ABSTRACT

VICTORIA MARIE LAMBERT. Connected by Rivers: Socialism, Nature, and Freedom as Explored by Thoreau and Hughes. (Under the direction of Dr. W. Jason Miller.)

Water has always connected us, and as long as enough of it remains pure and free, it always shall. Henry David Thoreau understood the pricelessness of water, as did Langston Hughes, and I believe that this shared knowledge – this shared love of water – is an apt connection between two otherwise very different men. I am inspired by Hughes and Thoreau’s shared fascination with bodies of water, a fascination revolving around the unifying and life-giving nature of rivers and ponds. The Concord River does not flow into the Mississippi, but I cannot deny the clear connection between two of the greatest literary minds in history.

These men were not merely great literary figures because of their shared reverence of water, though. I believe that Hughes and Thoreau are connected much more profoundly: Henry David Thoreau and Langston Hughes were men who dreamed of a world where humanity could live simply and harmoniously.

In my quest to make comrades of Hughes and Thoreau, I am perhaps most interested by their reactions – as framed by Marxist theory – to the significant socio-economic events relevant to each writer: the Industrial Revolution to Thoreau and the Great Depression to Hughes. Additionally, Thoreau’s reactions to the events leading up to the Civil War and Hughes’s commentary on issues of race in the first half of the 20th Century help frame their ideologies.

For generations, both Hughes and Thoreau have been taught in the classroom, albeit censored heavily to the point of obscuring their true ideologies. It is my mission to restore their reputations as revolutionaries; these men were rebels with a cause. Through my interpretation of their literary works and an exploration of primary texts, I intend to put Thoreau and Hughes in conversation with one another, as their actions – both literary and politically – have contributed to American culture in profound ways.