</sup>

If plays about Haiti seemed to indict U. S. domestic race relations, then by extension, an opera would do the same. And thus, critics could have perceived that in their *Troubled Island* Still and Hughes viewed U.S. race relations through a Haitian lens. Still had not yet begun to speak vehemently on political issues, but Hughes, as we have seen, was quite vocal in linking his Leftist politics and support of the Soviet Union clearly to anti-racism and anti-imperialism. When viewing the opera, anyone who had followed the news from Haiti for the previous twenty years would have immediately associated the name of one of Dessalines's mulatto advisors in the opera, the traitorous Stenio, with the name of the Haitian president, Stenio Vincent.

Members of the audience would also have been discomforted by the violence in the opera, recalling real-world violence both at home and abroad. Throughout the years of the U. S. occupation of Haiti, the domestic front was gripped by race riots. Following the return of troops from World War I, the country faced horrible racial violence during the summer of 1919, the so-called Red Summer, supposedly referring to the bloodshed

in lynchings and street violence as much as to the perceived Bolshevik threat. More recently, a June 1943 riot in Detroit necessitated action by the mayor and President Roosevelt who mobilized the National Guard to restore peace.<sup>31</sup> Internationally, nations in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were beginning to throw off European colonial rule. Two years before the premiere of the opera, Gandhi led India and Pakistan to independence from Great Britain. During the 1930s African and Caribbean writers ushered in the Négritude literary movement, with the Harlem Renaissance and Hughes viewed as models and inspiration. If writers abroad were influenced by Hughes to reject colonial rule, how then would African Americans at home respond to a stage work depicting a revolution associated with the massacre of European colonials and the founding of a separatist state?

### **Was There Something in the Opera Itself?**

Was there something in the opera itself—some plot device, an aria, a theme—something that signified the radical nature of this opera? It is full of text and subtexts. The first act opens on a sugar plantation, with slaves gathering for a mass armed revolt. In short, the opera begins with an oppressed minority rising up against white oppressors. In the second act, Dessalines has declared himself emperor, recalling shades of Marcus Garvey, who often paraded in uniform and who gave titles of “duke,” “lord,” “earl” and so forth to many leaders in his UNIA movement. The dramatic tension introduced may be perceived on the surface to illustrate the broad theme of democracy and freedom versus tyranny. But the thematic tension is drawn along racial lines: Dessalines excludes from his Haitian vision mulattos and the white French, thereby rejecting integration, espousing, rather, a black separatist state. By the third act, a black elite—a black aristocracy—has been established in mimicry of decadent European culture. It is this aristocracy that falls by the opera’s end, suggesting the dangers of assimilationism.

As Renda demonstrates, Haitian history was a powerful symbol for Americans—both black and white—as they negotiated issues of race and imperialism. Haiti was an especially powerful symbol for African Americans in the context of post-World War II Civil Rights. During the war, blacks had made significant advances, with federal law banning discrimination in government employment and industries with government contracts. Selected military units had been integrated on a trial basis (the Korean War would be the first war in which military units would be fully integrated). Thus, black members of the audience would have heard the themes of the arias differently from the white members of the audience and from the white critics. Both Guthrie P. Ramsey and Jon Cruz have argued persuasively to establish that black Americans and white Americans place different interpretations and possess different understandings of the same music in other contexts.<sup>32</sup> *Troubled Island* has several arias about free-

dom. In the first aria of the opera, “Slave Child Lullaby,” Celeste sings to her sleeping child about freedom:

Little black slave child,  
No slave to me!  
You are my son, child,  
Who must be free.

We are here, child,  
No place to rest.  
Lay your dark head, child,  
On mother’s breast.

Sleep now, my baby,  
Sleep now, my son,  
Mother will free you  
Ere night is done.

Dream your sweet dreams, child,  
That have no name.

Mother will dream now,  
A dream of flame,  
Flame that will sweep  
Our slavery away!  
Sleep on, my little one,  
Till the new day.  
Sleep on, my little one,  
Till the new day.

The white members of the audience (and most of the critics on opening night) would have associated freedom with a perceived “Communist threat” and the conventional rhetoric of American democracy. However, the audience was reportedly full of African Americans who would have heard the arias very, very differently—indeed as Hughes originally would have intended—as referring to freedom *from racism*.

The audience would have been collectively unsettled by Dessalines’s first aria. It is one of murderous intent: the slaves ask him what’s the news and he replies.

They do not know  
In their silken beds  
Our masters sleep—  
But the woods are alive  
With slaves who creep  
Through the darkness  
To strike for freedom’s sake.  
Our masters do not know  
What this night brings for them—

What woe! The end of time!  
Our masters sleep!

Historically, Dessalines, Robert Lawless writes, was associated with the slaughter of whites.<sup>33</sup> Both blacks and whites would have caught the undertone of impending racial violence. The slaves are gathered and waiting for the sign for the battle to begin. Immediately after the slave revolt, the violence—though it is not seen onstage—commences.

In contrast to much of the treatment of Haiti and of voodoo in the contemporary popular culture, Still's was not primitivistic or exoticized to the degree found in, say, Hollywood or pulp fiction. Rather, Still portrays Dessalines (who rejects integration) as a sympathetic and tragic figure, but always heroic in contrast to what was then the most popular figure of a Haitian emperor, Eugene O'Neill's con man Brutus Jones. Still does not pull punches in characterizing Dessalines as a powerful *Man*—as though answering the Big Bill Broonzy blues, "When Will I Be Called A Man?" Dessalines is always shown as a military and political leader. Indeed, when Dessalines enters the stage for the first time, he is described in the libretto as an imposing figure, "handsome, tall, powerful, black, surrounded by a crowd of slaves in rags." Dessalines strips off his shirt, baring his back and the scars from the whip to his fellow slaves. He sings "Never Again":

Never again  
Will a man say to me,  
"You are my slave, dog!"  
I am Free.

I have labored too long  
In the burning sun!  
Too long cut their cane!  
I want to be free!  
I want to be free!

Too long have I  
Bowed my weary back,  
Suffered the whip, the chain, the rack!  
No more!  
I want to be free!  
No more!  
I want to be free!

From early dawn  
Till the day is done  
I've worked their fields  
In the burning sun!  
For pay  
Look what they gave me for pay  
Behold my scars!

The crowd gasps and is further excited to begin the revolt after a voodoo ceremony involving ritual animal sacrifice. This is an extremely powerful scene showing a man hardened by physical torture and backbreaking labor, one who will exact his revenge. Dramatically the figure of Dessalines instills fear in the audience. Thomas Ott writes, “The Haitian Revolution had the distinction of proving that the Negro was, after all, a man.”<sup>34</sup> While white Americans would have heard themes about freedom, African Americans would have heard the demand to be treated not as second-class citizens, but as “nothing but a man.”

Still’s opera could be seen as pro-Haitian and opposed to U.S. imperialism, particularly in the aria where Dessalines asks Martel, the black slave born in Africa, to tell the slaves what he remembers of his homeland. Rather than giving them a tourist travelogue depiction of beautiful countryside or seascape, Martel sings in the aria “Africa!” (joined by the chorus) of remembering freedom from slavery and racial brutality:

*Martel:*

Africa!

Rememb’ring Africa!

The black man’s land where

Tall and proud

Black kings and chief’s hold sway!

Well do I remember Africa!

Well do I remember too

That most unlucky day

The slavers came and

Stole me away.

*Chorus* [call and response]:

Stole me away.

*Martel:*

Dark hold of a slave ship

Over the western ocean we came

In chains to this island, Haiti,

Where men are slaves.

*Chorus* [call and response]:

In chains! in chains!

Where men are slaves.

*Martel:*

And now, like dew

Upon this troubled island fall

Our tears.

All is darkened with a pall

For we are slaves,

And Africa is far away.

So long, so far away!

As the revolt begins, Dessalines calls out the names of various African countries and ethnic groups:

Sons of Africa! Join with me!  
 Tomorrow we'll be free!  
 Come forth now, Senegalese,  
 Tall and proud like coconut trees!  
 You from the Coast of Calabar!  
 Men from the Congo, join, too!  
 Ashanti men, be with us then!  
 Africa in Haiti now  
 Lifts high her head in Freedom's vow!  
 Tomorrow—we'll be free

This call for racial solidarity is very clearly an allusion to contemporary pan-Africanism.

Although the tragedy of Haiti becomes, if we accept Smith's thesis, confused with the tragedy of the love triangle and Dessalines's betrayal, even the romantic (sub)plot is rife with symbolism. There are always racial overtones. Azelia is a black and Claire is a mulatto, i.e., of mixed African and European ancestry. The mulattos, Dessalines believes, are not to be trusted. Does Hughes mean to indict race relations in the United States, questioning white Americans' sincerity and commitment to defeating racism, a theme that runs through all his poetic, journalistic, and fiction writings? Of course, historically, the mulattos occupied a privileged position in Haitian society, thereby constituting an upper class. Does Hughes mean to accuse the black middle class of his contemporaries of being overly assimilationist or accommodationist? One cannot separate the love triangle from issues of race, class, imperialism, and racial violence. Even the first love aria sung by Azelia to Dessalines is not unencumbered: it too is linked to armed struggle. Azelia sings that Dessalines will lead the slaves to freedom through revolt:

Through the woods in the dark  
 Himself a spark  
 To light the flame that will spread  
 Terror and dread  
 To our masters!  
 The flame that will sweep  
 Our slavery away—  
 And bring to our people  
 A new day!

Her love of him is linked in the audience's mind to his virility and power as a rebel, one who will defeat, kill, or expel the French colonial planters—and one whose undoing will result from the betrayal of those whose allegiance to the blacks is suspect.

One aria from *Troubled Island* did take on a life of its own, "I Dream A World." It is sung in protest to separatism and makes an appeal for integration. In act II, scene 1 Dessalines refuses to trade with the French even though Haiti is in desperate need of the revenue: the country's infrastructure is falling down; taxes have not been paid; schools need to be built; roads need to be repaired; the fields are untilled; the sugar cane uncut. Dessalines asks what happened to the dream of Haiti as a free and modern country. Martel advises him that they must open trade with the French. Dessalines refuses to trade with Haiti's former masters and vows that French boats will never dock in Haiti's harbors. He sees Haiti as a country for black men only; Vuval just laughs at their request. Dessalines asks him why he laughs and orders him out of his chambers. Martel then sings "I Dream a World" (see page 11, this journal, for full text of the aria).

Dessalines tells him that "a land where all live well and where every man is free" is a big dream. Martel replies that in time it will come to pass. Here is a plea for racial harmony, justice, and equality. The refusal of Dessalines to work with mulattos could be read as a rejection of interracial cooperation and integration and support for black separatism, *à la* Marcus Garvey. The exclusion and mistrust of the mulattos has been established at the beginning of the opera, in act I, scene 1. Vuval and Stenio, mulattos, want to join the revolt but some slaves, like Celeste, do not trust them. Vuval and Stenio exclaim the French motto, "Liberty, equality, fraternity." Popo and Martel let them join, but ultimately Vuval and Stenio do betray Dessalines. At the dawn of the Civil Rights era, the African American members of the audience would have voiced approval of the theme of racial equality, of a world where "Whatever race you be / Will share the bounties of the earth / And every man is free," while also holding many of the same prejudices as whites about individuals of mixed race. Hughes himself extracted this aria to serve a social purpose, this time to combat anti-Semitism and promote ecumenism. In 1941 he was asked to contribute something to the National Conference of Christians and Jews series, "The World We Want to Live In." Along with an article, Hughes sent this aria.<sup>35</sup>

Racial or pro-communist, Hughes spoke in militant tones in *Troubled Island*. It is tempting to read Dessalines, a real life revolutionary hero, as a symbolic figure through which Hughes projected past struggles onto contemporary political events. Throughout his lifelong support of the Left, Hughes approached politics not from the position of class, but race (though painfully understanding how class and race are conjoined). Hughes was a Race Man and supported racial advance and the defeat of racism and segregation on a geopolitical scale. Thus, when he visited the various ethnic republics of the Soviet Union in 1932, Hughes did not fail to see that he and his company were treated as honored *American* artists, rather than Negro and that there was no official Soviet policy separating those of darker complexion. It was the same racial climate that impressed Hughes's fellow traveler Paul Robeson on the latter's voyages to the U.S.S.R.

If Haiti was a topos of fascination for American foreign policy and popular culture, precipitated by the nearly twenty-year American occupation of the island nation, the American audience would have been conditioned to view Haiti in exoticized terms, as a racialized primitive other. This is not at all the view that Hughes and Still present of Haiti and by extension of black peoples everywhere. While there is a long-standing operatic tradition of using historical subjects for operatic treatment—such as Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, Puccini's *Turandot*, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*—the idea of using the hero of a slave revolt was radically new. Long before the Metropolitan debuts of opera singers such as Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, Kathleen Battle, and William Warfield, New York audiences were unaccustomed to seeing African Americans singing leading roles (or even appearing on the operatic stage, for that matter), let alone singing leading roles about black heroic figures. Even Porgy and Sporting Life, two characters from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, still played to racist stereotypes of hustlers or emasculated black men. Even the role made famous by Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson, Emperor Jones, was still an ex-convict and a superstitious hustler. The figure of Jean Jacques Dessalines, on the contrary, was virile—a leader of the black masses, i.e., the enslaved Haitians, and an overthrower of the French. In short, a challenge to the white power structure. Rather than a racialized, childlike Other, what Still and Hughes presented to a white New York audience was a black man willing to take on racial oppression by violent means at the extreme, or one willing to fight racism and struggle for basic human rights, at the more conservative end of the interpretive scale. It is this latter view that resonated with the large number of African Americans in the audience—those who rose to give Still a standing ovation and ask him to take a curtain call. While the white critics applauded the fine singing, the African Americans applauded both the fine singing and the Race Cause—the struggle as it was embodied in the opera's story and the struggle in real life as it was enacted on the road to production. *Troubled Island* challenged invisible but formidable racial barriers to black classical composers and opera singers as the modern Civil Rights era dawned.

Possibly interpreting the opera as I have described above, the critics may have seen it as a protest opera, or even more threatening a call to revolution itself. Historically, Dessalines rampaged Haiti during his reign and killed white citizens. Only one critic in the mainstream press noted that this was a political work and even addressed the issue of politics and opera. Noel Straus, in his article "Music: Two Operas: Milhaud Writes Score on Bolivar—Still Tells Dessalines Story" that appeared in the *New York Times*, perceived how potent a vehicle for the expression of political ideas and ideology opera could be.

In days like these, when peace is still an undecided issue, works of art that concern themselves with the liberation of the human spirit from oppressive forces that threaten to engulf it possess particular timeliness and significance. In the realm of music, op-



era affords the most compelling medium for the expression of this striving for disenthralment, since in opera only can the composer deliver any such message in the most concrete, positive manner, with assurance that the intentions of his musical idea will be fully grasped through the added aid of words and action.<sup>36</sup>

Straus acknowledged that each opera was historical (Bolívar was the liberator of Venezuela) and

has freedom as its theme. Each deals with a celebrated liberator of the Napoleonic period, and each, in episodic fashion, covers the chief events in its protagonist's career. Above all, the works are concerned with America in the wide sense of that word, connoting the New World and the ideal of liberty basic in all of its republics.<sup>37</sup>

A second critic, the one for the Communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, acknowledged the opera's political import and message. In discussing its troubled path to production, Ben Levine asked why the Metropolitan Opera had mysteriously withdrawn it fifteen years before, calling the move censorship with overtones of racial discrimination against Hughes and Still. He also made reference to the controversial subject matter.

The Metropolitan Opera Co. had this opera under consideration about 15 years ago, and then suddenly dropped the whole thing. This was, of course, not "censorship." It was only "free enterprise" by the big-business monopoly in the musical field. Those who criticize the free and open discussions on music in the Soviet Union would do well to compare the Socialist way of musical life with what goes on in this country, where an oligarchy can without a word of explanation deny a hearing to a composer. And it can be taken for granted that the fact that the composer and librettists are Negroes, and that the subject is not some innocuous love story but is the story of a Negro revolt, had something to do with the Metropolitan's decision.<sup>38</sup>

Levine closed his review mentioning the two Haitian Revolutions, the one led by L'Ouverture in 1791 and that of Dessalines in 1803. "These new revolts are significant in world history in that they marked the first time, before Napoleon's Spanish and Russian defeats, in which a national liberation movement was successful against Napoleon's tyranny."<sup>39</sup> Levine, in his closing, however, pulled his punches and backed off his earlier statement about the opera's plot.

### **The Mysterious Case of the Recordings**

In probing the troubled reception of *Troubled Island*, I have also gained insight into the mysterious episode with the State Department recordings. While further investigation in government and Voice of America archives

is needed in order to confirm my thesis, I have a plausible explanation to Arvey's and Still's puzzlement as to why the discs were mysteriously pulled from foreign broadcasts. As Verna and Still understood events to have taken place, the State Department made a recording of one complete performance which was released to radio stations abroad about a year later. The opera was broadcast in Paris and Brussels and proved to be very successful in the latter. So much so that the director of the Théâtre de la Monnaie expressed interest in Still bringing a company to perform the opera there. Still, he recounted, wrote people in New York about the reception the opera had had in Europe, but within ten days of his letter he received a letter from the U.S. State Department requesting the return of the records from the INR (Belgian National Radio). Still wrote:

on the ground [sic] that they were "mauvais." A few days after that, the U. S. Cultural Attaché in the American Embassy in Bruxelles (Miss Dorothy Moore) very kindly suggested that the INR substitute the operas of Gian-Carlo Menotti (an Italian-born American composer) for mine.

In certain other cases in which I suspect the Communist-sympathizers to be involved, they have been sly enough and careful enough to withhold evidence from me.

As you know, in musical circles the composition of an opera is attributed solely to a composer, rather than to a librettist, whose participation is less important. In the case of "Troubled Island," the libretto was written by Langston Hughes, a man listed in "Red Channels." Yes as you will see by the reprint from Music Forum and Digest (enclosed) my collaboration with him was definitely a thing of the past, ending long before 1939. It is significant that as "Troubled Island" came near to production, he opposed me at every turn, as did other people who are also listed in "Red Channels."<sup>40</sup>

Still blamed Hughes for the failure of the opera and for the mysterious incident with the recording. Still had refused to be "duped," although he had been approached by many Communists and Communist organizations who sought his endorsement; they tried to get him to join the party, but he refused, believing the Communists stood for segregation and that they wanted to set aside a portion of the United States for blacks only. Still came out publicly against the Communists in the August 1947 issue of *Opera and Concert*, in an article titled "Politics in Music." He took up the same subject in the same magazine in a May 1948 article, "American Music and the Well-Timed Sneer."<sup>41</sup>

In their letters and articles discussing what happened to the recordings of the *Trouble Island* broadcast Arvey and Still overlooked one critical piece of information: the recordings were intended for anti-Communist Voice of America broadcasts. Since the Voice of America was a propaganda tool aimed at European nations where the Communist party had many

members and to Communist countries—Eastern Europe, Asia, Viet Nam, Cuba, and the like—any material sent over these airwaves had to suit anti-Communist, pro-America, pro-Democracy rhetorical purposes.<sup>42</sup> Voice of America became “the nation’s ideological art of anticommunism, seeking to win allies at the same time that it tried to discredit the Soviet Union and other communist nations. For the duration of the Cold War, these remained the VOA’s essential goals.”<sup>43</sup>

The United States State Department intended to use Still and Hughes’s opera as anti-Communist propaganda. Holly Cowan Shulman explains, “All propaganda operates by taking cultural myths and symbols and reworking them in the service of nationally conceived aims.”<sup>44</sup> The United States propaganda campaign as broadcast over Voice of America frequencies was no different. Initially, it seemed as though *Troubled Island* would be an ideal propagandist’s tool: as an opera composed by two leading African American artists, it would dispel any criticisms of racism directed at the United States, as would the integrated cast and production team of City Center. How could there be racism if two black men could write an opera, have it produced by a white arts institution; have it stage-directed, choreographed, and conducted by white Americans and Europeans; and, see it performed before an integrated audience? Ay, but there was one rub: Langston. By the close of the 1940s and early 1950s he had come under FBI surveillance, had been denounced in the Congressional Record, and would appear before HUAC.

Ironically, the U.S. government, as evidence suggests, intended to use *Troubled Island* for propaganda purposes. In addition to broadcasting the recording of the opera over foreign radio, it also broadcast an interview with the composer. A memorandum containing an “outline of a possible recorded interview between [Still] and Mr. Sidney Berry” is extant and archived in the William Grant Still-Verna Arvey Papers. While intended to be a “suggestion” with “great gaps to be filled in by [Still]” who had the option to agree or disagree with specific items, Ralph McCombs writes, “You understand, I’m sure, why for international use we emphasize the point that you and Mr. Hughes are Negro artists.” And, they are introduced as such at the outset of the program:

The composer, William Grant Still, and his librettist, the poet Langston Hughes, are both Negroes. Both men are well and widely known in their respective fields of music and letters, but they are here collaborating in a work of Negro background.<sup>45</sup>

The radio broadcast read almost verbatim as the original script, except the sentence, “Both men are well and widely known in their respective fields of music and letters, but they are here collaborating in a work of Negro background” was broken up into two sentences.<sup>46</sup> According to the script, Still expressed thanks for the opportunity to appear on the Voice of America program:

It is I who am happy for this opportunity to speak to our friends overseas. I am proud, and at the same time very humble, to be asked to represent American composers—more specifically Negro composers—for your listeners.<sup>47</sup>

In the interview, the writer has Still pointing out that the first two theater companies that had performed the play versions of “Drums of Haiti” in Detroit and Cleveland were “Negro groups.” Commercial theater companies (here we are to read “Broadway”) “shied away from [producing “Drums of Haiti”]” chiefly because of expenses. The audience is asked to believe that the play had widespread appeal but was simply too expensive to produce. The script has Still going on to explain the opera’s path to production, from the collaborative process to the attempts to get both the Metropolitan Opera and City Center to produce it. The script also has Still recount his career. The interview concludes with the lines, “Ladies and gentlemen, I have been talking to the American Negro composer, William Grant Still, whose new opera, *Troubled Island* was produced March 31 by the New York City Opera Company at the City Center—an institution founded and fostered by the City of New York.” On the tape of the interview the first selection to be played from the opera was the love duet between Claire and Vuval. According to the original script the second selection from the opera to be played was the Voodoo Dance from act 1. The VOA also planned to broadcast the love duet from act 1, the scene “A Peasant Folk Are We,” and the scene from the third act with the flirtation between the fishermen and -women. The Voice of America did not intend to broadcast *any* of *Troubled Island’s* showcase arias: “Africa;” the bid for racial equality “I Dream A World,” the quest for freedom “Little Black Slave Child;” or Dessaline’s manly “Never Again.”

On the tape Still reads from the script as it is written. The script and subsequent text read by the announcer emphasize that although Dessalines declared himself emperor and a tyrant, Still’s opera was about freedom and the undying hope for freedom. With the opera’s theme about the overthrow of an oppressive system and the birth of this hemisphere’s oldest democracy—a black one at that—it seems an easy and foregone conclusion that the Still-Hughes collaboration should serve well as a propaganda tool. There was one hitch: Hughes’s politics. When his political views are considered in relation to the Voice of America program, then what is by itself a pro-American propaganda tool might be read as subversively anti-American—an opera that is not about American style democracy, but about a revolution that could serve as a model for people of color throughout the world. So, I suggest an alternative to the story put forward by Still and Verna Arvey. They believed that Communists were behind a conspiracy to withdraw the recordings for broadcast on foreign radio. My theory is that the U. S. State Department pulled the recordings because of (1) Hughes Leftist political associations and (2) the opera’s themes of revolution. Depicting blacks against colonial masters (alluding to the United States’ own

expanding empire in Latin America and the Caribbean) and injecting undertones of racial divisiveness, suggested government complicity in a racist system, in opposition to the nascent Civil Rights movement. By appearing on the Voice of America program, Still was placed in the position to present “the American Negro” to the rest of the world—a de-Nazified West Germany and especially to Eastern bloc and other Communist nations. The U.S. government intended to use Still himself for propaganda purposes. If the recordings were pulled, it is plausible that the State Department did so because the agency found it inappropriate for an opera co-written by a Communist to be broadcast over an anti-Communist radio program. The State Department, after learning of Hughes’s leftist political views and associations, simply pulled the disks from the Voice of America program with the *excuse* that they were *mauvais*.

## Conclusion

*Troubled Island* is one of Still’s most important works, and one of his most troubled and troubling. Its reception has been explained variously. Kernodle has not uncovered any evidence of a conspiracy to suppress it. Smith chalks up its problems to lapses in the libretto and dramatic structure. I suggest that aesthetic judgment of the opera lies in the cultural filter through which the beholder views this opera. The subject matter was not neutral, which Hughes surely knew—after all he had staged earlier versions of this play, both as *Drums of Haiti* and as *Troubled Island*. The play was written after his trip to Haiti *while it was still occupied by the U. S. Marines*. The subject matter was controversial: the overthrow of a colonial power by black revolutionaries. It is a work that aspires to the highest, loftiest ideals of high art—one that rejects the sexualized exoticism of so many other plays, films, and articles that filled the minds of white Americans with notions about Haiti. And it is a work that is not in the vein in which white New York critics typically encountered black music—jazz and the musical theater, whether in the nightclub or on Broadway. There very well could have been a conspiracy to pan the opera—no doubt there were many modernist composers who were disgusted with Still’s populist, accessible style. In light of other reviews of Still’s works, it is entirely plausible that the critics would have decided together to dismiss the opera on the basis of musical style. It is more likely that the critics had another motive. The opera was simply too radical: a black hero who leads a slave rebellion and expels whites from Haiti—who overthrows a colonial power! The United States had had a long and difficult time in Haiti fighting the Cacos, the Haitian guerrilla rebels, as the Haitian people proved resistant to military subjugation. On the mainland, racial violence could erupt at any time in the United States—as it had in 1918 and 1919, in the 1920s, in the 1930s, and again in the 1940s. An opera about black slave rebellions written by a librettist who was considered to be Communist and who still retained support from the Left into the 1940s threatened the

racial status quo, and at the dawn of the Cold War, threatened the World Order as well. *Troubled Island* had to be quelled lest it come to be understood as an opera about Civil Rights, socio-economic equality, and anti-American imperialism.

## Notes

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5. Arnold Rampersad. *The Life of Langston Hughes: I Dream a World* vol. 2: 1941-1967, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 167.
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9. Langston Hughes, as quoted in Rampersad, *Life*, vol.1: 1902-1941, 357.
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14. Paul Bowles, as quoted in Zuck, *Musical Americanism*, 107.
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21. *Ibid.*, 21.
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26. *Ibid.*, 50-51, 149, and 192.
27. *Ibid.*, 200.
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34. Thomas Ott, as quoted in Lawless, *Haiti's Bad Press*, 39.

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38. Ben Levine, "William Grant Still's Opera on Haiti Gets World Premier," *Daily Worker*, 6 April 1949, 13.

39. Levine, "William Grant Still's Opera on Haiti Gets World Premier," 13.

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43. Krugler, *Voice of America*, 1.

44. Shulman, *Voice of America*, 6

45. Ralph McCombs to William Grant Still, 30 March 1949, Memorandum, Still-Arvey Papers.

46. Tape of interview with Still, Tape of *Troubled Island*, William Grant Still Music.

47. Ralph McCombs Memorandum.