

Title: Disgust, Hygiene, and Revolution: Langston Hughes and Arthur Koestler in Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract:

Arthur Koestler and Langston Hughes chanced to meet in Ashkhabad in 1932 while both were (independently) touring Soviet Central Asia under the auspices the Comintern. Both leftists and supporters of the Soviet project, the two writers had radically different experiences of Central Asia as a site for the frontiers of socialist revolution. This paper examines Hughes and Koestler's responses through the lens of disgust, suggesting that an affect-oriented reading of these travelers' experiences illuminates broader questions about the relationships between revolution and boundary-crossing. While Hughes's account of Turkmenia revels in collective experiences, integration, and the vision of "a colored land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites," Koestler is disgusted at drinking tea from shared bowls, at the "dirty, ugly, and dusty" part of the world at the frontiers of the revolution. In dwelling on disgust, I argue, Koestler implicitly expresses concerns about the revolution's flouting of boundaries, anticipating his turn away from communism in the coming decades.