

“The Undaunted: Excavating A Dominican Garveyite in Harlem”

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Abstract:

Carlos A. Cooks was born on June 23, 1913 to Afro-Latino parents in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. His father and uncle were members of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Dominican Republic (UNIA), which came to heavily influence his philosophical positions later in his political life. Cooks arrived in Harlem in 1929 at the age of 16. By the age of 19 he was knighted by Garvey and was appointed as an officer of the Universal African Legion, an auxiliary branch of the UNIA. Committed to linking local concerns with global pan-African issues Cooks was most known for his fiery public speeches and powerful lectures that led him to be known as “The Undaunted.” He is most notably referred to as the missing link between Garvey and Malcolm X.

To date very little scholarly research has been done on Carlos A. Cooks. Philosophically, there exists no literature on his positions. This is troublesome because he was a central public figure in the Nationalist Movement in the 1950’s. He philosophically links the positions of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X through his advocacy of ‘Buy Black,’ critical interventions on Black aesthetics, and his adamant claims in favor of the abandonment of the term Negro. In this paper we aim to excavate the philosophy of Cooks in order to showcase his positions that helped set the stage for the Black Radicalism of the 1960’s. Hence, at the heart of this paper is an epistemic liberatory project that seeks to give a philosophical place to a figure forgotten in the history of Afro-Latino and Black thought.

Cooks is best known for coining the phrase ‘Buy Black.’ It aimed to better the economic success of Black life both locally and globally. Cooks argued that economic cooperation within the Black community would fundamentally yield a liberating re-organization of Black racial identity. The key, according to Cooks, was in the Black consumer’s ability to patron Black businesses, which would ultimately yield a shift in the economic plight of Black life. A further concern for Cooks’ was the internalization of white supremacist standards of beauty. He was adamantly critical of the practice of hair conking, which he identified as a foundational support of white supremacy because it made use of white standards of beauty as determinants of Black aesthetics. Tying his economic and aesthetic concerns together Cooks advocated for the abandonment of the use of the term Negro. The term Negro, for Cooks, was a direct outcome of white psychological torture inflicted on Africans as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, the term should be abandoned because it implied social and economic subordination.

Economic sovereignty, according to Cooks, would establish the foundation for Black unity and liberation. Given the contemporary conditions of Black life excavating and re-considering the philosophy of Cooks could prove impactful as a way of imagining livable futures that are entrenched in the undaunted claim that Black lives matter both locally and globally.