

Beyond the Blueprint: African-American Literary Marxism in
the Period of the Cold War, 1946-1969

by

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Introduction
Cold War Literary Marxism and the Making of an African-American Avant-Garde

So there you have all of it that's important. Or at least you almost have all of it. I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact. What else could I have done?

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The success is, I think, that one continues to search.

—Richard Wright, *The Outsider*

I. The Rear of the Avant-Garde: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, and Post-WWII Political
Fatigue

Early in the New York section of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's anonymous protagonist (whom I'll refer to as invisible man) encounters Peter Wheatstraw, a silver tongued street peddler hawking blueprints on the fringes of Wall Street. Momentarily perplexed by the scene before him, invisible man is quickly overtaken by Wheatstraw's siren song, "a blues" that made him think "back to things" he "had long ago shut out" (172-3). En route to deliver the last of seven poison-pen letters to a Mr. Emerson, invisible man takes his first elected detour away from "the path placed before [him]" to revel in the eccentric man's southern croon (120). His hopes for a bit of southern comfort are dashed, however, when the singing stops and Wheatstraw engages him in a strange,

but serious, conversation on black cultural responsibility. Opening with the coded non sequitur “is you got the *dog?*” Wheatstraw prompts the still-somnolent invisible man to recognize and value his political and cultural situatedness. Through riddled speech consonant with the blues aesthetic that, for Ellison, had come to replace the pessimism and rigidity of historical materialism, Wheatstraw urges invisible man to dispense with a straight life where “the dog’s got holt of you” to instead “coast a while” down one of them “good downhill streets” (175, 176). With his bounty of discarded blueprints as material emblems of the superfluity of formalized plans, Wheatstraw signifies further on the value of “coast[ing] downhill”:

Here I got ‘bout a hundred pounds of blueprints and I couldn’t build nothing! [...] I got damn near enough to build me a house if I could live in a paper house like they do in Japan. I guess somebody done changed their plans, he added with a laugh. I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw ‘em out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain’t never been used, you know. (175)

Acknowledging the speech’s aesthetic value—“despite myself, I liked his words”—Wheatstraw’s covert communiqué proves a premature delivery of the news, as invisible man reveals that he is not yet prepared to choose the “blues” over the “blueprint” (176). Rejecting Wheatstraw’s jaunty explanation, that “folks is always making plans and changing ‘em,” invisible man laments the loss of direction: “but that’s a mistake. You have to stick to the plan” (176).

Although invisible man is not yet prepared to embrace Wheatstraw's mandate of restless mobility, we know from the Prologue that it is just this aesthetics of "coast[ing]" for "a while" that defines the novel's political endgame. In eschewing the blueprint—Ellison's metonymic shorthand for the political, cultural, and, most importantly, the *subjective* constraints imposed on invisible man by the novel's institutional antagonists, including "Jim Crow racists, Uncle Tom apologists, Wall Street capitalists, blood-thinking black nationalists, and authoritarian Communists"—invisible man is finally released from an oppressive narrative of progress in which "success" is always indicated by a "rising upward" (Foley 7, Ellison 510).

Ellison's twinned indictment of continuist narratives of national progress and the Communist Party's stage theory of history may initially recall the metacritical concerns associated with Western Marxism. Yet his "wait-and-see" politics, dramatized by the invisible man's subterranean retreat and conceptually concretized by Ellison's advancement of "hibernation" as a form of "covert preparation for future action," disabuses us of the connection (13). The anticipatory character of Ellison's promise for "future action" is nullified by the specific character of invisible man's political life world, where the greatest act of political "sabotage" is the theft of a paid resource: electricity (13). In Ellison's use of the word, "sabotage" signifies neither disruption nor destruction but *moving with the current*. Ellison's refusal to identify freedom with any institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought leads not to revolutionary critique of the status quo, but a rationalization of political stasis that would, in the present day, exist on the order of stealing cable. Despite its rhetoric, *Invisible Man* is not an underground record of "covert preparation" but a document of post-WWII political fatigue.



Figure 0.1 Jeff Wall, “After *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue.” (1999-2000.)

Mirroring the placatory ethic of his protagonist, Ellison would, in the wake of *Invisible Man*'s publication, identify himself as an aesthetic and political conduit for power. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1953, Ellison attributed the novel's success to a prose style that, through its “experimental attitude,” aimed to return America “to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy that typified the best of our nineteenth century fiction.” Linking his aesthetic practice to the health of American democracy, Ellison aligned himself publicly with what he would later term the “elegance and power” of the State (qtd. in Callahan, *Collected Essays* 680). Such uncritical support of the State continued throughout the peak years of the Cold War. An admirer of Lyndon Johnson, whom Ellison likened to Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson in his

1968 essay “The Myth of the Flawed Southerner,” Ellison supported Johnson’s escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, his establishment of anti-Communist cultural organizations, such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) led by CIA agent Michael Josselson from 1950-1967, and multiple concessionist programs that paid lip service to race and class equity.

Beyond his support for oppressive Cold War institutions, Ellison nurtured a growing culture of censorship by actively obstructing the careers of black Left writers “whose ideas offended him” (Rampersad 407). Ellison, who considered Communism and Marxism reciprocal terms, snubbed non-Communist writers of the black Left including a young Toni Cade¹ (1939-1995), who asked Ellison to write a letter in support of her application to the prestigious Eugene Saxton fellowship; Kristin Hunter (1931-2008), whose request for Ellison to blurb her first novel, *God Bless the Child* (1964), Ellison ignored; and Gayl Jones (1949-), whom Ellison dismissed as unimportant after Toni Morrison recommended he read Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) during Morrison’s tenure as senior editor at Random House (Rampersad 516, 487, 508). Ellison blackballed established writers of the black Left with equal aplomb. John Oliver Killens’ attempt to draw Ellison in to the black internationalist Left through a writing gig at *Freedomways*² was rebuffed by Ellison for its clear “conflict of [political] interest” (Rampersad 403). Ellison expressed offense at the invitation to write a book on James Baldwin, and, after Baldwin’s death in 1989, refused to eulogize him in the American Academy and National Institute of Arts

¹ Later, she published under the name Toni Cade Bambara.

² *Freedomways* was a leading African-American theoretical, political and cultural journal of the 1960s-1980s founded by Louis Burnham, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Edward Strong. Shirley Graham Du Bois was its first editor. The journal ran from 1961-1985.

and Letters publication, *Proceedings*.³ Even Langston Hughes, perhaps the only black Left writer to support *Invisible Man* in print, was iced out. Ellison declined to review his new anthology *New Negro Poets: U.S.A* (1964) after Hughes expressed annoyance at Ellison's apathy (bordering on antipathy) toward Africa and African independence (Rampersad 262).⁴

Ellison explained his disaffection with the literary world of the black Left in terms of aesthetic distance. Framing his dismissal in new critical terms, Ellison had no use for writers who allowed "history to interfere" with the writing (qtd. in Rampersad 413). Yet for an author who took pains to distinguish politics from art, for whom "eloquence" and "aesthetic mastery" were paramount, in practice Ellison engaged in a primitive (and pre-technological) form of distant reading (qtd. in Ellison, *Collected Essays* 159). Although Ellison would have balked at Franco Moretti's sociological formalism, with its reduction of literature to quantitative data, Moretti's paradoxical claim that knowledge is acquired and preserved by *not reading* resonates with Ellison's artificial selection of cultural texts in the period of the Cold War.⁵ Inflating personal prejudice to the dimension of categorical knowledge, Ellison dismissed en masse works that he had either not read or cursorily

³ Arnold Rampersad, in his unparalleled biography of Ellison, includes a note that Ellison wrote at the time of the objection: "Perhaps what Baldwin is telling white Americans is: allow Negroes to sleep with your daughters or we homos will sleep with you" (Rampersad 389). As a race writer and an out-homosexual, Baldwin had little chance with Ellison, even though he, like Ellison, objected to the "narrow naturalism" of the Wright School.

⁴ Dismissing Africa as "just part of the bigger world picture," Ellison criticized African American writers' connections to Africa. "The African content of American Negro life," wrote Ellison, "is more fanciful than actual" (qtd. in Rampersad 366). True to his convictions, Ellison refused to participate in Langston Hughes' 1956 book drive for Ghana, and declined to visit the country on behalf of the State Department. Paradoxically, Ellison was inspired to begin collecting "pricey African Art" after learning of Andre Malroux's aesthetic interest (Rampersad 366).

⁵ For a concise polemic on "distant reading," see Franco Moretti's essay "Conjectures on World Literature."

scanned, including novels, plays, and poetry by Amiri Baraka, Rosa Guy, Langston Hughes, Kristin Hunter, Paule Marshall, Willard Motley, Ann Petry, Ishmael Reed, William Gardner Smith, Sarah Wright, and the later novels of James Baldwin and Richard Wright. According to Ellison, these authors exhibited a “menacing style” shaped by “politico-cultural theories discredited some thirty years ago” (qtd. in Rampersad 365). Here Ellison’s invisible referent—Communism—is advanced as an enduring if anachronistic albatross hung around the necks of the black Left literati. To not read these authors was to keep current, to make progress, to close the door on an embarrassing moment in his own, and in black America’s, recent past. Yet Ellison’s aesthetic and ethical revulsion against the “herd mentality” of Left writers was just as antiquated (qtd. in Rampersad 418). The artists that Ellison rejected did not, as he feared, constitute a uniform school, but a decentralized avant-garde writing from a Marxist-internationalist perspective. For these artists, Marxism was no longer an official dogma or fixed system with transcendental claims, but a method open to manipulation and critique. The aesthetic dishonesty of socialist realism and its ilk was the exception, not the rule, as black writers’ confronted political problems on a global scale. Without pandering to the masses, or offering platitudes about how things should be, these authors developed discursive strategies that could, at once, “represent and accuse” their new reality (Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension* 33). For these authors, the question of how to fight the system without contributing to its enhanced functioning, and how to do so non-prescriptively, were central to the production of a new form of committed literature.

II. Black Cold War Fictions: Beyond the Blueprint

Why then, begin with Ellison? More specifically, given my critique of Ellison's retrograde politics, why open this study of Cold War African-American literary Marxism with an author whose political aesthetic is as anemic as his political record? Beyond his reputation as the most significant African-American novelist of the twentieth-century—a reputation with which any literary critic of the Cold War period must contend—something like Ellison's practice of artificial selection has regulated the study of the mid-twentieth-century African-American literary Left. Until recently, with the publication of Dayo Gore's *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African-American Women Activists in the Cold War* (2011); Lawrence Jackson's *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African-American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (2011); Alan Wald's *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2012); Cheryl Higashida's *Black Feminist Internationalism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1955-1995* (2013); and Mary Helen Washington's *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (2014), the Cold War African-American literary Left was a neglected topic of study. Serious critical engagement with the African-American literary Left was limited to the interwar period (1919-1939), during which time black authors' literary and political proximity to Communism and the American Communist Party enabled literary historians to empirically (and objectively) ground the aesthetic in the political. Important and path-breaking studies by Kate Baldwin, Anthony Dawahare, Barbara Foley, William Maxwell, Alan Wald, and Mary Helen Washington revealed fully the "import and prominence of the American Communist Party as an engine of intellectual and artistic development for black Americans who were committed to issues of social and economic justice" (Jackson 12).

As black writers began to leave and to openly criticize the Communist Party (between 1939-1945), however, the link between Marxism and African-American literary production became more precarious. Although a vibrant theoretical tendency in Western Europe, non-Communist (or anti-Communist) Marxism was a contradiction in terms in the context of the Cold War African-American literary Left. For stalwart members of the black Communist Left, (including Lloyd Brown, Lorraine Hansberry, and John Oliver Killens) and contemporary critics devoted to a Communist-specific literary-political repertoire (including Barbara Foley, William Maxwell, and Bill Mullen), African-American writers who openly criticized the Communist Party's class-conscious antiracism, in literature or non-fiction, were considered apostate Marxists.⁶

Challenging these political predeterminations, my project, *Beyond the Blueprint: African American Literary Marxism in the Period of the Cold War, 1946-1969* recuperates the repressed political and aesthetic legacies of Left African-American writers and cultural workers in the period of the Cold War. Anchored in novels that unsettle the fixed political itinerary of Marxist identity articulated in 1930s proletarian fiction, I examine non-aligned forms of Marxist expression in the work of Richard Wright (1908-1961), Rosa Guy (1922-2012), and Sarah E. Wright (1928-2009). Through their fiction—Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953), Rosa Guy's *Bird at My Window* (1966), and Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969)—each author offers a formal record of his or her subjective experience in the margins of official forms of radical belonging, namely the

⁶ The specific content of these critiques are offered in individual chapters. Lorraine Hansberry and Lloyd Brown's attacks on the anti-Communism (and alleged anti-Marxism) of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* can be found in Chapter Two: "Deep Marxism: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Making of a Postwar Aesthetic." John Oliver Killens' attacks on non-realist representations of social protest can be found in Chapter Three: "The Protocols of Race in the Black Arts Matrix: Rosa Guy's Surrealist-Marxism in *Bird at My Window*."

Communist Party, the “ultra-Bolshevism” of French philosophical Marxism, Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, and Third World Internationalism.

My emphasis on formal (e.g. stylistic and structural) analysis in the interpretation of non-aligned committed literature revises traditional analytic methods of literary radicalism founded upon an author’s standing in existing political organizations and institutions. In addition to compromising the legacies of individual authors’ complex political and literary imaginations, these methods have suppressed a vital body of literature that expresses the most significant historical transition of the twentieth-century—a moment that philosopher Hannah Arendt theorizes as “between past and future” (Arendt 3). While the innovative writing (and reading) practices performed by these authors may not resemble the radical writing of the 1930s and early 1940s, their departure from this previous mode of expression reaffirms the dialectical quality of Marx’s thought, which requires that any appropriation—political, philosophical, or cultural—respond to its particular historical and material conditions. Such a theoretical position has traditionally been attributed to continental theorists, especially the Frankfurt School in Germany, the post-Althusserian school in France (including Michel Foucault, Étienne Balibar, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière), the existential Marxism of Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; however, the existence of an African-American Marxist avant-garde at the helm of these theoretical advancements has been virtually ignored.

Another aspect of the radicalism enacted by these authors is that each stands apart from the non-Communist black Marxist intellectual and political leaders of their milieu, including C.L.R. James, Kwame Nkrumah, and George Padmore, all of whom advanced an affirmative utopic vision of Black Internationalism. Although in solidarity

with these anti-colonial and internationalist struggles, their persistently *negative* critique of Western consciousness, specifically of the place of Western philosophy in black diasporic intellectual work departed sharply from Nkrumah’s “philosophical consciencism” and James’ unreconstructed Hegelianism (Nkrumah 79).⁷

Two chapters on Richard Wright frame this account. In “Richard Wright’s Poetic Marxism,” I build on Richard Wright’s re-classification of Marx as a poet to uncover a Marxist aesthetic in Wright’s work that is deeply at variance with existing accounts. The chapter focuses on the influence of American rhetorician Kenneth Burke on *Native Son*—a connection not yet appreciated by Wright scholarship—and culminates in a re-examination of the politics and form of Richard Wright’s most famous novel.

Chapter Two, “Deep Marxism: Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and the Making of a Postwar Aesthetic” revisits the thirteen-year interim between *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953), during which Wright’s focus shifted away from political and cultural Marxism to the principal texts of Marx’s thought. Challenging the established narrative that identifies postwar Richard Wright as an apostate Marxist, I advance a counter-thesis: that Wright became a Marxist only after he left the Communist Party.

While the first half of my dissertation, which I have titled *Beyond the Blueprint*, restores Richard Wright’s postwar revolutionary legacy, the second half recovers Marxist aesthetics in the context of African American and Afro-Caribbean women’s writing. In this section, I examine two novels, Rosa Guy’s *Bird at My Window* (1966) and Sarah

⁷ Nkrumah’s defines the concept of “philosophical consciencism” in his theoretical treatise, *Consciencism* (1964), as “the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western and Islamic, and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality (Nkrumah 79).

Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969); the authors were charter members of the central organ of the black Marxist Left, the Harlem Writers Guild. Chapter Three, "The Protocols of Race in the Black Arts Matrix: Rosa Guy's Surrealist Marxism in *Bird at My Window*" examines Trinidadian-American author and activist Rosa Guy's neglected first novel. Politically, ethically, and formally challenging, *Bird at My Window* dramatizes the abysmal material and psychological conditions for African-Americans in post-WWII Harlem through the experiences of one of its native sons, the brilliant, but clinically depressed murderer Wade Williams. Moving beyond her formal training as a Marxist agitator, Guy disrupts rote ideological interpretations (both Freudian and Marxist) of criminal and psychological desiccation in urban black communities through a stylistic interplay of naturalist and surrealist narration. Reflecting her twinned interests in automatism and Marxist revolutionary theory, Guy's aesthetic experimentation challenges our aesthetic assumptions about Marxist expression and the explanatory power of historical materialism.

In *This Child's Gonna Live*, Sarah Wright portrays the collective suffering of a poor black family mired in Depression-induced poverty through the novel's female protagonist, Mariah Upshur. Though not the first to dramatize black women's triple oppression using the novel form, Sarah Wright was the first and to date the only black writer of either gender to generate a palimpsest narrative linking two key moments of twentieth-century black Marxism, the Great Depression and the Cuban Revolution. Supported by original archival material that chronicles little known details of Sarah Wright's political and aesthetic trajectory, this chapter restores to Sarah Wright's only published novel both its historical context and prospective theoretical vision, offering a new model of reading a

revolutionary Marxist aesthetic from an avowed, but unsung, revolutionary.

Recognizing this is a beginning stage in the development of a non-programmatic method for mapping Marxist aesthetics and commitment, I conclude with a Coda that addresses subjects and texts for future inquiry. To reinforce the necessity of a three-part approach combining archival, theoretical, and formal analysis in the study of non-aligned Marxist literature, I open this final section with a brief reading of the final pages of Willard Motley's previously unpublished manuscript "Little Boy Blue" (1965). Completed one year before his death at age fifty-eight, the novel chronicles a cross-generational homosexual affair between a white American exile and a young indigenous boy. In many ways reminiscent of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), another novel drawn from the mediated autobiographical content of an Africa-American expatriate, "Little Boy Blue" dramatizes the tragic consequences of an American in pursuit of his identity. Other texts considered include James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1960), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Richard Gibson's *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1958), Gayle Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro: A Play in One Act* (1969), Ann Petry's *The Narrows* (1953), William Gardner Smith's *The Stone Face* (1963), Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), and John A. Williams' *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1968).

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Chapter One

Richard Wright's Search for a Method

I. Marx, a Poet?

In the final question of an interview for *France-U.S.A* in September 1960, Richard Wright is asked by translator and journalist Annie Brière, “Do you read a lot?” (210).¹ A standard, even banal question for a famously voracious reader, Wright begins to answer this question rather mechanically, listing novelists for whom he has long expressed admiration. The names offered—Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, Thomas Hardy, Guy de Maupassant, Marcel Proust, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky—are unsurprising as is Wright’s emendation that he would “give them all up for a book by Dreiser” who “encompasses them all” (210).² But in the very moment that we, and no doubt Brière, are prepared to learn nothing new from this practiced recitation, Wright chooses to disrupt his rote. After a full stop, Wright adds, separately, “And I should like to add that I am

¹ For the full interview, see Brière’s “R. Wright: America is not Conformist: It Renews Itself Endlessly.” It is worth noting Brière’s keen interest in African-American literature. Brière is not merely on assignment, but is an informed reader of African-American literature. See additional interviews conducted by Brière in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (1995), ed. Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner.

² Wright’s admiration for Dreiser is well documented. Of all of Dreiser’s novels, Wright favored *Jennie Gerhardt* (1933) and *Sister Carrie* (1900) for their complex narrations of female suffering, a theme that resonated with Wright, who spent his youth in the throes of his mother’s struggles with sickness, abuse, and poverty. Dreiser’s novels encouraged Wright to write one of his own. In his original typescript for *Native Son*, Wright includes a lengthy dedication to his mother. The dedication is clearly influenced by Wright’s reading of Dreiser’s women.

fond of Freud and Marx,³ not from a political angle but because they are poets” (210). Wright’s Delphic response piques Brière, who immediately attempts to secure a future interview on this idea of Marx-as-poet. Although this interview would never materialize—Wright dies of a heart attack two months later—this line survives as the most explicit if interpretively oblique expression of Wright’s formal investment in Marx’s thought. Offering a new lens through which to read and understand Wright’s complex relationship to Marxism throughout his writing career, Wright’s recasting of Marx-as-poet is of special importance to critics and readers of Wright’s postwar fiction, a body of work that has, due in no small part to Wright’s departure from the Communist Party in 1942, been stripped of its Marxist valences.

What was Wright trying to communicate through this provocative recasting of Marx as poet? However generically fitting, this chapter will not look to Wright’s poetry for further insight and clarification. While a full length study of Wright’s poetry, from his early poems⁴ “A Red Love Note” and “Rest for the Weary,” appearing in the January/February 1934 issue

³ For Wright, Marx and Freud occupy the same discursive universe. Wright’s recasting of Marx and Freud as poets runs parallel to more familiar methodological arguments on behalf of a merging of Freud and Marx, including those by Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*, 1955) and Michel Foucault (“What is an Author?” 1969), Wilhelm Reich (*Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis*, 1929), and Erich Fromm (*The Sane Society*, 1955). With the exception of Foucault (and, of course, Wright), each author combines Marx and Freud to develop a more comprehensive diagnostic approach for social analysis. Although this chapter will pursue Wright’s revisionary reading of Marx as a poet to the comparative exclusion of Freud, it leaves open—and, indeed, encourages—a critical reevaluation of Freud as poet. Such a reevaluation would do much toward complicating existing “Freudian” readings of Wright, including those by Claudia Tate in “Rage, Race, and Desire: *Savage Holiday* by Richard Wright” and Maurice Wallace in “Richard Wright’s Black Medusa,” both of which read Wright’s narratives Oedipally.

⁴ Additional early poems include “I Have Seen Black Hands” (1934) published in *The New Masses*, “I am a Slogan” and “Ah Feels it in Mah Bones” (1935) in *International Literature* and “Red Leaves” (1935) in *Transcontinental*.

of *Left Front*,⁵ to the 4,000 plus haiku⁶ Wright wrote in the last two years of his life (1958-1960), would no doubt contribute to one aim of this project (toward reclaiming Wright's formal agility), it nevertheless risks obscuring both the subject and objective of Wright's critical act. The subject here is not poetry, neither Wright's nor Marx's⁷ nor anyone else's, but *reading*. In reading Marx as a poet, Wright expands the interpretive and discursive possibilities engendered by a traditional reading of Marx. No longer the author of a fixed discourse known as Marxism, Marx is transformed into a "founder of discursivity."

Although this distinction comes from "What is an Author?," Michel Foucault's 1969 essay in which Foucault explains his relationship to Marx's thought as structural rather than conceptual or political, the import of Wright's critical act must not be subsumed by

⁵ *Left Front* magazine ran from 1930-1935, and was published by the Chicago chapter of The John Reed Club. Wright briefly edited the magazine, a position he secured after joining the Communist Party in 1933.

⁶ See the recent reissue of Wright's posthumous collection *Haiku: This Other World*.

⁷ While I do not intend to overstate my case, or worse, implement what Marx considered to be the dunce of all rhetorical tropes—the (false) analogy—the similarities between Wright and Marx with regard to their poetic trajectories are worth noting. First, both men began as poets. Wright began his literary career as a poet, writing overtly political poetry for Marxist and Communist publications. By his own admission, Marx produced "volumes" of poems during his early years in university. Despite the comparative ease with which both were able to generate poems, both men turned to prose at the start of their major phase as writers. In comparison to Wright, whose generic shift seemed natural given his primary interest in fiction, Marx's evolution was much more dramatic. Marx narrates this expressive shift in an 1837 letter to his father. In this letter, Marx frames his interest in poetry as a pathology caused by a persistent feverish state. According to Marx, this sickness proved temporary: "When I got better I burnt all the poems and outlines of stories, etc., imagining that I could give them up completely, of which so far at any rate I have not given any proof to the contrary" (Marx). Although Marx's words suggest an agonistic relationship between poetry and political economy, his development of a materialist dialectics of history would be unthinkable outside the context of his early interest in poetic form. Marx's materialist revision of Hegel's dialectic, confirmed by a spatial metaphor (the turning of Hegel on his head), is nothing if not a formal and stylistic revision of Hegel's synthetic logic. Through his interest in poetics, Marx is able to take language—and the material conditions it strives to describe—beyond its proper frontiers. This more expansive understanding of representation is essential to the development of revolutionary thought. Marx may have given up on the writing of poetry, but his investment in poetics survived his hasty act of immolation.

Foucault's more concentrated explanation. While the deliberate ambiguity of Wright's statement is powerfully reinforced by the precision of Foucault's theoretical language, Wright's transcendent reading of Marx prefigures and, as will become clear, far exceeds the parameters established by Foucault.⁸

Nevertheless, Foucault's re-classification of Marxian discursivity offers crucial support to a topic—Wright's Marxism—overdetermined by interpretive practices that rely on the presence of a Communist specific repertoire.⁹ Under Foucault's rubric, the test of conceptual allegiance—wherein a work's Marxist potency is determined by the degree to which it appropriates and deploys a content that has been vetted as properly Marxist—is proven not only insufficient, but also theoretically (and, ultimately politically) impotent. It is not enough for a discursive field to generate new ideas and discoveries; whether a work is praised for the ease or for the complexity of its appropriation does not matter if the discursive field itself is left unchanged. What distinguishes Marx (and Freud) from other “initiators of discourse”—including Aristotle and Saussure, Galileo and Newton—is a formal

⁸ Wright's refiguring of Marx as a poet is again deliberately unaccompanied by an immediate explanation or supporting theory.

⁹ While a detailed account of Foucault's own Marxist trajectory exceeds the parameters of the present inquiry into Wright's Marxism, a few key plot points are worth noting. Foucault was in the French Communist Party (PCF) between 1950 and 1954. Leaving France shortly after his departure from the PCF, Foucault spent the next three years of his life in Sweden (which had become, after its 1917 split with the Communists, a social democracy), and Communist Poland. By the time he returned to France in late 1958, his criticism of the PCF had expanded to a wider rejection of Marxism. Disappointed not only in the party, Foucault now “disdained all 57 varieties of Marxist thought from the Sartrean brand to the structuralist brand” (Miller 34). Significantly, it would take a non-Western Marxist event, the Tunisian student led revolt that lasted throughout 1967 and reached its peak between March and June of 1968, to reawaken Foucault's interest in Marx's thought. At this time Foucault was living in Tunis, and was surprised to find a socially non-oppressive form of Marxism at the heart of the rebellion. Foucault found the students' “continual questioning” of all forms of governance, including previous iterations of Marxist governments, a welcomed reprieve from the stilted interpretive (and political) practices to be found in France. Most importantly, the Tunisian revolution taught Foucault that “politics, like art and eroticism, could occasion a kind of limit experience” (qtd. in Miller 36).

quality that communicates/reflects an active resistance to such imitation and orthodoxy. Thus, while the study of either historical materialism or psychoanalysis necessitates a “return to the origin” (12)—to Marx or Freud—the product of this return is not delimited in advance by the initiator’s original findings. The endgame, then, is neither revision nor supplementation. No matter how potentially useful to the host discipline, such additive practices, which deny the principle of historical contingency, affirm their own discursive stagnation.

At the start of this brief Foucauldian interlude, I explained that my primary motive for integrating Foucault was terminological. Foucault’s systematic critique of the discursive limits of contemporary Marxism, buttressed by his revision of Marx as a “founder of discursivity,” brought intellectual resonance to my present inquiry. Significantly though, the points at which Foucault and Wright overlap—their shared resistance to allegedly pious readings of Marx, including both the motivated distillation of Marx’s thought into isolated propagandistic mandates (e.g. “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”)¹⁰ and its codification into a comprehensive system (as with Stalinist *diamat*)¹¹—are balanced by different and ultimately incommensurate understandings

¹⁰ It is clear, I hope, that I am referring to the de-contextualization of various lines either uttered or written by Marx. Using this logic to quash the revolutionary potential of discourse is to discount Marx’s contribution to revolutionary thought and action. Marx was, we must not forget, a *writer* who was himself criticized, five years after publishing his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), for making the “study and development of revolutionary theory” first priority over more “practical political activity” (Nicolaus 8-9).

¹¹ *Diamat* is the name that Stalin gave to his revision of dialectical materialism. Stalin’s perversion of dialectics and especially the principle of contradiction is perhaps best documented in the following excerpt from his 1930 address to the Soviet Congress: “We stand for the withering away of the state. At the same time we stand for the... strongest state power that has ever existed... Is this ‘contradictory’? Yes, it is contradictory. But this contradiction... fully reflects Marx’s dialectics” (qtd. in Luckyj 178). Luckyj’s *Literary Politics in the Soviet Ukraine* reproduces fully Stalin’s report to the Sixteenth Congress of the Party in 1930.

of form. Foucault's explicit disinterest in "the totality of Marx's thought"¹² combined with his public "shun[ning]" of "all things related to the dialectic" reveals the limits of his formal interest in Marx and, as we will see, distinguish his project from Wright's (Balibar 39). Additionally, his primary aim—to "locate [in Marx] the rules that formed a certain number of concepts and theoretical relationships"—affirms his as a structural and disciplinary (philosophical) approach to Marxian discursivity.¹³ Wright's recasting of Marx-as-poet stands as a direct challenge to such systematized methods of reading. Rather than reading for rules in order to establish structural patterns in Marx's thought, Wright reestablishes Marx's as a guiding, but ultimately unrealizable aesthetic—as poetry¹⁴—locating the revolutionary potential of Marx's thought in its formal qualities, those that cannot be easily lifted for political or philosophical appropriation. Poetry, neither "the name for a [restrictive] form of writing made by poets" nor a generalized "metonym for the arts," becomes for Wright a way of coding what he identifies as a structural imperative in the specific context of Marx's thought (Nealon 868).

In what follows, I will use Wright's poetic revaluation of Marx's thought to construct a narrative account of his development of a non-objective Marxist aesthetic. The focus here is

¹² See paragraph three of "What is an Author?" (Foucault 205-206).

¹³ Yet another way of differentiating the two is to compare their Marxist trajectories after each man's respective semiotic turn. Shortly after he published "What is an Author?" Foucault aligned himself with the Maoists. Less than five years later, he would refuse to discuss Marxism altogether. Wright, on the other hand would claim that he was "searching for an *attitude* to replace Marxism" but would never renounce Marx. In the next chapter, devoted to Wright's postwar masterpiece *The Outsider*, I will show how Wright style exemplifies the structural principles of Marxian critique.

¹⁴ My language in this paragraph is strongly influenced by Christopher Nealon's theorization of the "poetic case" in his article of the same name ("The Poetic Case" in *Critical Inquiry*.) The language supporting my argument is taken directly from the following sentence: "Poetry is not "the name for a kind of thing made by poets—either literal writers of poems or artists generally" but a name for an aesthetic that pushes its reader to "think" about aesthetic experience as marking a kind of human capacity, whether or not it produces traditionally aesthetic objects" (Nealon 868).

on the early stages of Wright's development, beginning with his reading of Kenneth Burke, from whom he appropriates, virtually in name alone, the idea of a "poetic" Marx, to his deployment of this principle in what he calls his "poetic revision" of *Native Son* (Figure 1). Following these discussions, I will look backward. Both "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), Wright's earliest articulation of Marx's relationship to literary form, and "Between Laughter and Tears" (1937), Wright's rebuke of an African American literary folk sensibility, anticipate Wright's development of a dialectical literary sensibility. Although they remain somewhat outside our primary narrative, they too are essential coordinates in our inquiry into the origins of Wright's style.

Though the narrative does not always proceed chronologically, it reaches a definite historical end in 1946, the year in which Wright began work on *The Outsider* (1953). The logic here is to provide both the theoretical and empirical foundation necessary for an historical and stylistic reappraisal of Wright's most misunderstood novel, culminating in a method of reading applicable to other non-objective, non-Communist forms of Marxist African American literary expression.

Neither a biographical nor a new historicist reconstruction in their traditional sense, my proposed narrative at times resembles both. My reliance upon archival sources in particular may flag mine as a "subject centered" view of history, one where the "specific texture of a specific life" eclipses broader historical concerns¹⁵ (Buchanan xv). While I make no apology for what some Orthodox semiotic Marxists including Buchanan might label

¹⁵ See Ian Buchanan's foreword to *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*. Buchanan speaks disparagingly of biographically informed research. Archival work, described as the "exhuming of objects and documents, public records and private records," is treated with even greater suspicion. Buchanan contrasts this "new historicist" methodology to Fredric Jameson's "object centered view of history" (xv).

“empiricism,”¹⁶ such an association detracts from the speculative nature of this project. Inspired by Sartre’s regressive–progressive method of historical investigation,¹⁷ my approach, designed to illuminate the evolution of a particular literary style exemplified by Wright, is a particularized investigation into a neglected historical phenomenon. Without speculation, such an inquiry would be, quite literally, unthinkable.

II. Wright Reads Burke

Wright’s understanding of the poetic quality of Marx’s thought was most likely influenced, albeit rather quietly and ultimately very critically,¹⁸ by Kenneth Burke’s aborted project,¹⁹ beginning in *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1938),²⁰ to render Marxist aesthetics— and specifically Communist practice—poetic.²¹ It is through Burke rather than

¹⁶At times Jameson’s own rhetoric seems to discount not only the historical value of archival work, but also its potential to strengthen the precision of his, and our, understanding of the role of literature and literary production in the dialectical process. For a few examples of this argument at work, see his Preface to *Marxism and Form* (1971) and Chapter 7, “Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse” in *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990).

¹⁷Sartre describes this method in Chapter III of *Search for a Method*, alternatively translated as *A Question of Method* (1957, 1960), titled “Progressive–Regressive Method.” Beginning with the premise that “men themselves make their history but in a given environment which conditions them,” Sartre develops a method of historical analysis that at once acknowledges the primacy of economic considerations without giving way to a kind of economic determinism which not only defaces but obliterates the role of *individual* persons as historical agents (or producers of history).

¹⁸Eugene Miller has also developed a theory of Wright’s poetics based on Burke. In doing so, he has *eliminated* any trace of Marx’s thought from both Burke’s concept of poetics and Wright’s appropriation. In so doing, Miller has not only depoliticized, but dehistoricized the work (and processes) of both.

¹⁹The series of qualifications used in the first clause of this sentence remain crucial to understanding the Wright/Burke narrative. As this section progresses, the *limits* of Burke’s influence on Wright will become more clear.

²⁰Burke refines his concept of “poetic action” later that year in the short essay “Semantic and Poetic Meaning”—a more concentrated explanation of what he refers to here as the “poetic effect.”

²¹Significantly, the only other major inquiry into Wright’s poetics, Eugene Miller’s *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (1990), positions Wright’s poetics *against* his Marxism. While Miller’s archival work forced him to acknowledge that Wright’s understanding of

the Russian formalists (whose works Wright neither owned nor read)²² that Wright was first introduced to a politicized understanding of poetics undetermined by the generic limitations of race and even class specific forms of linguistic or narrative transgression.

Burke's theory of poetic action, his move away from the study of static symbols in literature, poetry, and criticism in order to develop a vocabulary that could represent the hidden movement, or action, of dialectical thought resonated with Wright, who was struggling, after sentimental reviews of *Uncle Tom's Children*,²³ to develop a mode of expression that exceeded existing forms of literary radicalism.²⁴ However formative to his development as a writer, the guiding principles¹ of proletarian fiction—to represent the revolutionary potential of the laboring classes—had by this time run their course. Rather than continue to create literature designed for the “cauldron of the Revolution” (Gold 62) as specified by

poetics “seem[ed] to refer to a Marxist revamping of African American folklore,” he chooses to suppress this path of inquiry in favor of a focus on Wright’s “purely literary concepts.” As a defense against this obvious act of critical suppression, Miller argues that unlike the anachronistic, historically retrograde interpretive coordinate of Marxism the “purely literary” remains a more reliable and germane avenue for contemporary scholars. According to Miller, it is the “purely literary that move and direct the forces of history today” (Miller xxi) While Miller also cites Burke as a major influence of Wright’s poetics, he fails to mention Marx as the very foundation of Burke’s “poetics of action.”

²² Michel Fabre’s annotated listing of Wright’s library, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, does not include any titles by members of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ). Nor do his notes include indexical reference to Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov, or affiliated members Vladimir Propp and Roman Jakobson.

²³ Wright addresses these reviews in the following passage, excerpted from “How Bigger Was Born” (1941): “When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest” (16). I will discuss Wright’s plans for revision further in my discussion of the production of *Native Son* in the third section of the present chapter.

²⁴ Wright’s early focus on narrative voice and representations of collective action (recall, for example, the elaborate protest scenes in “Bright and Morning Star” and “Fire and Cloud”) had inspired sympathy, that most banal and passive of emotions, where he had hoped to initiate a desire for real structural (social, psychic, and political) change.

Communist Party of the United States of America (henceforth CPUSA) literati, Wright, in the height of his celebrity as the “Party’s most illustrious proletarian author,” (Aaron 21) began to amend his narrative principles.

Given the increase in party suspicion toward unorthodox approaches to Marx’s thought, particularly those practiced by its African American members,²⁵ Wright’s new interest was at risk of intellectual atrophy. Left with few viable theoretical models,²⁶ Wright turned to Kenneth Burke. Although Wright had encountered Burke three years earlier at the First American Writer’s Congress—Burke’s iconoclastic speech “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” would have been all but impossible to miss—he was not moved to further inquiry until late 1937, the year that *The New Masses* published Burke’s scathing critique of Jacques

²⁵ In *American Hunger*, Wright describes a Party campaign in the late 1930s to “rid” the Party of African American Trotskyists. In the ‘30s and ‘40s, “Trotskyism” functioned as a metonym for non-doctrinaire interpretations of Marx’s thought. The accusation of “Trotskyism” among black Communists revealed the extent to which the party remained ignorant to the material conditions of its black American members. Although written in hindsight, Wright’s response to the “Party theoretician’s” campaign to “rid the Communist party of all its Negro Trotskyite elements” (112) reveals it to be a key moment of profound disillusionment:

Of all the Negro Communists I knew, I tried to determine one who could be called Trotskyite, and I could think of none. None of the black Communists I knew possessed the intellectual capacity to formulate a Trotskyite position in politics. Most of them were illiterate migrants from southern plantations and they had never been vitally interested in politics until they had entered the Communist Party. (112)

Ultimately, the question of whether such charges were motivated by a genuine or a willed ignorance did not matter. Wright had joined the CP not for “the economics of Communism,” but because its *theoretical* framework, delineated by Stalin’s *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, provided oppressed people with a way through, if not quite out, of an unwanted subject position. The transposition of a Comintern conspiracy theory onto any act of defiance among African American Communists was enough to remind an already wary Wright of the increasing distance between the stated aims of the CP—its promise to aid in the development of a national identity based not on race nor any other easily observed (and reified) quality, but the “intangible” (though no less national) character of a shared “*psychological* make up”—and its political life.

²⁶ In “Writing from the Left” Wright identifies the work of Nelson Algren, Andre Malroux, and especially the unsung fiction of Meridel LeSeur as ideal creative types, but has greater difficulty naming exemplary theoreticians.

Barzun's *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition* (1937).²⁷ The review, which was printed on the same page as Wright's "Between Laughter and Tears," a similarly critical analysis of the retrograde race writing of Walter Edward Turpin and Zora Neale Hurston, confirmed the leading Marxist's special interest in race.²⁸ The final lines of Burke's "The Science of Race Thinking" proved an ideal preface:

This book [*Barzun's Race: A Study in Modern Superstition*] should also be read by Marxists because it indicates how both class and regional divisions can in naïve hands lead to a schematization of psychological traits that is hardly other than a concealed variant of the same oversimplified patterns as prevail in race thinking. On Marx's own testimony, a theory of purely economic classification must be subtilized when one is analyzing the expressions of any specific individual. (21)

Burke's recourse to Marx in the context of "naïve" theorizations on race and racialized psychology would have appealed to Wright, who had been forced to neglect the very subject that had inspired his interest in the party²⁹ due to his heavy workload³⁰ as the Harlem

²⁷ Although evidence suggests that it was only after reading *Permanence and Change* that Wright began to articulate the relationship between Marx and literature in theoretical and formal rather than fixed, conceptual terms, Wright's earliest known articulation of the relationship between Marxism and literature, his 1937 manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing" focuses on the specific context of Marxism's relationship to black radical thought. Here Wright identifies Marxism as a *fixed* method of social analysis and stresses the necessity for its aesthetic supersession.

²⁸ For a visual image of this spatial juxtaposition, see *The New Masses* 5 Oct. 1937.

²⁹ Wright attributed his political awakening to Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*. Wright's interest in Stalin's work will be discussed further later in this chapter, in the context of *Native Son*.

³⁰ In just six months time, Wright "produced forty signed articles on Harlem and dozens of anonymous brief dispatches" (Rowley 128). For greater specifics on Wright's work for *Daily Worker*, see Rowley's chapter "A Change of Fortune" in *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (128-131). These pages include fascinating archival information detailing Wright's discontent.

bureau's editor of the *Daily Worker*.³¹ More, it would have *surprised* him. Wright considered contemporary Marxism's interest in the psychology of the oppressed a recent phenomenon, one he attributed to Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (1934) rather than to Marx himself.

³¹ Exhausted and uninspired by his prescribed writing tasks at the *Daily Worker*, Wright welcomed the glimpse of non-doctrinaire logic that Burke's review offered. Rapidly producing copy and well aware of his luck in having secured such a prestigious position within the party, in his private correspondence Wright was lamenting his foray into Communist-sponsored journalism. It seemed that the more direct his contact with the party, the more Wright longed for his days as a peripheral Marxist affiliate. The contrast between the rigidity of his present position at the *Daily Worker* and his former work for *Left Front*, a magazine published by the Chicago chapter of the John Reed Club, could not have been more pronounced. There, Wright had been valued for his poetry as much as his politics. More importantly, he had had the time to work on his burgeoning interest in fiction. At the *Daily Worker*, his worth was entirely contingent upon his capacity to toe party line. As he confessed to young mentee Ralph Ellison, party journalism was a "hard, hard grind" that prevented him from doing "any work" (Rowley 412).

REVIEW AND COMMENT

The "science" of race-thinking—Two Negro novels—Quest for the absolute and the Pacific puzzle

JACQUES BARZUN's study of "race-thinking"¹ is a tremendously valuable survey that assembles in one place a most astounding record of flimsy theorizing. One will certainly do well to avoid it if he would make his own baleful contributions to the "science" of racial discrimination. Here is a house of horrors if there ever was one—and I think that its evidence should be included in the exhibit of lynch ropes, Klan robes, and kindred devices assembled at Commonwealth College. The ropes themselves are "neutral." They might have been used for tethering cattle, and the robes would probably do quite well as night shirts. Here, however, is the record of the "ideas" that guide their use for malign purposes.

The book, for me at least, contained surprises. It was surprising to be reminded that "race-thinking" was not always reactionary. Tacitus, for instance, played an important part in "starting the powerful race dogma of Nordic superiority," yet he was actuated by the exact opposite of chauvinistic purposes. His "essay on the Germans, which contains so many of the facts and so much of the feeling that animates modern racialism" was motivated by emancipatory intentions:

Tacitus wrote as traveler, historian, and moralist, but especially as an embittered foe of the imperial tyranny. Hence his eulogy of the Germanic race is systematic and politically pointed. According to him the Germans are an indigenous race; they are virtuous, individualistic, freedom-loving, and jealous of their racial purity; physically they are tall and blond, brave and tough, they live frugally and are adventurous rather than toilsome.

In other words, he was building up the picture of an "ideal" race as a political weapon against tyrannical trends at home. It was apparently a roundabout way of saying, "Let us be virtuous, brave, tough, frugal, adventurous, individualistic, and freedom-loving." Later we see the uses of such thinking begin to shift.

Learning on the *Germania* for a description of the ideal gifts and institutions of the Frankish or Germanic race, the Count Henri de Boulainvilliers (658-1722) evolved the still lively notion that all freedom and independence come from the Germanic strain. Hence Louis XIV's absolute monarchy, based on the Roman idea of the imperium, was a government fit only for slaves. Boulainvilliers wanted the nobles of his day to revolt against slavish institutions and restore the aristocratic freedom of the German forest.

We also find that race-thinking serves, a little later, to enunciate a muddled doctrine of class-consciousness in an emancipatory direction:

Just before the French revolution the Abbé Sleybs, the author of *What Is the Third Estate?*, had tried

¹ RACE: A STUDY IN MODERN SUPERSTITION, by Jacques Barzun. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50.

to settle the race issue for all time. The nobility, said Sleybs, claims that its political rights are based on the inheritance by blood of the privileges won in the Frankish conquest. "Very well. We, the Gallo-Roman plebs, will now conquer the nobility by expelling and abolishing them. Our rights will supersede theirs on exactly the principle they invoke."

Hence, after the revolution, when "the bourgeoisie had overthrown both the monarchy and the aristocracy and had lumped the two," we find that "Freedom" had thereby changed camps, from the Franks to the Gallo-Romans. This is the initial alteration of the Nordic myth of freedom found in Tacitus.

The general pattern was now secure, though its variants would be endless, with all sorts of new strains introduced each time some new scientist found another way of classifying differences. Those who tend to feel that race-thinking is "peculiarly German" (an attitude that is itself an example of race-thinking) will discover ample evidence that it is ubiquitous, with far more important systematic contributions coming from writers in France than from writers in Germany prior to the rise of Hitlerism (the "Franks" enjoyed a special tactical advantage as vessels of liberty, because of the pun lurking behind the name).

Much of such thinking, as Barzun points out, was not cast in the "superiority-inferiority" mold at all. It was liberal, neutral. Particularly in aesthetic theories as to different "racial" or regional characteristics, the distinctions were frequently made along "parliamentary" lines, with the notion that each "race" had its own special contribution to make toward the common cultural pool of mankind. Herder's romantic historicism was of this sort. However, such theories incidentally reinforced the belief in racial distinctions by taking it for granted that they existed. Hence, such a mode of thought indirectly served reactionary ends, since it maintained the belief in distinct "racial" traits (with a trait like "humor," or "musicality," for instance, being allocated to some particular "blood"). Political rivalries arising from economic pressure could always provide the groundwork for resentments that converted such neutral appreciation of differences back into an invidious comparison of differences.



Charles Marth

And always, as the author shows, in the heat of such impassioned controversies the crassest inconsistencies could be charitably overlooked. For you worked the system two ways: first you discovered "Aryan," or "Semitic," or "Celtic" traits—and whenever you found an "Aryan" that didn't fit the "Aryan" pattern, you thereby "discovered" that he was really "Semitic," etc. Or you extolled a certain "blood stream" as all-powerful, capable of winning out over any other (along the "nobility will out" line of thought), and coupled this heroic disclosure with admonitions lest this all-powerful "blood" be contaminated by other "bloods."

Each advance in physiology, geography, philology, anthropology, history, laboratory technique, psychology, and medicology was in turn drawn upon for service in the cause of racial quackery. Any innovation in scientific measurement provided a fresh opportunity for "us vs. them" racial patterns of one sort or another, with each supposititious faction slightly revising the terms for the opposing traits. "We" had "boldness" on "our" side, for instance—but a thinker on "their" side would name this same trait "brutality." "Merimée was right when he said that racial historiography was the democratic form of dynastic history."

The book concludes with a summarized critique of such thought, and with suggestions as to the great number of ways in which it must be modified if it is to be anything but damned nonsense (nonsense serviceable for the uncritical scapegoat devices of political demagogues). The book should also be read by Marxists because it indicates how both "class" and "regional" divisions can, in naive hands, lead to a schematization of psychological traits that is hardly other than a concealed variant of the same oversimplified patterns as prevail in "race-thinking." On Marx's own testimony, a theory of purely economic classifications must be subtilized when one is analyzing the expressions of any specific individual.

KENNETH BURKE.

Between Laughter and Tears

THESE LOW GROUNDS, by Waters Edward Turpin. Harper & Bros. \$2.50.

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, by Zora Neale Hurston. J. B. Lippincott Co. \$2.00.

IT IS difficult to evaluate Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied in either of the two novels; but rather because neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation. Miss

Figure 1.1 Layout of page 22 of the *Daily Worker*. Wright's review continues on page 25. The review is split by three pages of advertisements.

The timing of Burke's words combined with their approximation to Wright's own

review was nothing short of serendipitous. Prior to this reading encounter, Wright had identified the primary function of Marx's thought—the demystification of the logic of capital—as a *content* to be *transcended* by the black literary vanguard.³² Now, less than three years later, Wright began to reconsider his “blueprint.” No longer did Wright believe that Marx's “capacity to lay bare the skeleton of society” was an end unto itself. He was now in search of a vocabulary to support his thinking.

The specificity of this aim guided Wright's reading of Burke, beginning with his selection of *Permanence and Change* over *Counter-Statement* (1931) and *Attitudes Toward History* (1937). Wright chose neither the first nor the most recently published of Burke's texts, but the one that identified the radical locus of Marxism in Marx's structure of thought rather than in its terminology. Burke's incisive critique of orthodox interpretations of Marx's thought led Wright to count Burke among the new class of Marxist-influenced writers, including Andre Malroux and especially Meridel Le Sueur, who were unfettered by doctrinaire logic.

Wright records his thoughts on Burke's *Permanence and Change* in “Writing From the Left.” A generically strange and infrequently cited document³³ with a mysterious publication history, “Writing from the Left” documents Wright's thoughts on emerging theories on the relationship between Marxism and aesthetic practice.³⁴ Wright offers the following précis of *Permanence and Change*:

³² In several of his autobiographical works, including his contribution to Richard Crossman's *The God that Failed*, *American Hunger*, and interviews throughout his writing career, Wright emphasized that his attraction to Marx must not be attributed to the “economics of Communism,” union work and development, or “the excitement of underground politics.” Though less enumerative in describing what did attract him, Wright was clear in expressing the agential role of reading Marx and extensions of Marx's thought (as opposed to interpretations).

³³ “Writing from the Left” combines Wright's general thoughts with a mini-précis and formalized notes of Marxist aesthetic theory.

³⁴ It is unknown how widely, or if at all, “Writing from the Left” was circulated. It is included in Wright's papers at the Beinecke, but it is neither dated nor otherwise annotated.

Kenneth Burke, in *Permanence and Change*, sought to frame a definition of Marxist aesthetics in terms of a poetry of action; from Burke's point of view, Communism becomes a poetic conception of life, of man unfolding their personalities through action. ("Writing from the Left")

Insofar as his reading was guided by his dissatisfaction with the aesthetic parameters of committed art as it was then defined in U.S Marxist inflected literature, Wright was particularly attracted to Burke's more capacious understanding of poetics in narrative. Burke criticized the necessity of singular "ideals" in narrative—proposing instead that writers work toward a more gestural ethic to be advanced through a complex dialogue among expository (or semantic) and hortatory (or poetic) forms of expression. No longer limited to the representation of specific (and existing) forms of liberation, the function of committed art was to instill a revolutionary sensibility, a sense of futurity, of the not-known. An author would "not merely give the names and addresses of events," in his work, "but would," through the form of his prose "also suggest exhortations for the promotion of better names and addresses" (Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* 127). For Burke, this new, prospective vocabulary was a necessary translation of Comintern materialism for American Marxists. Burke knew that the direct, unmediated import of the core of Soviet discourse—its promise to deliver "jobs for all"³⁵—would have a limited shelf- life for Americans as they gained greater distance from Depression life. In order to "make revolutionaries out of people who were (comparatively speaking) used to easy living," a "shift in nomenclature" was needed. If, Burke mused in an unsent letter to Malcolm Cowley, the word "leisure" replaced the word "unemployment," American Marxists would be forced to admit that the abolishment of class

³⁵ "A Letter from Burke to Cowley" (2 June 1932), unsent, quoted in Ann George and Jack Selzer's *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*.

required a signifying turn, or, as he would write in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, the cultivation of a “strenuous cult of style” (Burke, *Philosophy* 161).

While the hortatory quality of Burke’s understanding of poetic meaning making stayed with Wright, informing the most significant of Wright’s major revisions of the first draft of *Native Son* under the all caps title “POETIC MOTIFS MUST BE WOVEN INTO FINAL SCENE,” (a discussion of Wright’s Burkean inspired revisions to come later in this chapter, in section III) other aspects of Burke’s theoretical musings did not. Although Burke’s intentionally incongruous approach to both Marx’s thought and Communist practice makes concision difficult, there exists a thetic moment in *Permanence and Change* that communicates at once the ideological constraints of Burke’s appropriation of Marxist thought (anticipating his systematic, Cold War expulsion of Marx from what was essentially a Marxist framework³⁶), and also the limits of his influence on Wright. In what initiates the complete reversal of his premise—that Marx’s thought demonstrates a poetic quality ignored by doctrinaire interpretations—Burke suggests that the “highly humanistic or poetic nature” of Communism is concealed *due to a conceptual and symbolic rigidity in Marx’s thought* (93, italics mine). According to Burke, the “homogeneity” of Marx’s “emphasis on one unifying ideology,” can only be corrected by “exorcising” from the Marxist repertoire Marx’s not only its many “misnomers,” with which Wright would have agreed, but its “signifying logic” as well (93, 134).

In a rather lengthy passage, one of many cut from the first (1935) edition of

³⁶ In 1954, Burke revised the original 1935 edition of *Permanence and Change*. Additions include a thirteen-page prologue, five pages of introductory material before each of the three parts, and a twenty-one-page appendix. Deletions include six pages concerning communism and capitalism.

Permanence and Change,³⁷ Burke further explains the limits of his Marxist affiliation. In brief, Burke suggests that although Communism, “by whatever name it may finally prevail,” constitutes “the only coherent and organized movement” in existence, “a philosophical corrective to its technological rationalization” was needed. Replacement of the term “Communism” was first on Burke’s list of revisions. Burke mistrusted the term’s echoes of the word “communicant,” which he identified as “the key term about which the entire religious rationalization of the West was constructed” (93). Burke insisted that unless Marxists wished to abandon their aims to build a “new rationalization” unfettered by oppressive precepts (Burke suggested that Communism also invoked the language of “competition”³⁸), the word “cooperative” must overtake communism as the key term around which Marxist/Communist activity was organized.

While both the sentiment and its rhetorical packaging are unsurprising—Burke was not shy about his desire to “convert [Communism] to [his] own vocabulary,” expressing this publicly in “My Approach to Communism,” published in the 19 March 1934 issue of *The New Masses* and privately in various letters to Malcolm Cowley throughout the 1930s³⁹—his efforts to translate Communism’s “pivotal terms,” weirdly amounted to a critique of Marx rather than a critique of contemporary Communist interpretations of Marx. According to

³⁷ For a complete list of deleted passages see Edward Schiappa and Mary F. Keehner’s study “The ‘Lost’ Passages of *Permanence and Change*.”

³⁸ See *Permanence and Change*: “Perhaps the word ‘cooperative’ (as distinct from the ‘competitive’ which flourished when the acquisitions of science were backed by the stimuli of business enterprise) would replace the word ‘communicant’ as the pivotal term of the new rationalization. And a restoration of homogeneity in the means of *communication* is sought in the Marxian emphasis upon one unifying ideology that will inform the Marxian culture” (93-94).

³⁹ See Stacey Sheriff’s “Resituating Kenneth Burke’s ‘My Approach to Communism.’” Sheriff makes use of Burke’s many drafts of “My Approach to Communism,” drafts replete with Burke’s unconcealed exasperation with himself, and with his very confused relationship to Communism and Marxism both.

Burke, Communism, as a political ethic, was being held back by a terminological allegiance to Marx:

I am not a joiner of societies. I am a literary man. I can only welcome Communism by converting it into my own vocabulary. I am, in the deepest sense, a translator. I go on translating even if I must but translate English into English. My book [*Permanence and Change*] will have the Communist objectives, and the Communist tenor, but the approach will be the approach that seems significant to me. (Qtd. in Selzer 16)

More than a one-time slip, Burke writes of the “Marxian method” and “Communist doctrine” as if they were convertible terms. In the same letter to Cowley, Burke admits that his endorsement of Communism required a complete overhaul of the “Marxian method,” a process he refers to as his “personal manipulation of Marxian doctrine” (Jay 22-3).

In some ways an American analog to Walter Benjamin, whose dialectic of dreamwork and catastrophe and critique of a constrained language for “thinking Marx,” recalls Burke’s “dramatistic” translation of dialectical logic, Burke’s almost moody interpretation of Marxism (expressed during his most Marxist period) as a rigid form in need of “personal manipulation” brings to the fore a concealed aspect of Burke’s *categorical* understanding of Marx’s thought: his belief that the poetic quality of Marx’s thought, reached only through the strenuous translation (or “perversion”) of an American rhetorician, constitutes a departure from Marx’s thought rather than an extension of it. While this strange incidence of cooptation is especially baffling considering the centrality of the dialectic to Burke’s philosophical and linguistic revaluation of Marxist discourse, our re-examination of what Burke would have referred to as his “rhetorical situation” has shown the extent to which his “ethically focused rational” revaluation of Marxist discourse rests on an interpretation of

Marx as a figure hostile to historical re-vision.

What began as a traditional, even conservative form of study due to its principally affirmative relationship between writer (Burke) and reader (Wright) had by monograph's close shifted to critique. Wright had expected a poetic rendering of Marx outside party constraints and received its opposite, a poetic translation of Communist terminology supported by a displaced rhetorical critique of Marx's conceptual rigidity. As a generous but discerning reader, Wright did not discount Burke entirely, but appropriated what he knew to be useful, the idea of a poetic Marx, in order to return to a revisionary process that had been stalled. Ironically, it was Burke's theoretical imprecision, his conflation of "Marxian logic" with "Communist doctrine" that brought Wright out of what had seemed an impassable quandary.

III. Wright's Poetic Revision of *Native Son*

Wright's revised approach to Marx's thought, shaped by his reading of *Permanence and Change*, is formalized in the developmental notes (Figure 1.1) for his first completed draft⁴⁰ of *Native Son*.⁴¹ In a direct challenge to Burke's deployment of the term,⁴² Wright uses "poetic" as a metonym for a form of Marxist overwriting or re-vision that exceeds simple conversion or replacement. Going beyond individual metaphors and symbols, as is the case for a poetics based on either word or image specific substitution (such as Burke's), Wright, under the

⁴⁰ In his collected papers at the Beinecke Library, this draft is labeled "Intermediate."

⁴¹ With his reading of *Permanence and Change* came a new vocabulary for thinking through the relationship between art and action. This relationship was of paramount concern to Wright, who defined the "serious artist" as a "revolutionary figure" (66-67). According to Wright, it was the artist's responsibility to make [readers] conscious of the possibility of historical change" (66-67).

⁴² Although the absence of specific dates makes the development of a precise timeline that tracks Wright's reading of *Permanence and Change*, his completion of the first draft of *Native Son*, and the onset of his poetic revision impossible, the confluence of these events in concert with the content of this list secures their immediate (and shared) relevance to the present reappraisal.

under the heading “POETIC MOTIFS TO BE WOVEN INTO FINAL SCENE”

composes a list of seven principles to follow in his revision of the novel’s end:

POETIC MOTIFS TO BE WOVEN INTO FINAL SCENE:

- I. A sense of others striving to wrench the world away from a few and remold it to a truer shape of desire.
- II. A sense of that world in concrete form, buildings, earth, sunshine, snow still unmelted upon roofs
- III. A up and surge of self-confidence, “What I killed for I am.”
- IV. The realization that he is tried wrongly.
- V. Realize in flow of time the nearing goal of death, making him more feverish and feeling more what is in him to be emptied.
- VI. A storm of passion of remorse and regret -- then a quiet curocity [sic] about what is to come -- and a pride enough to walk to death.
- VII. Most important of all poetic motifs is that of life being a deep, exciting and enthralling adventure; that is the note on which the book should end to carry over the premise and feeling of something which must happen in the future.

I MUST SPEAK IN POETIC TERMS OF THIS . . (“Poetic Motifs”)⁴³

⁴³ Together, the content and tenor of Wright’s note, communicated through his typographic fervor (e.g. I MUST...) and the breathlessness conveyed by lack of punctuation, makes clear that this poetic revision of *Native Son* will not “simply reflect what is or what was” (Wright 691) but will, rather, maintain a double correspondence between “what is” with “what has not yet come into being” (Jameson x). Through his poetic revision, Wright integrates a sense of futurity—of revolutionary speculation—into his unflinching narrative of racism and class inequity. These are overlaid not merely with *existing* forms of liberation (the most prominent and promising being the Communist Party), but the *formal possibility* for “a future that has not yet been realized” (Jameson x). Because Wright’s poetic vision preceded his concentrated revision of the novel’s final scene, our discussion of *Native Son* will include other scenes and

POETIC MOTIFS TO BE WOVEN INTO FINAL SCENE:

- I. A sense of others striving to wrench world away from a few and remodel it to a truer shape of desire.
- II. A sense of that world in concrete form, buildings, earth, sunshine snow still unmelted upon roofs.
- III. A up and surge of self-confidence, "What I killed for I am."
- IV. The realization that he tried wrongly.
- V. Realize in flow of time the nearing goal of death, making him more feverish and feeling more and more what ~~is~~ is in him to be empty.
- VI. A storm of passion of remorse and regret -- then a quiet curiosity about what is to come -- and a pride enough to walk to death.
- VII. Most important of all poetic motifs is that of life being a deep, exciting and entralling adventure; that is the note on which the book should end to carry over the promise and feeling of something which must happen in the future

I MUST SPEAK IN POETIC TERMS OF THIS ..

Figure 1.2 "Poetic Motifs to be Woven into Final Scene."

moments that support the present revaluation. Although our evidence links "the poetic" with this specific revisionary act, it is hardly the only moment illuminating Wright's poetic vision. It is critical to note that the revision in question was necessitated by its structural incongruence to the rest of the novel.

At once diagnostic and proleptic, the above criteria, embedded in nearly 1,000 pages of a heavily worked-over draft, served as a guide for Wright's revision. Although he had already submitted his manuscript to trusted readers as "all but done" ("Untitled Letter"), Wright's heavy annotations reveal a persistent anxiety about the novel's reception. Wright had learned, from the lachrymose response to *Uncle Tom's Children*, that to write a novel for which tears could be no consolation⁴⁴ he would have to create less sympathetic characters and pay greater attention to form. With *Native Son*, Wright set off to do both, focusing less on the novel's plot line, for which he appropriated stories from the *Chicago Tribune*, and more on narrative structure and depth of character. In "How Bigger Was Born," (1941) Wright's retrospective on the process of writing *Native Son*, he explains his reason for relying so heavily on local news stories:

Life had made the plot over and over again, to the extent that I knew it by heart. So frequently do these acts recur that when I was halfway through the first draft of *Native Son* a case paralleling Bigger's flared forth in the newspapers of Chicago. Many of the newspaper items and some of the incidents in *Native Son* are but fictionalized versions of the Robert Nixon case and rewrites of news stories from the *Chicago Tribune*. (16)

It was not for lack of imagination that Wright relied on news stories for the plot of *Native Son*. Wright believed that a quotidian plot line would force readers to focus their attention

⁴⁴ "The second event that spurred me to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle. I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of *Uncle Tom's Children*. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest" ("How Bigger Was Born" 16).

elsewhere; the dramatic action, Wright hoped to relay, was located not in the novel's basic plot-line constituted by Bigger's murder of Mary and his subsequent trial, but the governing structures⁴⁵ that made such a story so known, so acceptable, and so *inevitable*. It was this latter quality of inevitability that Wright hoped would shock the reader out of political submission.

Wright's apprehension was especially concentrated around the novel's final scene, which had "Bigger going smack to the electric chair" ("How Bigger Was Born" 12). Wright's concern lay with the finality of this act, which he feared too closely resembled the narrative logic of *Uncle Tom's Children*.⁴⁶ Unable to reconcile the scene's regressive qualities—particularly its emphasis on immediate (and symbolic) corporeal violence—with his burgeoning aesthetic and political vision, Wright cut the ending entirely. Rather than depicting Bigger's death, which would reinforce a reading of *Native Son* as yet another story of racial oppression ("How Bigger Was Born" 18) focused on the retributive aspects of the "catastrophically damaged"⁴⁷ American justice system, Wright began a process of revision designed to confront the methods through which political and ethical judgments are made.

Although his marginalia indicates that he was under immense pressure to complete the novel, Wright refashioned the final scene as a conversation between Max and Bigger. Far

⁴⁵ Because Wright wanted the reader to look beyond "surface reality" (18), he crafted scenes that could not but announce the novel as a structural critique rather than social commentary. In reference to the scene in which Bigger is in his jail cell with a black preacher, Jan, Boris Max, the State's Attorney, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Bigger's mother, his brother, his sister, Al, Gus, and Jack, Wright writes: "I knew that it was unlikely that so many people would ever be allowed to come into a murderer's cell. I felt that what I wanted that scene to say to the reader was *more important than its surface reality or plausibility*. Always, as I wrote, I was both reader and writer, both the conceiver of the action and the appreciator of it."

⁴⁶ This is particularly true of "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Bright and Morning Star." Both stories end with the torture and death of black youth.

⁴⁷ This phrase comes from Jonathan Elmer's "Spectacle and Event in *Native Son*." Elmer's framework is quite different from my own; he uses contemporary court cases (Willie Horton, Rodney King, and OJ Simpson) to establish the sustained relevance of studies that focus on the spectacle of American racism, particularly in the context of its retributive practices.

more than a superficial endorsement of a more democratic ethos, Wright redeveloped the form of the novel's end to reflect the structural nuance of his own position between Marxisms. No longer convinced of the deliverance of a Communistic social order, Wright denied his readership the emotional and psychological relief of a fully drawn conclusion. The satisfaction of a positive political message, whether it was mandated by the Communist Party (Max) or articulated by a *lumpen* figure (Bigger), directly contradicted Wright's burgeoning understanding of the utopic quality of historical materialism. As with Adorno and Bloch, for whom there could be no "positive conception or vision of utopia," Wright identified the utopic as a *prospective* cognitive and material condition that evades fixed signification.⁴⁸

Toward this, Wright strove to create a narrative structure that would formally reinforce the irreducibility of the novel's political content. The first line of order was characterization. Knowing that the tendency to interpret a single character as an isolated political symbol was something of a cultural compulsion, Wright fashioned Bigger as a figure of radical disidentification. Neither the proletarian rebel of traditional thirties protest fiction (including his own) nor a reprisal of the culturally deft drifter (emblematic is McKay's Lincoln Agrippa Daily of *Banjo*, 1929), Bigger is a figure undefined by both work and play. Although the consequences of race and class oppression have marked his life,⁴⁹ his precarious status *within* rather than *outside* his political and cultural milieu have kept him impervious to traditional Marxist revolutionary appeals.

⁴⁸ This comparison is not to suggest that Wright's fiction depicts the *realization* of radical possibility in the form of social change or uplift. After the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), in which a collective response, usually in the form of protest, satisfies the reader's desire for narrative—and historical—resolve, one would be hard pressed to find in Wright's literary corpus—*Native Son* (1940), *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *The Long Dream* (1960)—clear representations of hope and possibility.

⁴⁹ As evidence, see the novel's opening scene. *Native Son* opens with a characteristically naturalist *mise en scene*: a mother and her three children sharing a rat infested single room apartment on Chicago's South Side.

Dramatized subtly throughout the novel, Wright reinforces Bigger's recalcitrance to the period's supreme form of organized Marxism—the American Communist Party—in the novel's final, revised scene. In an appeal designed to reveal Bigger's "suppressed" political consciousness—a space where one might expect his humanity to dwell—the unsubtly named Boris Max uses Bigger's death sentence to advance a polemic on the inextricability of race and class:

Bigger, the people who hate you feel just as you feel, only they're on the other side of the fence. You're black, but that's only a part of it. Your being black, as I told you before, makes it easy for them to single you out. [...] They rule and regulate life.

They have things arranged so that they can do those things and the people can't fight back. They do that to black people more than others because they say that black people are inferior. But, Bigger, they say that *all* people who work are inferior. And the rich people don't want to change things; they'll lose too much. But deep down in them they feel like you feel, Bigger, and in order to keep what they've got, they make themselves believe that men who work are not quite human. They do like you did, Bigger, when you refused to feel sorry for Mary. But on both sides men want to live; men are fighting for life. Who will win? Well the side that feels life most, the side with the most humanity and the most men (427).

However sobering and emotionally potent to readers, Max's rather paternalistic explanation—he goes so far as to call Bigger "son" (421)—inspires laughter in Bigger. Further convinced of his righteousness (428), Bigger, who had been silenced⁵⁰ by Max's authoritative presence, finally gains the confidence to speak. Bigger's initial acceptance of his subordinate

⁵⁰ Wright uses Bigger's silence ("he could not speak," "he sighed as an answer") to reaffirm the inequity between Max and Bigger.

status, supported by his “trust” that “the sound of his voice rather than the sense of his words [would] carry his meaning,” to Max’s empathetic ear, is reversed by Max’s speech. Breaking his silence by shouting “I’m glad I got to know you before I go,” Bigger, who had felt the shock of Max’s depersonalized speech as he would a slap (423), proceeds to explain to Max the limits of his—and by extension CP Marxism’s—revolutionary approach.

Wright uses Bigger’s silence to reaffirm the structural inequity between Max and Bigger. In doing so, Wright illuminates a major problem in Communist dissemination of Marx’s thought: party regulation of Marxist interpretation. Wright dramatizes the party’s comparative neglect to cognitive development by emphasizing Bigger’s automatic recourse to black nationalist appeals. A warning rather than an endorsement, Wright’s occasional return to black nationalist rhetoric through Bigger is so convincing that it is later appropriated by Marcus Garvey, who terms his “imagined community” of black nationalists “The Bigger Brotherhood” (Dawahare 8). When Max first enters Bigger’s cell, Bigger feels too intimidated to speak. Though Bigger had much to communicate, he is repeatedly silenced by Max’s presence, and Max leaves him without language.

Though Bigger had much to communicate, we are repeatedly told that he “could not speak” and “sighed” rather than spoke “an answer” (421). Through the exchange between Max and Wright, and the structural reversal between the two—first it is Bigger but ultimately it is Max, who is without language and understanding—Wright reveals the limitations of CP / African-American unity. We will see revisit this relationship in Wright’s critique of Kwame Nkrumah’s dissemination of Marxism, to be discussed in the following chapter in the context of *The Outsider* (1953).

Wright’s focus on the limitations of the historically revolutionary relationship forged between the Communist Party and disenfranchised African Americans does not eliminate the

radical import of Communist fostered Marxism altogether. Bigger owes the emergence of his *structural* awareness of social and political destitution to Max, whose preliminary interview with Bigger proved the first meaningful interpersonal connection of his life. Bigger reminds Max of this during their final meeting: “You asked me questions nobody ever asked me before. You knew that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man” (424). Bigger’s reference back to their first meeting resuscitates—in what could otherwise prove a singularly damning critical moment—the revolutionary foundation of African American / Communist Party relations. Max’s broader indictment of capitalism as a system that thrives on the compulsory dehumanization of the laboring classes appeals to Bigger, whose insight into capitalist machinery, communicated by his grim utterance “all I know is that they hate *me*” (348, emphasis added), is expanded by Max’s sociological unmasking of class oppression.

Significantly, it is the question form rather than the particular content of Max’s conversation that Bigger identifies as emancipatory. While Max’s questions inspired Bigger “to think,” the fruits of Bigger’s cognitive labor shocked and even disappointed his lawyer, who, as it turns out, finds himself in the position of identifying and even empathizing with the slain Mary Dalton. Horrified by the extent of Bigger’s disgust with Mary’s touristic interest in the “the way Negroes live” (350), Max attempts to overcorrect Bigger, refusing him the rhetorical space to disagree.⁵¹ Despite his rhetorical savvy, Max’s attempt to frame Mary’s queries as “kindnesses” falls flat (350), as Bigger refuses to interpret Mary’s condescension as a humane gesture. Able, not only, to sense⁵² the hypocrisy of Max’s

⁵¹ See the following sentence for an example of the coercive structure of Max’s appeal: “But Bigger, you don’t hate people for that. She was being kind to you” (*Native Son* 350).

⁵² We are reminded that Bigger is using his “intuition” to glean the hypocrisy of Max’s reasoning (*Native Son* 348-351).

qualification that Mary “was acting toward [him] only as she knew how,” Bigger confronts Max with his regressive logic. In a direct challenge to Max’s interpretation of Mary’s social transgression, Bigger reminds Max that he, too, was “acting toward her,” a rich, white woman, “only as *he* knew how” (350, emphasis added). With only his “feelings as a guide” (350), Bigger recognizes that his vulnerability in the culturally overdetermined situation is ignored. Max’s revolutionary fervor is tempered by his liberal generosity to Bigger’s oppressor. At this point in the conversation (and in the novel), we are meant to see that it is Bigger rather than Boris Max who possesses the more sophisticated structural critique.⁵³

What begins as a straightforward juxtaposition of Bigger’s revolutionary rawness with Max’s political sophistication quickly becomes a staged confrontation between Bigger’s extralinguistic understanding of structural oppression and Max’s command of basic Marxist concepts mediated by the interpretive constraints of his association (his membership is suspected but never confirmed)⁵⁴ with the Communist Party. Yet rather than privilege Bigger’s undisciplined political unconscious over Max’s doctrinaire pedantry, Wright uses the conflict to demonstrate the *limits* of each. Bigger’s insights may be used to emphasize Max’s comparative naiveté, but Wright is far from offering Bigger as either a Marxist exemplar.⁵⁵ While Wright describes Bigger, in “How Bigger Was Born” as a “meaningful and prophetic symbol,” his subsequent description makes his intent very clear. Wright identifies Bigger as

⁵³ At this point Wright still identifies black subjects (international and American) as the Marxist vanguard.

⁵⁴ See Paul N. Siegel’s “The Conclusion of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” for more on Max’s ambiguous political identity. Siegel suggests that although Boris Max is “called a Communist” by the “red-baiting prosecuting attorney and newspapers,” critics must not be quick to confirm his official political status.

⁵⁵ Bigger’s deployment of Marxist logic to come to intellectual terms with his murder of Mary Dalton does not, for example, extend to his second murder of the novel, that of girlfriend and co-conspirator Bessie Mears. Although Bigger uses his awakened sense of injustice to justify first his detachment to and then murder of Bessie, the blindness and ignorance that he identifies in and attributes to her is a projection of his own limitations.

an unequivocally destructive harbinger of the future, a figure amenable to Nazi logic:

When the Nazi's spoke of the necessity of a highly ritualized and symbolized life, I could hear Bigger Thomas on Chicago's South Side saying: 'Man, what we need is a leader like Marcus Garvey. We need a nation, a flag, an army of our own. We colored folks ought to organize into groups and have generals, captains, lieutenants, and so forth. We ought to take African and have a national home. ("How Bigger Was Born")

Wright's confirmation of Bigger as a figure *psychologically* attracted to Fascist rather than Communist⁵⁶ leadership serves as a warning to Marxist pedagogues, specifically those within Communist Party ranks, to rethink not only their recruitment practices, but their own approach to Marx's thought. The inclusion of this latter critique is essential to understanding the full import of Wright's appraisal of contemporary Marxism. Not merely the "cynical reduction of the party" (Foley 209) to the novel's Communist characters, *Native Son's* defiance of narrative and ethical expectations, dramatizes Wright's personal struggle with existing models of Marxist thought.

IV. Critical Prefigurations

In this chapter, I've used Wright's reading of Burke as my primary coordinate to track Wright's development of a non-objective, non-Communist Marxist aesthetic. While the logic of this structure makes sense given the proximity of Burke's "poetics of action" to Wright's heterodox reading of Marx as a poet, Wright's interest in the relationship between Marx's thought and literary production preceded his reading of Burke. In this final section, I will

⁵⁶ Consistent with Wright's writings on the subject throughout his literary career, I use Communism and Fascism as proper nouns. While there is some debate about the grammatical accuracy of this decision, one cannot deny that the historical, political, and social weight of both supports the change in case.

locate Wright's interest in two documents, his 1937 manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and review essay "Between Laughter and Tears," published the same year. I am aware that the manifest content of these essays (both very well known in and outside of Wright specific circles) and Wright's Burkean inspired appropriation of a poetic Marx may not be immediately apparent to those familiar with their notoriety as militant ("Blueprint") and misogynistic ("Between") tracts.

However paradoxical, the reach of such myopic interpretations only confirms the necessity of their inclusion in the present reevaluation. Although this section focuses almost exclusively on "Between," its premise, that Wright's formal rebuke of folk art exists as a primer, or critical prefiguration to his firmly Marxist critique of the mimetic principles guiding Communist sponsored literature as developed in *Native Son* (and later, *The Outsider*), requires that I begin with Wright's earliest known articulation of the relationship between Marxism and literature, his 1937 manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Here Wright identifies Marxism as a fixed method of social analysis, and stresses the necessity for its aesthetic supersession. Wright's description of this sublative process, "after Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of the plenitude of his will to live," reinforces the interpretive fallacy against which his revision of Marx-as-poet is founded.

Yet rather than interpret Wright's 1937 manifesto as a naïve or vulgar stage in Wright's theoretical evolution as a Marxist intellectual, a position that he later "overcomes" due to greater theoretical sophistication, we must historicize the document. Wright rarely distinguished, within this early period, his allegiance to the Communist Party from his attraction to Marxism, describing the use value of both in terms of their ability to clear the ideological ground for the production of committed black literature. Wright's "Blueprint,"

which does in fact represent Marxism as a category of analysis agonistic to black aesthetics, reflects not an unsophisticated mind but his rather knotty introduction to Marxist thought through the Chicago chapter of The John Reed Club, where, despite official independence from the Communist Party, boundaries between Marxist and Communist identification remained rather porous.

Far from sustaining this position, Wright radically amends it throughout his literary career, although not in tract or manifesto form. In his first emendation, “Between Laughter and Tears,” Wright eliminates the language of Marxist aesthetics altogether, grounding his criticism of the structural problems limiting the interpretive possibilities of African-American narrative, including empiricism and a holistic literary sensibility, in the context of folk art.

What has been read as an unjust dismissal of Hurston, attributed, in part to Wright’s misogyny⁵⁷ but also to Wright’s suspicion of the politics of the local,⁵⁸ “Between Laughter and Tears,” contains Wright’s earliest—if least developed—expression of the necessity for a dialectical literary sensibility in black literature. Giving voice to this neglected aspect of Wright’s review adds an essential formal dimension to a half-century’s worth of criticism overdetermined by ideological interpretations that assume an unmediated correlation between Wright’s political stripes—his Communism—and his critique of the “safe and narrow orbit” of Hurston’s narrative.⁵⁹ As I will show, Wright’s excessive rebuke of African American folk

⁵⁷ See Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) for her critiques of Richard Wright’s gynophobia, which allegedly extends beyond fictional representations of violence committed against women.

⁵⁸ See Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey*, where Gates’ privileging of the black vernacular, and

Wright’s opposition to its usage in black fiction, naturally aligns Gates with Hurston.

⁵⁹ William Maxwell addresses—in order to challenge—a number of critical debates arising out of a perceived aesthetic split between Wright’ and Hurston. See “Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright–Zora Neale Hurston Debate” in *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (1998).

sensibility—a critique that re-emerges in Wright’s postwar criticism in the context of the “tribalism” of African fiction—coded what was essentially a *structural* limitation of black art.

Although it is unlikely that Wright consciously inscribed a formally Marxist (or dialectical) critique into his review (recall that his conscious development of a non-objective Marxist aesthetic only comes after unwanted sentimental reviews of *Uncle Tom’s Children*) his criticism of *Their Eyes’* one-dimensionality is at once a pointed critique of Hurston’s affirmation of an “unwanted black culture” born out of “slavery and segregation,” (Dawahare 113) and a categorical rejection of collective black culture. As Anthony Dawahare argues in *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora’s Box* (2003), embedded in Wright’s criticism of black cultural nationalism was an early critique of the Communist Party’s official attitude toward black Americans as elaborated in the “Black Nation Thesis” (Dawahare 113). Neither as “stable or progressive” as the revised 1930 Comintern Resolution suggests, the thesis’ premise—that the recently industrialized “Black Belt South constitutes a nation,” newly populated by black workers now positioned to participate in the “revolutionary struggle of the America proletariat”—placed unnecessary political, aesthetic, and ontological constraints on the contemporary black imagination.

While the revised Resolution emphasized “*the right of self-determination of Negroes in the Black Belt*” (original emphasis), its emancipatory aims were delimited by the economism of the Third International after Lenin. Actively discouraging the “partial demands” of the black and white bourgeoisie, the language of the Resolution strenuously separated “real” revolutionary activity— collective “rebellion against acts of national oppression” including the “confiscation of land from white landowners and capitalists,” the “establishment of the State Unity of the Black Belt,”— from language-based (aesthetic and psychological and more broadly intellectual) advances, which it deemed categorically “reformist.” Together, the

Resolution's suppression of a non-orthodox, non-doctrinaire discursive working through of oppressive structures of thought (even those shaped by Marx's thought) and reliance upon a nationalist framework to define the African American position in the international overthrow of capital, proved incommensurate with Wright's commitment to the development of a "less homogenous" historical consciousness and "cultural community" among blacks (Dawahare 113).

The timing of this conflict between the CP line on "the question of a black nation" and Wright's interest in the cognitive and psychological processes of oppressed subjects is crucial, as it locates both Wright's critique of Communist thought—and his early distinction between Marx's thought and Party doctrine—in his heyday as a proletarian novelist. Although it is unlikely that Wright was intentionally foregrounding a formal interest in Marx's thought, we can see that Wright's suspicion of "the local" in Hurston transcends politics proper.⁶⁰ It is not merely Hurston's limited focus on "the psychological movements of the [Floridian] folk mind,"⁶¹ which rubs against Wright's emphasis on the forging, among black writers, of a political "world view," but the way in which the novel's structure delimits its place and relationship to history, a move that Wright reads as a *voluntary* foreclosure of historical possibility. Hurston's overvaluation of voice, her anthropological orthodoxy, evidenced by her allegiance to actually existing patterns of thought do not exist alongside or within a narrative structure that *challenges* its validity; Hurston's uncritical loyalty to her subject

⁶⁰ For a virtuosic and convincing reading establishing continuity between the projects of Hurston and Wright, see Maxwell's "Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright–Zora Neale Hurston Debate" in *New Negro, Old Left*. Mark C. Thompson's *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars* also likens Hurston's project with Wright's, but in terms of a shared "black nationalist" ethos.

⁶¹ Wright admitted that "Miss Hurston [could] write" but stressed that her skill was squandered by a prose style "cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley" (25).

limits the novel's capacity to initiate cognitive change.

Latent in Wright's content-based rebuke of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*⁶² is a nascent conception of the structural principles required of committed black art that he will continue to refine throughout his literary career. Black art, whether it is firmly located in an existing place and time, must be willing to contradict its own narrative logic, promoting a tension among diegetic levels that compels the reader to recognize that what exists collectively—e.g. in the same narrative space of the novel—exists in a persistent state of contradiction. The task of the reader is not to seek resolve where resolve does not exist (in art as well as life) but to make meaning *relationally*, to recognize the whole (narrative and novel) as a contradictory totality. Only then would the reader realize that literature was neither an affirmative cultural practice nor a safe place in which to settle.

Although directed at Hurston, Wright's remarks about "affirmation" and "complicity," as well as his criticism of the limited emotional range inspired by a reading of *Their Eyes* re-emerge one year later, this time in the context of Wright's own work. In the first of a series of painful (if ultimately productive) critical reversals,⁶³ Wright's first major publication, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938)—a collection of four novellas⁶⁴ dramatizing black life under (and in resistance to) Jim Crow—is embraced by readers brought to tears by the tragic,

⁶² "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears" (25).

⁶³ All of Wright's major publications to follow, *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953), and *Black Power* (1954), were subject to similar acts of critical misprision. With each act, Wright rethought his narrative process—always keeping Marx at the center of his revisionary process.

⁶⁴ In 1940, Harper's reissues *Uncle Tom's Children* as *Uncle Tom's Children: Five Long Stories*, including "Bright and Morning Star." Wright's essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" is also included as an introduction to the collection.

implementation of a new expressive sound, or poetics,⁶⁶ only came after his own work was implicated in the “oversimplified” dramatic structure he had so sharply criticized in Hurston and other “progressive southern fiction” (“Between Laughter and Tears”).⁶⁷ Although Wright had believed that his political—and generic—allegiance to proletarian art was made significantly more complex through his fluency and selective appropriation of modernist literary methods. He cites, in his notes for an unidentified lecture, Stein’s “experiments in words,” James’ “experiments in scenes,” and “Conrad’s experiments in moods” (Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 97). The latter lacked the interrogative quality needed to disrupt the social and political validity of existing structures of thought. It is in this moment that Wright began—pace Burke’s *Permanence and Change*—his revisionary reading of Marx and subsequent development of a Marxist aesthetic unbound by the form and function of American literary Marxism’s dominant vessel: the proletarian novel.

IV. Conclusion

Wright’s search for a method to replace both the economism of Marxist political doctrine and the “unabashed leftism” of literary Marxism began with the parsing of

⁶⁶ This section is informed by Houston Baker’s *Afro American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (1988). Baker cites Bachelard’s definition of poetics as a “meditative enterprise that privileges the poetic image, or the unique expressive *sound* of a culture, as the founding or generative force of a culture” (Baker 171).

⁶⁷ Wright’s refusal to see the subversive qualities of Hurston’s folk narration continued long after he lost interest in the shortcomings of Harlem Renaissance and more generally middlebrow black American writing. Wright’s post-WWII interest in pan-Africanism led to related critiques, this time on the tribal quality Wright found ubiquitous in contemporary African literature. Wright’s reading of the “tribal dependence” of the African author Amos Tutuola provides a particularly apt comparison with Hurston. Like Hurston, Tutuola’s style capitulated to an oppressive structure. “What is wrong with [Tutuola],” Wright offers, “is that awful sense of tribal dependence” (Wright’s letter to Margrit de Saboniere, 6 Sept. 1959). According to Wright, tribal life acts as a kind of *pharmakon* in the context of literary production. While granting the novel its “rich fantasy” life, it at the same time secures the author (and by extension, the black man’s) dependence on the “white man,” whose “dominance he takes for granted.”

Marx's thought from Communist interpretations. Through his reading of Burke, Wright developed a conceptual apparatus that enabled him to think through—and beyond—existing Marxist frameworks. Wright's first full application of this newly revised approach to Marx's thought is evidenced in his revision of *Native Son*. Although Wright does not, in *Native Son*, allow his imagination to be outstripped by existing Marxist cultural work, his efforts to subvert interpretive expectations by privileging structure over plot (and to demand that the reader follow this narrative inversion) failed.

Critics on the Right and Left read *Native Son* as social realism peppered with melodrama, and Bigger Thomas “as a symbol of the Negro people generally” (Rowley 200). Bigger was no longer a complex figure, as Wright had intended, but a static symbol of racial oppression. These interpretations were devastating to Wright, who had deployed narrative techniques designed to make people think rather than react. Though he was in Cuernavaca, Mexico in the wake of *Native Son's* publication, Wright learned of the media frenzy through Ralph Ellison, who informed him of the content of the reviews. Frustrated by the superficial reading practices shared by all on the political spectrum (including Communists, Leftists, liberals, and the Right), Wright reached his breaking point after reading Daniel Cohn's *Atlantic Monthly* review of *Native Son*, in which Cohn accused Wright of writing a propagandistic novel. The content of Cohn's review—his crude reduction of Wright's artistry to a base form of agitprop—forced Wright's hand. Finally engaging in a public battle against his critics, Wright wrote a scathing response to Cohn, also published in *Atlantic Monthly*, titled “I Bite the Hand that Feeds Me” (1940). As communicated by the article's subtitle: “A

Response to David Cohn,” the piece is more reactive than critical.⁶⁸ It would take another thirteen years of Marxist study, seven of which were concentrated on the production of Wright’s postwar masterpiece *The Outsider* (1953), for Wright to finish what he had started in *Native Son*.

⁶⁸ In the article, Wright frequently resorts to chant-like statements. Such statements, two of which I provide below, do little to further Wright’s argument against his participation in the agitprop form:

We know our weakness and we know our strength, and we are not going to fight America alone! We are not so naïve as that. The Negro in America became politically mature the moment he realized that he could not fight the “society of the majority” alone and organized the National Negro Congress and throw its weight behind John L. Lewis and the CIO!

I urge my race to become strong through alliances, by joining in common cause with other oppressed groups (an there are a lot of them in America, Mr. Cohn!), workers, sensible Jews, farmers, declassed intellectuals, and so forth. I urge them to master the techniques of political, social, and economic struggle and cast their lot with the millions in the world today who are fighting for freedom, crossing national and racial boundaries if necessary.

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Chapter Two: Richard Wright's Marxism

The text contains its own gloss. — Tzvetan Todorov¹

I. Return of the Native Son?

In January 1955, less than two years after its American debut, the French translation of *The Outsider* (1953) was published. Translated as *Le Transfuge* (literally, *The Defector*) by the French Cubist painter Guy de Montlaur,² the edition was prefaced by a new introduction written by Wright. Unexpected by a readership inured to the third person foreword,³ the introduction's opening, which forewent clarity for strangely

¹ Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*.

² Guy de Montlaur (1918-1977) was a philosopher, painter, and French Resistance fighter in the *Forces françaises libres* (Free French Forces). Montlaur studied philosophy at the Sorbonne (1934-1936) and painting at the Académie Julian (1936-1938). After the war, he moved to the United States where he taught at the Art Students League of New York (1947-1949) and returned to France in 1949. Montlaur's translation of *The Outsider* appears to be his sole work of translation.

³ While we lack hard data that would "clarify the distribution of this custom according to author, period, national tradition, and genre" (Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* 163), in the context of French postwar literary production, the introduction had become a space where political and aesthetic associations were made public. Though the content was unrestricted, it was an unwritten rule that the writer of the introduction would figure as a secondary author, vetting not the particulars of the text, but the broader political perspective with which it was in concert. In the early years of his exile, Wright wrote introductions in support of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946), the French edition to Chester Himes' *Lone Crusade* (1947), Gertrude Stein's *Wars I have Seen* (1946). As he became more aware of the political complexity of the French literary scene, Wright became more selective. After 1952, the year in which Sartre publicly endorsed the French Communist Party (PCF), Wright wrote almost exclusively on behalf of black internationals, making a few notable exceptions for Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning* (1954) and Françoise Gourdon's *Tant Qu'il y Aura La Peur* (1961), both of whom wrote on the black South.

calibrated sentences, did little to mediate its unconventional presence. Rather than offer readers pragmatic guidance on how to approach his long anticipated second novel, Wright wrote at odd angles about its production.⁴ Clear that *The Outsider* was “the first” of his “literary efforts projected out of a heart with no ideological burdens,” Wright offered no positive terms to indicate what that freedom signified. In sentences where proper nouns are offered—such as the one in which Wright affirmed the novel as evidence of his “search for a new attitude to replace Marxism”—the rhematic emphasis on “search” nullified thematic expectations associated with the many faces of “Marxism” in circulation during the Cold War. By Wright’s rhetorical calculation, Marxism was no longer the proper name for an ideology, theory of political economy, or philosophy of dialectical and/or historical materialism, but a degenerated affective state that resulted, one was left to presume, from the vagaries of contemporary political appropriations.⁵ Leaving the reader at the threshold of interpretation, Wright exits the subject of Marxism and ideology to conclude with a perfunctory acknowledgment of his “much improved” writing conditions in Paris. Though it is not without illocutionary force, Wright’s introduction was compromised by a lopsided semantics of contradiction in which meaning never ran downstream.⁶

⁴ All quotes attributed to Wright’s introduction from his original un-translated draft in the Richard Wright Papers. Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵ Wright’s removal of Marxism from political and ideological appropriations is akin to and theoretically supported by Fredric Jameson’s proposition that Marxism is as much a style of thought as it is a theory of society. Through a dialectical hermeneutic, Jameson moves beyond the pervasive divide between humanist and economist theories of Marx’s thought in order to confront the central problematic of Marxist theory: the quest for totalization and a totalized form of knowledge that does not, in its searching, posit unification (or a clear or final sense of knowing) as its end point.

⁶ i.e., the current of Wright’s thought ran counter to linear logic and progression. For an excellent secondary account of the upstream or anti-linear logic of dialectical thought see Susan Buck-Morss’ *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the*

No stranger to “the Henry James style-Preface” (Rowley 198),⁷ Wright’s introduction to *The Outsider* signaled a radical departure from his previous explanatory style. Whereas his prior efforts, which included the famous corrective “How Bigger Was Born” (1940) and the photo text *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), published a year later as an additional though lesser-known supplement to *Native Son*, were designed to eliminate confusion about the social and political value of his work, his most recent iteration seemed to court the inverse reaction. What could such a strategy mean for an author once so desperate to lift the “sociological fog” (qtd. in Rowley 198) that obscured his critical message?

While such indeterminacy has the potential to confirm the most troubling aspects of Wright’s postwar reputation—as an author suspended between cultures, political platforms, and philosophic schools—his elusive rhetoric was both strategic and instructive. Far from wishing to alienate the reader, Wright’s introduction functions as a primer to the critical form of *The Outsider*, which dialectically examines the limits of orthodox Marxism (or, Marx without Hegel) and Idealist ontology⁸ (or, Hegel without Marx) in the context of the 20th century’s most pernicious ideological advent, that of totalitarianism.

As a political concept, totalitarianism evolved from a particular name for

Frankfurt Institute (1979), and Fabio Akcelrud Durão’s *Modernism and Coherence: Four Chapters of a Negative Aesthetics* (2008), which discusses dialectical logic as a “logic of sedimentation” (16) positioned against the compulsion toward empiricist and other causal logics.

⁷ See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* 198.

⁸I capitalize the term “Idealist” to indicate that I am using a limited definition of the concept that does not extend to any or all of the views held by the school of German Idealism. In referencing Idealist ontology I mean not only the belief that the external world consists of representations that are creations of the mind (Husserl), but ontologies that prioritize social factors, such as French existentialism.

Mussolini's doctrine of Italian fascism as "a new political style—everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state"⁹ to an appellation associated with nationalist socialism throughout Europe to, finally, the Cold War formulation that expanded the term to include Communist regimes. While Wright was working on *The Outsider*, the term was repurposed by major political theorists on the peripheries of the Left, including Hannah Arendt and J.L. Talmon in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and J.L. Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952) respectively. Wright was in possession of both books, and although it is impossible to say with real precision the extent to which he engaged with either, his novel offers a critique of the theoretical foundations of both. Whereas Arendt's staggering work of political philosophy insisted on the specific character of modern despotism in the twinned forms of Nazism and Stalinism, on "totalitarianism, not merely dictatorship" (ix), Talmon's *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, saw the possibility for totalitarian practices to flourish in ostensibly free democracies, where nominally free citizens are stripped of any real power despite possessing highly coveted civil rights. If this form of governance, which Talmon identified as "totalitarian democracy," appears to resonate with the Marxian indictment of liberalism, Talmon's dread and invalidation of revolution disabuses us of the connection. Wright's theorization of totalitarianism in *The Outsider* encompasses in order to exceed the flawed polarized logic in both. For Wright, totalitarianism was not a degeneration of Western democracy, but a symptom of it.

In order to show how, why, and to what end Wright examined in order to expose the inner link between the ideological positions of demotic Marxism and Idealist

⁹ See Benito Mussolini. "The Doctrine of Fascism" (1932).

ontology in the context of Cold War totalitarianism, the critique offered in *The Outsider* must be situated in the context of his evolving political and theoretical relationship to Marxism. Although *The Outsider* constitutes a radical shift in form, Wright's impulse to thwart appropriative logic in the context of his personal relationship to Marxist thought is prefigured by and is an extension of an earlier rupture: his break, in both style and method, from the principles of proletarian literature. In the previous chapter, "Richard Wright's Search for a Method," I examined this break in Wright's formal and conceptual overhaul of *Native Son's* final scene. Anxious that his ending, which had "Bigger going smack to the electric chair,"¹⁰ too closely resembled the narrative logic of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Wright turned to heterodox Marxist rhetorician Kenneth Burke, from whom he appropriated the idea of a poetic Marx. Wright took seriously Burke's recommendation that committed writers discard propagandistic mandates for a more gestural ethic, and implemented Burke's proposal in his ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful "poetic revision" of the novel's final scene. While Wright's revised conclusion had helped him to actualize his pledge to produce a story that left readers "without the consolation of tears,"¹¹ his attempt to forge a dramatic method informed by Marx, but external to Party-sanctioned forms of schematization, fell short. The totalizing effect of Wright's final scene was not enough to undo the narrative's causal logic, which advanced a base-superstructure model of social understanding. Communism, rather than Marxism, emerged as the novel's watchword.¹²

¹⁰ See Richard Wright's "How Bigger Was Born" 435.

¹¹ See Richard Wright. "How Bigger Was Born" 433.

¹² Reviews of *Native Son* alternated between objections to and praise for the novel's political agenda. Officially endorsed by the Party at the time of its publication, many within its sphere of influence remained wary of Wright's open critique of racial paternalism. Outside the Party,

Although Wright had intended for his appropriation of Burke's Marxian "poetics of action" to reflect the structural nuance of his own position between Marxisms, this critical distinction was lost on his readers. Wright's response to widespread critical misprision was twofold. Publicly, he directed his anger toward the liberal press. Exercising little self-control, Wright blasted liberal journalists, focusing the majority of his vitriol on David L. Cohn, whose negative review of *Native Son*, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright," confused the novel's representation of violence with advocacy.¹³ Privately, Wright blamed himself. His segmented approach to Marxism, evidenced by his attempt to "weave" Marxism into his novel via seven "poetic motifs" had done little to distinguish it from other forms of social protest. Wright's characteristic sensitivity to reviews was thus compounded by the emergence of an inconvenient truth: his attempt to approximate Marxist critique in narrative form was weakened not only by the interpretive constraints of his readership, but by serious restrictions in his own understanding of Marx's thought. Wright's experience with Burke, whom he had trusted for his apparent sensitivity to race, and ultimately turned to for his heterodox interpretation of Marx, had clearly led him astray. At odds with both the Party and America's first Marxist,¹⁴ Wright began to shift his focus away from Marxist appropriations in both literature and politics to the principle texts of Marx's thought.

charges of misogyny and gratuitous violence were widespread. Worst of all, critics of all stripes read Bigger as a static political symbol of the times (a figure to pity, if not weep) rather than a destructive harbinger of the future. See Michel Fabre's *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* 184.

¹³ For a more thorough discussion of Wright's public response, see p-37-42 of this dissertation's previous chapter, "Richard Wright's Search for a Method."

¹⁴ i.e., Kenneth Burke.

II. An Outsider Emerges

To claim that Richard Wright became a Marxist in the midst of his fallout with the Communist Party is paradoxical, but for the self-styled artist and intellectual the paradox stands. In 1940, Wright began to assemble a Marxist library that exceeded his prior, Party-based focus on revolutionary strategy (Lenin) and the role of minorities in the revolution (Stalin).¹⁵ Aware that the truth in Marx's thought lay in its method, Wright embarked on a six year study of dialectics, in which he swapped Marxism's "mass leaders"—William Z. Foster's joint appellation for Lenin and Stalin—for Marx and Hegel.¹⁶ Wright's first acquisition was *Capital*, Volume 1 (1867), which he purchased in New York just before he left for Cuernavaca, Mexico that April. In the subsequent months and years before his move to France, Wright acquired Volumes II and III of *Capital* (posthumously published in 1885 and 1894 respectively), Marx and Engels' *The Civil War in the United States* (1861), and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), and Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1910) and *Science of Logic* (1929). In addition to these primary texts, Wright obtained two supplementary aids for his reading of Hegel, William Wallace's *Prolegmena to the Study of Hegel's Philosophy and Especially of His Logic* (1894) and *The*

¹⁵ Specific titles in his pre-1940 library included Andrei Zhdanov's *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writer's Congress* by A. Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky (pseud), N. Bukharin, K Radek, A. Stetsky (1934), Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (1917), *State and Revolution: Marxist Teaching about the Theory of the State and Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (1917); *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1903), and *Women in Society* (1913), Joseph Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches* (1934). Texts and dates in Wright's library were scrupulously recorded by Michel Fabre in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*. (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1990).

¹⁶ In his new quest, Wright approximates Georg Lukacs' transvaluation of Marxist orthodoxy in *The History of Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1971). Lukacs overturns the accepted definition of Marxist orthodoxy as the "uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations," and redefines it as the "conviction that its method is the road to truth, and that its methods can be developed, expanded, and deepened, only along the lines laid down by its founders" (xxvi).

Logic of Hegel (1892). Significantly, Wright did not trade the Scottish philosopher's explanations of Hegel for Alexandre Kojève's. Though the latter was the unqualified spearhead of the postwar Hegel revival on the Continent, leaving an indelible imprint on French intellectual culture in which Wright was soon to be immersed, his admiration for Stalin who had, according to Kojève, replaced Napoleon as the "culmination of the end of history" had, for Wright, trumped his philosophical dexterity.¹⁷

As was the case for his reading of *Permanence and Change*, non-fictional documentation of Wright's impressions of the above texts is limited. Outside of a humorous story recorded in his 1946 essay "How Jim Crow Feels," in which Wright is stopped by a Mexican guard who finds a copy of *Capital* in his luggage and assumes he is a Communist, specific details on this period (1940-46) in Wright's Marxist evolution are sparse, obscured by more dramatic biographical aspects and events including his separation from the Party in 1942, official break in 1944, and move to France in 1946.¹⁸ Although these events affirmed nothing more than Wright's autonomy from oppressive ideological institutions (i.e., the State and the Party), the combination of his political remove and distance from existing communities of dissident Marxists subjected Wright to a new and higher degree of cultural and political suspicion. It did not matter that Wright's isolation was self-selected, nor that his decision to maintain independence from groups mired in a similar theoretical quandary, including two famous (and separate)

¹⁷ Though it may seem a minor point, Wright's selection of Wallace over Hegel runs counter to Paul Gilroy's characterization of Wright's postwar understanding of Hegel as "Kojévian." See Paul Gilroy, "Without the Consolation of Tears: Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* 184.

¹⁸ This narrative was further safeguarded in 1945, when Harper's refused to publish Wright's autobiography *American Hunger* in full, a decision that recast Wright's complex *bildung* as a narrative of African American uplift.

clusters that included his friends Ralph Ellison and the West Indian Trotskyist C.L.R. James,¹⁹ was one of self-preservation and intellectual integrity.²⁰ What did matter was that Wright's independence seemed to take him further from those forms of oppression (i.e., the Negro-hating South," American bourgeois society, and the CPUSA) that had not only marked his work but "steeled his talent." Phrased as an expression of concern, Constance Webb, more than likely speaking on behalf of her husband at the time, C.L.R. James, perhaps said it best when she expressed concern that Wright would "lose himself" (163) in France among the existentialists, who "blamed the individual for the problems of society" (163).

Preliminary unease with Wright's move(s) proved prophetic when *The Outsider* was finally published in the United States on March 16, 1953. White ex-Communists praised the novel for its political remove and considered it Wright's perfectly timed exit from the race-based sociological novel and entry into the cosmopolitan novel of ideas, going so far as to cast it as a melodramatic cognate to Whittaker Chambers' book *Witness* (1952).²¹ Those closer to Wright's actual politics, including Communist playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the militant novelist and critic Lloyd Brown, and Left critic J.

¹⁹ From 1933-1947, James was a leading figure in the Trotskyist movement. Wright and James were friends and discussed the revolutionary significance of black and African peoples' struggles against Western oppression, but Wright steered clear of James' political cult.

²⁰ In the U.S., Wright's singularity is illustrated most poignantly through his distance from his former mentee, Ralph Ellison, who in 1942 had moved closer to the non-orthodox, and nominally Hegelian inquiry into Marx performed by Kenneth Burke and Stanley Edgar Hyman. Though he did not at this time abandon Wright (the official break occurs in 1957), his interest in Marx's thought was closer to the rhetorical reappraisals put forth by Stanley Edgar Hyman and Kenneth Burke. If differences between the two are best exemplified in their respective inquiries into Hegelian negativity in *The Outsider* and *Invisible Man*, letters between Ellison and Wright in the mid-forties illustrate the intellectual underpinnings of the dissolution of their intellectual—if not personal—friendship. For more, see Lawrence P. Jackson's "The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright." 321-355.

²¹ See Granville Hicks. "The Portrait of a Man Searching: Richard Wright's New Novel of Violence Probes the Struggle to Understand Life" BR1.

Saunders Redding eviscerated Wright for his generic and political departure.²² For Margaret Walker, Wright’s “movement” (319) through Jung, Husserl, and Heidegger impedes his search to go beyond the “simple and immediate” to the “universal and profound” (319). Yet the cruelest, and consequently the most culturally deft review came not from an expected antagonist, but from long time friend to Wright, distinguished writer and critic Arna Bontemps.²³ Cutting to the quick, Bontemps leveled the novel’s political, formal, and philosophical tensions to pronounce the book as the prurient product of Wright’s “roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre.”²⁴

Though few critics before and after were as pointedly crass in their characterization of the novel’s relationship to French thought, Bontemps’ trumped up critique of Wright’s philosophical foray was prolonged by decades of critical confusion on the precise relationship of *The Outsider* to Continental philosophy.²⁵ While critics no

²² Hansberry and Brown accused Wright of perpetuating the oppressive political and cultural policies maintained by Cold War regimes of power. See Lorraine Hansberry, Untitled Review 7 and Lloyd Brown’s “Outside and Low” in *Masses and Mainstream*. 62–64.

²³ Bontemps was a former colleague of Wright’s in the South Side Writers’ Group, a group that included Arthur Bland, Frank Marshall Davis, Robert Davis, Fern Gayden, Garfield Gordon, Fenton Johnson, Russell Marshall, Marion Perkins, Dorothy Sutton, and Theodore Ward.

²⁴ See: Arna Bontemps, Review of *The Outsider* by Richard Wright 15-16.

²⁵ From 1953 to 1991, an auspicious year for critical bias to be lowered, if not quite lifted, criticism on *The Outsider* was regulated by uncritical assumptions about Wright’s relationship French philosophical Left. In addition to the authors listed in the above paragraph, I’d add Robert Bone’s revised *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale. University Press, 1958), which all but dismisses *The Outsider* and Daniel Aaron’s, which uses *The Outsider* as further evidence of the Left’s “long retreat” from literary radicalism. Barbara Foley’s, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in the U.S. Proleterian Novel 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), extends both theses: Such adverse judgments [about the Communist Party’s exploitation of African American allegiance] have been sustained by the predominantly negative portrayal of Communists and Communism in a number of novels and memoirs by black writers who were active with the left in the years between the wars—e.g., Claude McKay’s *A Long Way from Home* (1937), Chester Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953) and *American Hunger* (1974)—part of which appeared originally in Richard Crossman’s 1950 anthology of recantations, *The God That Failed* (1950). The strongly anti-Communist impact of these texts were for years sufficiently powerful to foreclose

longer reduce the novel's philosophical topoi to a simple (and sycophantic) relation between Wright and the post-War French intellectuals with whom he was associated, the process of identifying in order to assess Wright's philosophical (and consequently, political) investments via *The Outsider's* philosophical references remains compulsory, as if the novel's intrinsic meaning and value as an historical artifact of the Cold War hinges on a lost allusion to one, or several, Continental philosophers referenced in the novel among Cross Damon's reading.²⁶ While this process has produced several brilliant essays that successfully disprove Wright's intellectual acquiescence to Sartre, the critical disruption is only temporary—Sartre is deposed only to be replaced by another, this time German figure linked to both Wright's postwar intellectual interests and Damon's philosophical library.²⁷ No longer Sartrean, Wright is assigned Damon's philosophical stance and becomes Nietzschean (Thompson), Husserlian (Gilroy), and Heideggerian (Atteberry and JanMohamed). Marx, who is not listed in the novel among Damon's reading and is, on all but one occasion,²⁸ only mentioned in the context of Communist appropriations, is accordingly eliminated from critical consideration—emerging only to confirm that the

analysis of any complexities and contradictions—let alone positive features—in the Communist program for black liberation.

²⁶ There are a handful of notable exceptions to this general rule. The first is Michel Fabre's pioneering essay "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists" in *MELUS* 5.2 (1978): 39-51. Additionally, Cedric Robinson's "Richard Wright and the Critique of Class Theory" in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), and Alan Wald's "Lonely Crusaders, Part I" in *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 150-174.

²⁷ See: See Jeffrey Atteberry's "Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright's Critique of Marxism and Existentialism." *Modern Fiction Studies*, 51.4 (2005): 873-895; Paul Gilroy's "Without the Consolation of Tears": Richard Wright, France and the Ambivalence of Community" in *The Black Atlantic: Double Consciousness and Modernity* (1993): 146-185; Sarah Relyea's "The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*" in *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Cultural Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin* (2006): 59-90; Abdul R. JanMohamed's "The Outsider: Patricidal Desires" in *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death* (2005): 175-209.

²⁸ Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned black Marxist, issues the novel's single reference to Marx outside the parameters of the Party. I discuss this in the essay's final section.

novel's residual representations of Marx serve as evidence of the "scar left by Wright's years as a communist" (Gilroy 170).

Without contesting the relevance of philosophical themes to *The Outsider*, I insist that the novel's relationship to philosophy, and specifically the specific form of its representation, cannot be understood outside the impress of Wright's Marxist education. Though frequently overshadowed by *The Outsider's* twinned critique of Stalinism and Fascism—two evils symbolically killed off in the novel's representation of the "double totalitarian murder" (436) of Communist Gil Blount and Fascist Langley Herndon—Wright's narrative offers a full-scale critique of totalitarian thought more in the fashion of Slavoj Žižek than Hannah Arendt.²⁹ For Wright, as for Žižek, totalitarianism was not the name of a diabolical political entity or coupling of diabolical political entities, but a metonym for unnameable, shape-shifting networks of power in which we are unendingly bound.³⁰ Philosophy frequently viewed from within its ranks as a discourse external to State sponsored regimes of power, was for Wright (as for Marx), a part of this network.³¹ Social critique was necessarily immanent—i.e., issued from within the contradictions of existing social relations; the notion of issuing a critique from outside the system was the realm of ideology. Though he does not, in *The Outsider*, go so far as to equate philosophy with oppressive political regimes, he does demonstrate—through his dramatization of

²⁹ See Slavoj Žižek's *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions of the (Mis)Use of a Notion*. (2001).

³⁰ This term is used frequently by structuralists and post-structuralists, including Barthes and Foucault. I have no particular allegiance to either usage, but Foucault's understanding of power as a "moving substrate of force" rather than a "static group of institutions and mechanisms" that ensures the subservience of the citizens of a given state is apt here (*History of Sexuality* 93).

³¹ Etienne Balibar discusses Marx's critique of the "political sociology of modern intellectuals" in *The Philosophy of Marx*. In *The German Ideology*, Marx identified professional philosophers as an oppressive class of intellectuals, or "ideologists."

Damon's uncritical embrace of reified philosophical concepts, including Husserl's phenomenological reduction, Nietzsche's nihilism, and Kierkegaard's critique of atheism or faithlessness—the extent to which philosophers act, mostly unconsciously, as functionaries of the State.

III. Early Days in France: Negotiating Hegel and Marx

When Wright began work on *The Outsider* in 1946, he was not yet versed in phenomenology, nor was he especially well read in French existentialism.³² He had, however, expressed interest in writing a novel that pursued a philosophical problem, that of consciousness, and was eager to advance his project on modern alienation in an intellectual culture³³ that neither shrank from nor sentimentalized his independence from extant political or social groups. Wright describes this independence in his essay “I Choose Exile” (1950):³⁴

³² Michel Fabre discusses Wright's very limited knowledge of Sartre's work in “Richard Wright and the Existentialists” and *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. According to Michel Fabre, Wright did not possess “significant knowledge” of Sartre's work until the early 1950s. Though “sympathetic to Sartre, Wright did not have substantial knowledge of his writings at that time; he had bought “*Existentialism, Age of Reason* and *The Reprieve* probably as soon as they appeared in 1947, but he had to wait at least until 1949 for the translations of *What Is Literature?*, *Intimacy and Other Stories*, *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*, *Crime Passionnel*, and *Men Without Shadows*, until 1950 for *The Psychology of Imagination*, until 1951 for *The Chips Are Down*, and until as late as 1957 for the Methuen translation of *Being and Nothingness*.” Wright's “regard for the man, outweighed his admiration for his work” (321).

³³ Wright knew from extensive conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, who had spent a significant amount of time at his Charles Street Apartment and had been instrumental in securing his official invitation to travel to France, the extent to which his ideas, combined with his experience, would be accepted beyond their liberal curb appeal. The exception to the French intellectual embrace of Wright came, unsurprisingly, from the *Parti communiste français* (henceforth PCF) press, who introduced Wright to its readership as a “renegade” who had already “failed” as an “authentic” Marxist ideologue even before he “deserted” the Party (Kanapa 3). Still, this criticism did not disturb Wright, who was long accustomed to the Party's rote defamations of his life and work. See Jean Kanapa, “Il Y a deux literatures americaines.” *Les Lettres Francaises* (5 February 1948).

³⁴ Wright wrote “I Choose Exile” for *Ebony* magazine in 1950, but the editors refused the piece on account of its “sharp criticism of American culture and its bleak portrayal of African-

France is, above all, a land of refuge. Even when there is a shortage of food, Frenchmen will share their crusts of bread with strangers. Yet, nowhere do you see so much gaiety as in Paris, nowhere can you hear so much spirited talk. Each contemporary event is tasted, chewed, digested. There is no first-rate French novelist specializing in creating unreal, romantic historical novels! The present is to be understood and they find it exciting enough. “The problems of philosophy,” says Jean-Paul Sartre, “are to be found in the streets.” I have encountered among the French no social snobbery. The more individualistic a man is, the more acceptable he is. The spirit of the mob, whether intellectual, racial, or moral, is the very opposite of the spirit of French life. SOIT RAISONNABLE, (be reasonable) is their motto. (4)

Although Wright had not yet secured the novel’s narrative structure, his newfound freedom from knee-jerk ideological judgment provided him with the necessary space to move between opposed philosophic modes, idealism and materialism, in search of a critical (rather than strictly political) position that embraced the individual even in its recognition of the individual as a socially constituted subject.

While the French intellectual embrace of Wright functioned as a key form of intellectual support and confidence to an embattled intellectual, his concept for the novel came not from French philosophy, but from by an unresolved tension in his reading of

American life in Chicago’s South Side” (qtd. in *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* edited by Jerry W. Ward, Robert J. Butler 192

Marx and Hegel.³⁵ A committed materialist who rejected as illusory the idealist notion of “pure thought,” and the understanding of consciousness as “an entity in possession of its own truth,” (Wright 1947 Draft), Wright remained critical of Marxism’s categorical rejection of consciousness as immaterial. For Wright, inquiry into the sundered consciousness was not a decadent, epiphenomenal concern fated to intensify social atomization, but a procedure necessary to any radical disruption of the existing social order.³⁶ The elaboration of a revolutionary alternative to advanced capitalism required a reevaluation of the individual outside the determinist concept of “human potential,” which maintained an interest in the capacities of man only insofar as those capacities were among those that benefited the collective.

Without challenging Marx’s definition of consciousness as a material concept that described an individual’s relation to his environment, Wright wished to expand the conceptual terrain of environmental degradation beyond its naturalist trappings.³⁷ According to Wright, human wretchedness was insufficiently represented by rote descriptions of class warfare, which tended to overemphasize the visible conditions of catastrophic social phenomena (including poverty and racism) at the cost of the particular conditions of forms of ideological servitude. A 1948 letter to Dorothy

³⁵ Details of the French embrace of Wright, particularly by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, are well documented. Rather than reproducing the particulars here, which would disrupt both the account and cognitive pacing of the present counternarrative, I would direct the reader to Michel Fabre’s *The World of Richard Wright* (1985) and *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1993) and Sarah Relyea’s chapter on Richard Wright in *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin*. (2006).

³⁶ By proposing that social atomization was both the outcome (Arendt) and the precondition (Marx) of authoritarianism, Wright brokered a strange merger between Hannah Arendt and Marx.

³⁷ See Karl Marx’s *The German Ideology*. “Mein Verhältnis zu meiner Umgebung ist mein Bewußtsein” translated, my relation to my environment is my consciousness.”

Norman provides a record of Wright's frustration with such positivist currents in Marxist thought:

The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume. If man is to be contained in that definition and if it is not to be challenged, then that is what will prevail; and a world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom, and those who will say that they are not happy under such a regime will be guilty of treason. How sad that is. We are all accomplices in this crime... Is it too late to say something to halt it, modify it? (qtd. in Fabre 325)

Wright found an answer, albeit a provisional and ultimately disappointing one, later that year in the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (henceforth, RDR), an anti-Stalinist organization led by former French Trotskyist David Rousset that pledged to “give new life to the principles of liberty and human dignity by linking them to the struggle for social revolution.”³⁸ Though Wright was long disenchanted with what he referred to as “politics proper,” the 1948 Soviet blockade of Berlin, which carried the threat of a Third World War, softened his position.³⁹ As additional encouragement,

³⁸ See: Ian Birchall's extensive obituary for Rousset in *Revolutionary History*. 7.1. *A Paradise for Capitalism? Class and Leadership in Twentieth Century Belgium* (1998). “Between the rottenness of capitalist democracy, the weaknesses and defects of a certain social democracy and the limitation of Communism to its Stalinist form, we believe an assembly of free men for revolutionary democracy is capable of giving new life to the principles of freedom and human dignity by binding them to the struggle for social revolution.”

³⁹ Wright's rebuke of “politics proper” is one repeated throughout the forties and fifties. See *Black Power* (1954) for his pointed critique of Kwame Nkrumah's Marxist propaganda as both “politics proper” and “politics plus” and a 1955 interview in which he describes his sustained

nearly everyone in Wright's immediate social circle backed the organization.⁴⁰

Wright's public support of the RDR lasted approximately eleven months. Though he did not have an official position, his role in the organization approximated that of a cultural attaché.⁴¹ Wright educated the philosophical Left on the particular difficulties that African American dissidents experienced at home and abroad on at least three occasions, the first delivered at the RDR's inaugural conference, "The Internationalism of the Mind," held at the Sorbonne.⁴² Though there was much buzz around Wright's involvement, his tenure as the organization's African American ambassador was brief, ending when Rousset compromised the RDR's position of non-alignment, of "neither Washington nor Moscow," by lessening his previously unqualified condemnation for Western capitalism. Though Rousset never established clear ties to the U.S., his political stock dipped, and the organization disbanded within the year.

The dissolution of the RDR had unexpected consequences for Wright. Though habituated to political disappointment, Wright was unprepared for the sudden upsurge of political militancy among friends previously committed to positions of Left non-alignment. Albert Camus, whom Wright had admired for his strident independence in political and artistic pursuits, aligned himself more closely with staunch anti-Communists

"passion for politics" as illogical. Wright says: "In spite of myself, I'm passionately interested in politics. But I curse the day that I first heard the word "politics. My racial identity places me at the focal point of world politics. Merely to read my morning newspaper is to encounter political ideas debating the destiny of the colored majority of mankind" quoted in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 163-165.

⁴⁰ High profile members included Simone de Beauvoir, Andre Breton, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

⁴¹ Wright never applied for French citizenship and was therefore ineligible.

⁴² Due in large part to the range of its intellectual celebrity (in addition to Wright, the conference was led by Carlo Levi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir), the conference was a superficial success.

including Arthur Koestler, who by then had financial and ideological ties to the CIA.⁴³ Sartre was even more disappointing. Unlike Camus, Sartre saw the RDR's political openness as its chief weakness. Voluntarism would not, according to Sartre, foster a revolutionary movement but would, as evidenced by the RDR's political precariousness, promote instability.⁴⁴ Calling instead for "definitive" (Birchall 114) action supported by a stable political structure, Sartre began to voice support for the organizational principles of bolshevism. Though he remained ambivalent about the role of Stalin in the revolution—he opposed forced labor camps but unequivocally supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary—Sartre moved closer to PCF, an organization with notoriously "backward prejudices" (qtd in Birchall 80) on race that had personally attacked Wright two years prior.⁴⁵

Despite clear points of animus, there was never an official break between the two. Save for one occasion in 1953 when Wright characterized as "stupid" Sartre's claim that "one could work with the Party while still criticizing it" in a *New York Times* article (qtd. in Fabre 375), Wright remained mostly loyal to Sartre well after the latter's full-blown Communist conversion.⁴⁶ Wright publicly sided with Sartre over French intellectuals with whom he had much more in common, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had entered into full, public battle with Sartre over his uncritical

⁴³ Koestler's anti-Communist zealotry led to several incidents of back-door collusion with the State Department. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. The New Press, 2000

⁴⁴ See Ian Birchall's *Sartre Against Stalinism*. Oxford: Berghahn Press. 2004. "In his notes on the RDR, Sartre stressed the inadequacy of voluntarism: New and definitive apprenticeship in realism. You can't *create* a movement" (114).

⁴⁵ See note 37.

⁴⁶ Consideration of Ely Houston, *The Outsider's* district attorney, is just beyond the scope of this essay. Still, it is worth noting that Houston was fashioned after the physical appearance of Kierkegaard and the political ethos of Sartre.

“ultrabolshevism.”⁴⁷ Continued sympathy for his friend notwithstanding, Wright emerged from the ordeal newly hardened against the French philosophical Left, and began to critically reexamine his place within it. Wright noted that although he thrived socially and intellectually in France, his critical capacities had languished under what he described as the “curated freedom” of the French.⁴⁸ On the one hand, he had witnessed an unparalleled and almost “mythical sense of intellectual freedom”⁴⁹ among the French, who were not only undeterred by the persistent antagonism between the mind and materialism, but made the contradiction of consciousness and environment central to existentialist humanism. On the other, Wright remained suspicious of the ease with which French intellectuals transformed social struggles into episodic causes célèbres. Aspects of Sartre that Wright had initially found appealing, such as his “voluntary identification of the French experience” (qtd. in Fabre 162) under occupation with the colonized people of the Africa, were now cast in a different light.⁵⁰ Though he never went so far as to characterize Sartre’s position as co-optive, as he had with the Party, he increasingly came to see Sartre’s position as both privileged and illusory. In place of open enmity grew the seeds of critique.

IV. Philosophy as a Discourse of Domination

Despite his increasing disillusionment with the micropolitics of postwar French intellectual culture, Wright was not yet prepared to reject in toto the transformative

⁴⁷ For more, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1974.

⁴⁸ “The Outsider: First Draft, Typescript, Corrected” Richard Wright Papers. Box 48 Folder 604.

⁴⁹ “The Outsider: First Draft, Typescript, Corrected” Richard Wright Papers. Box 48 Folder 604.

⁵⁰ Michel Fabre quotes from Wright’s 1946-1947 journal in *The World of Richard Wright*: “Sartre is the only Frenchman I’ve met who had voluntarily made the identification of the French experience with that of mankind. How a rare a man is this Sartre!” (162).

potential of ontological inquiry. Though he had moved beyond the existential humanism of Sartre, the allure of the phenomenological approach to modern philosophical questions, especially the problem of individual freedom in an imposed reality, persisted. Reminded, once again, that cultural proficiency did not constitute metacritical understanding, Wright redoubled his efforts and turned to the father of 20th century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, for guidance.⁵¹

Wright located his investigation of Husserlian phenomenology in Husserl's *Ideas towards a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913), the third installment in Husserl's life long project to redeem philosophy as a science through the development of an unprejudiced description of the essential structures of subjective experience. Though Husserl's philosophy was then considered the intellectual terrain of professional philosophers in whom Wright had little faith (including the French philosophical Left and Husserl's most famous pupil, Martin Heidegger, who by 1949 was publicly judged a *Mitläufer*), *Ideas* was an expansive text at the cusp of process philosophy and social psychology, two areas of inquiry in which Wright had an abiding interest.⁵² Beyond

⁵¹ It is impossible to know what Wright knew of Husserl's influence outside of his immediate impact on French and German phenomenology. Paul Ricouer, who Wright had met through Dorothy Norman a few years prior to his study of Husserl, was at the time working on a Husserl / Marx connection, proposing that Husserl's phenomenological reduction or *epoché* could be seen as a phenomenological cognate to utopia in Marx's thought. While Wright too was interested in Husserl for his promise to imbue the individual with the cognitive tools to challenge the psychological and material constraints of imposed reality, he was not a professional philosopher interested in dealing in abstraction. It is more likely that Wright came to Husserl in much the same way, and for much the same reason, that he came to Marx and Hegel.

⁵² Wright's interest in psychology is well documented though still underexplored. Along with Dr. Fredric Wertham and Earl Brown he founded the Lafargue Clinic in 1946, the first health clinic in Harlem. In his library, Wright owned titles by Karl Abraham, Helene Deutsch, Otto Fenichel, Sándor Ferenczi, Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein, Theodor Reik, and Géza Roheim. See Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (1993). Jay Garcia's *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Twentieth-Century America* (2012) includes an

Husserl's potential contribution to already existing intellectual interests, Wright considered the philosopher's emphasis on the possibility for subjective experience unfettered by the necessity of a collective synthesis a welcomed reprieve from the humanist worldview of the French Left which seemed to tolerate difference, including racial difference, as a *provisional* stage in the process of universalization.⁵³

Wright's immersion in Husserl was intense but short lived.⁵⁴ If Wright thought that he was, in Husserl's *Ideas*, undertaking a more focused version of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911), which he had read with great interest the year before, what he found was a long and frustrating exercise in speculative futility. Objectives and concepts that initially captivated Wright, including Husserl's representation of the transcendental ego as an experiential domain, his promise to deliver a full, scientific account of consciousness on all of its "cognitive, volitional, affective levels," (quoted in Luft 117) and the possibility for the "mediating philosopher" to temporarily bracket imposed reality to experience weightless and astonishment (phenomenological reduction), were undone by Husserl's historical relativism and utter lack of concern for the materiality of the body. Husserl's claim that the "mediating philosopher" could stand apart from existing social and historical conditions was the epitome of ideology. Only ideologists, to quote Marx from *The German Ideology*, could claim to "stand beside their own class, and to

excellent chapter on Wright and social psychology titled "Richard Wright Reading: The Promise of Social Psychiatry" 49-74.

⁵³ Wright was, at this point, newly irritated with the considerable liberties Sartre had taken with his Hegelian formulation of negritude, in which he reduced black consciousness to "the antithesis to the thesis of white racism," i.e., a position that "existed only to destroy itself," in his essay on Leopold Senghor, "Orphée Noir" (1948).

⁵⁴ Paul Gilroy notes Wright's interest in Husserl via a single, but provocative anecdote. Wright had Husserl's *Ideas* rebound in leather to protect it from everyday wear. Gilroy's mention of the Husserl/Wright connection serves as a brief, but persuasive anecdote intimating an affirmative connection between the two.

produce ideas” that existed “beyond social practices” (Marx 34). While other dissident Marxists also interested in the possibility for Husserl’s method to elaborate on the undertheorized notion of the utopic in Marx remained comfortable linking the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* to utopia in the context of a “purely mental experiment,” such as Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 27), Wright could not abide a theory of perception that refused to take into consideration the concrete dynamics and logics of actually existing conditions of oppression, including the monumental problem of racism, to experience the world anew. No matter how disciplined in his study of Husserl’s theories of the phenomenological and eidetic reductions,⁵⁵ Wright’s body was not something he could theorize away.

Disappointed as he must have been, Wright’s renewed sense of alienation had a silver lining—it was the final push he needed to secure the narrative structure of *The Outsider*. Though the title was still in flux,⁵⁶ Wright determined that the novel would be a “darkly drawn character study,” that used philosophy to track the lived experience of a black man struggling with modern forms of alienation. Husserl would figure largely in this dramatization, underpinning the novel’s major acts of “creative destruction”

⁵⁵ Wright returns to this critique one year later in his juxtaposition of Husserl with the figure of the “brooding Ashanti”: Wright uses an excerpt from Husserl’s *Ideas* as an epigraph to his chapter on the perils of African folk logic:

Not only might human development have never overstepped the pre-scientific stage and been doomed never to overstep it so that the physical world might indeed retain its truth whilst we should know nothing about it; the physical world might have been other than it is with systems of law other than those actually prevailing. It is also conceivable that our intuitional world should be the last, and “beyond” it no physical world at all. (289)

In the chapter, Wright observes that with “no way to check one’s perceptions or feelings,” to “feel something” was to “make it true. He writes: “what one feels, what one fears, what one loves, comes immediately into being” (294).

⁵⁶ Wright toyed with several titles, including “Cross Daemon,” before he eventually settled on *The Outsider*.

including Damon's death hoax and selective amnesia, in Wright's very thinly veiled assault on the reduction proper. Finalizing the particulars of his novel with renewed exigency, Wright harnessed the pain, anger, and frustration from his philosophical isolation, combined it with existing political frustration with polarized Cold War politics and channeled it into a nearly eight-hundred page⁵⁷ treatise against totalitarian thought.

V. The Novel

Divided into five alliteratively titled books drawn from Kierkegaardian categories, "Dread," "Dream," "Descent," "Despair," and "Decision," *The Outsider* tells the story of Cross Damon, an erstwhile philosophy student at the University of Chicago, now employed as a postal worker on Chicago's South Side. The novel opens with Damon entering his local bar, The Salty Dog, where he drinks, excessively enough to be reprimanded by his friends, to forget his life. Damon is married with children, but has an underage mistress who claims that she is pregnant. Saddled with debt, two young boys, a critical wife, and a drinking problem, Damon faces the possibility of having his affair double his troubles. Despairing, Damon takes to the streets, where fate intervenes in the form of a fatal 'L' train accident. After crushing the skull of the accident's only other survivor (on whom Damon plants his identification), Damon flees to New York and assumes a new identity. Damon's social death—an undeclared reference to, and critique of, Husserl's call for the temporary destruction of given reality in order to reemerge in the world unencumbered—and rebirth as Lionel Lane sets the stage for the remaining three books of the novel, in which Wright dramatizes the tragic consequences of

⁵⁷ Wright's agent and editor both rejected the original draft based on its length, and forced Wright to cut the novel by more than one hundred pages. Wright, who was years late with the manuscript, was forced to comply, and compressed the novel into 540 pages.

Damon's flight from reality.

Before the novel is given over to the more fantastic aspects of Wright's eccentric premise, it introduces the reader to its interpretive coordinates—Marxism, Idealist ontology, and the misreading of both—and its dialectical structure through a protracted opening scene designed to frame Damon's eventual flight from reality as the final stage of a Hegelian Odyssey long in the making. Although Wright was warned against⁵⁸ opening with a scene that his editor, John Fischer, insisted was “superfluous” to the novel's dramatic action, Wright fought for its inclusion.⁵⁹ Wright knew—both from his experience with misreadings of *Native Son* and his awareness of U.S. intellectual culture—that if he did not foreground the novel's critical underpinnings they would be lost in the novel's steady stream of melodrama. Crucial to apprehending the novel's negative form, Wright uses this frame to dramatize the “cataclysmic danger and criminal ruthlessness” as Marx writes,⁶⁰ that results from the adoption of transhistorical consciousness.

Following several paragraphs in which Wright locates the reader in the novel's alternative temporality—he describes a group of huddled black men “sloshing” (1) down the dark streets of Chicago on a particularly frigid February toward their local bar before dawn—Wright immediately shifts the narrative focus from the collective suffering of men working the midnight shift to Damon's particularized reading habits and thought experiments. Wright's move from environmental concerns—his naturalistic description

⁵⁸ Wright's editor John Fischer asked Wright to delete these early scenes, which he considered “superfluous.” Wright refused. As a compromise, Wright agreed to shorten these scenes considerably, which helps to explain the strange pacing of Book One.

⁵⁹ Although his new set of narrative concerns would be both unpopular and misunderstood by his American readership, Wright refused to open the novel according to generic and political expectations.

⁶⁰ See Karl Marx. *The German Ideology* 37.

of the elemental brutality of Chicago's harsh winters, the misery of working life, and the annihilation of the body—to the vatic montage of remembered events from Damon's learned past signals the forecasts the storm that is to come: the constructed violence of the protagonist's consciousness.

Although the present tense experiment dramatized in the novel—the possibility for life after social death—is one ostensibly gifted to Damon by an 'L' train accident, it is prefigured in the novel by two elaborate thought-experiments that introduce the connection between Damon's philosophical charlantry and his mercenary logic. In the first of these episodes, Damon's friends recall a moment from several years back, where their friend, who is standing on the eleventh floor of the Post Office, tosses coins out his window to unsuspecting passersby:

Early in the evening, when the rush hour was on, he used to—we were working on the 11th floor then—lift up the window, run his hand in his pocket and toss out every cent of silver he had. Just throw it all out of the window to the street. And then he'd lean out and watch the commotion of all them little antlike folks down there going wild, scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money and then, when the money was all gone, they'd stand looking up to the window of the 11th floor with their mouths hanging open like fishes out of water. And Cross'd be laughing to beat all hell. And Cross'd say that them folks was praying when their faces were turned up like that, waiting for more money to fall. Haha. (6)

While the men recall this comical reprieve in an otherwise monotonous workday with fond nostalgia, their mirth is disrupted by Damon's refusal to join in on the laughter. No longer "laughing to beat all hell," (6) Damon's real-time expression is marked by "detachment" (7). Disappointed but unsurprised by Damon's willful remove, the men, who had summoned up the scene in an attempt to remind their depressed friend of better times, re-signify the memory in accordance with Damon's intellectual vanity. Aware on some level that Damon's former immersion in "big deep books" (6) had given rise to his "crazy stunts" (7) the ensuing conversation establishes the novel's first formal connection between Damon's cruel experiments and his reading practices.⁶¹

Although all are ignorant of Damon's former life as a student—Wright does not provide readers with the specific titles in Damon's library until Book Five (where readers learn, through the compulsive detective work of District Attorney Ely Houston, that Damon possessed texts by Jaspers, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Hegel—each contributes to a conversation that introduces the reader to Damon's bibliomania.

Beginning with pure physical description in which the men recall the ever present "batch

⁶¹ Were we to limit our interpretation of this scene to the textual references stipulated in the novel, we would be left with Nietzsche and his oft cited (and frequently misread) theorization of the "will to power." Such a connection has been advanced by Mark Thompson in his polemical chapter on *The Outsider*, "Richard Wright's Jealous Rebels: Black Fascism and Philosophy" in *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars* (143-170). If at first the connection holds—with the Nietzschean will to power at once a philosophical cognate to, and psychological explanation for, Damon's unqualified seizure of power—the connection is shaken by the paragraph's formal logic and objective detail. Wright's use of coins rather than paper money, and recourse to a slightly antiquated language (he uses the term "silver" rather than the more colloquial term "change") evokes Marx's M-C-M (Money, Commodity, Exchange) model of capitalist logic. Damon's idealization of monetary material—his use of money, already a universal form, to express a form or idea he already knows, modern alienation—plays into Marx's critique of the "elementary misunderstanding" of social degradation. See Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1.*, Sec. "Theories of the Standard of Money." <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch02b.htm>

under his arm, and the mass of “big and little books” in the “clothes closet, bathroom, and under the bed” (8) of his cramped apartment, the conversation moves on to the psychology behind Damon’s stockpile. Two men in the group, who go by the nicknames Pink and Booker, offer insight into their friend’s reading practices, which they describe as frenetic:

But what I couldn’t understand was why Cross wouldn’t believe anything in the books he read. One time he was all hepped-up over one writer and the next time he was through with ‘im and onto another. (8)

Before Damon is given a chance to respond to the above observation, his antagonistic friend Joe (who he kills a few scenes later) follows the observation with two questions. The first, in which he asks Damon “how come [he] don’t read no more,” (8) is met with deflection. Damon, obviously dismayed by a question that so patently calls forth his present despondence, responds defensively that “books are a thing of the past” since given up along with so many other “childish things” (9).⁶² Approaching Damon with a similar question but from a different angle, Joe asks, “how come [he] was reading all them books?” Damon’s comparatively “quiet” (8) response, that he “was looking for something” (8) offers something much truer.

Embedded in Damon’s answer that he “was looking for something” is the crux of Wright’s introductory provocation (in his Preface to the French edition of *The Outsider*) with which this chapter opened. Like Damon, Wright studied Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger, and published essays on Karl Jaspers’ philosophy, specifically his anti-

⁶² In an additional scene of Book One, Damon fakes amnesia in order to psychologically abuse his wife. 76-84.

totalitarian tract *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953).⁶³ Yet despite the terminological and textual⁶⁴ connections linking Wright’s “searching” (“for an attitude to replace Marxism”) with Damon’s “looking,” (for a single fail-safe solution to his web of problems) theirs remain discrete and conflicting intellectual journeys.⁶⁵ Similarities in content are disrupted by an absolute severance in method.⁶⁶ Damon’s scattered, non-systematic reading, evidenced by his wanton embrace and disposal of philosophers based on their superficial application in a given moment—an approach that Fredric Jameson characterizes in a different context as the endless, solipsistic “pursuit of the existential traveler”⁶⁷—exists as a deliberate point of contrast to Wright’s scrupulous study of an interpretive process designed to help the subject understand how things work. In contrast to Damon’s philosophical cherry picking,⁶⁸ Wright neither “used” nor “applied” the fruits of his intellectual labor to any particular advantage, and censured those who did, including the much beloved Black Marxist Kwame Nkrumah, at personal and

⁶³ See: Michel Fabre. *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 81-82.

⁶⁴ There are additional biographical connections linking Wright and Damon. Like Damon, Wright was a full time postal worker in Chicago.

⁶⁵ Damon’s “looking” is the epitome of Jameson’s criticism of the “subject-centered existentialist journey,” wherein the individual subject fails to recognize the broader social and historical implications of his/her existence, specifically that there is “nothing that is not social and historical” even something as intimate as one’s own psychology. See Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 52.

⁶⁶ The connection in content and the severance in method between Wright and Damon is done to establish a *formal* disconnect between his own and his characters’ intellectual lives. Wright suffered, throughout his literary career, from an uncritical association between his own voice and his the voice of his characters. Wright could not, to use one frequently cited example, represent misogyny without being accused of it, nor could he represent philosophical irresponsibility without himself being accused of the same form of privation.

⁶⁷ See Ian Buchanan’s introduction to *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* xvi.

⁶⁸ Damon’s subject centered approach to history forestalls his capacity to understand that Marx’s thought is, in its very design, embedded in the spatial, temporal, and economic logic of capitalism itself.

political cost.⁶⁹ Rather, his study of Marx provided him with the critical acumen and theoretical structure necessary to recast the specific conditions of his experience—including visible forms of oppression (racism, racialist capitalism) to the more abstract “blind zones”⁷⁰ of alienation that he experienced among the French Left⁷¹—in an historical dialectic that paired seemingly isolated parts in a single, tyrannical system.

The methodological disconnect between Wright and Damon is further supported by Damon’s consistent misrepresentation of Karl Marx. In an otherwise vast Marxist repertoire, Damon doesn’t read Marx. For Damon, Marx is a figure of antiquity, one consigned to museums:

Imagine the British, past masters of exploitation and duplicity, allowing a Karl Marx into their British Museum to pore over and unravel the pretensions and self-deceptions of British banditry. Such records of blatant chicanery served thoughtful and astute men as guides in the building of new, scientific and more efficient methods of deception!

(Wright 484)

⁶⁹ In *Black Power* (1954), where Wright describes Prime Minister Nkrumah’s political application of Marxism as a form of rhetorical alchemy:

What I had seen was not politics proper; it was politics plus....[sic] It bordered upon religion; it involved a total and basic response to reality; it smacked of the dreamlike, of the stuff of which art and myths were made....The number of men around the Prime Minister who knew Marxism were few in number, and how could they have instilled so quickly such abstruse ideas into illiterate masses? What I had seen was a smattering of Marxism plus the will to be, a thirst for self-redemption! And I suspected that Nkrumah himself was but an *agent provocateur* to the emotions of millions—emotions which even he did not quite grasp or understand in all of their ramifications (100).

⁷⁰ See Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1981.

⁷¹ Du Bois describes this phenomenon as “double-consciousness.”

Damon's unimaginative, and worse, unhistorical, approach to Marx as a "monument of the past" (Balibar 1) underpins his failure to recognize the present-day import of Marx's revolutionary theory beyond its Communist appropriations. This particular aspect of Damon's misapprehension of Marx is supported on three⁷² other occasions in the novel in which he conflates "Karl Marx" (never once does he refer to "Marx" in its more colloquial form) with the major figures associated with Russian Bolshevism and the bureaucratic regime of the Cominform. It is "Karl Marx" who strips men of their humor⁷³ (see page 242), and transforms them into Bolshevik automatons (see page 437).⁷⁴

The Outsider's distinction between Marx and Marxism—and between reading and (in)citing Marx—is conceptually supported by the paradoxical thesis proposed by Etienne Balibar in *The Philosophy of Marx* (1995). When Balibar declares: "*there is no Marxist philosophy and never will be, and yet Marx [remains] more important for philosophy than ever before*" (Balibar 1, italics original) he troubles the "strict connection" (1) between the philosophical and political system attributed to Marx and the form and content of Marx's work, which gains its critical edge by its very externality to either genre or system of thought. Moreover, the particulars of Balibar's critique of both the scholasticism and bureaucratization of Marxism—which he describes *The Outsider* advances a similar proposal. Without abjuring Marx, Wright offers a twinned critique of philosophy without

⁷² In all three of his subsequent mentions of Marx, Damon focuses on the ways in which it was brought into crisis. Although does not follow that Marx's thought is delimited by these crises,

⁷³ When a joke that he has made to Communist Gil Blount has fallen flat, he blames Blount's lackluster sense of humor on his excessive Marxism.

⁷⁴ "Karl Marx" is also blamed for poisoning the capitalist well by "dangerously esoteric doctrines of communal property" 437.

Marx (Cross Damon), and of orthodox Marxism without philosophy (the Communist Party).

With the Wright reserves the novel's only mention of a Marx unattached to Communist bureaucracy for Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned Black Marxist⁷⁵ who urges her husband, a Caribbean man who has been censured by the Party for organizing outside the specific directives of the Party, to leave the rank and file life and to "read Marx and organize" (258) on his own. Sarah reminds Bob that she will continue to support their family even after the Party has cut off his stipend, but he refuses to break rank, reciting a gunfire of rehearsed logical fallacies, including Lenin's loyalty to Party dogma—"A good Bolshevnik obeys. Lenin obeyed, didn't he? Molotov obeys" (258)—in order to buoy up support for his continued subordination. Sarah, however, refuses to yield and expresses her unedited disgust with her husband's position, characterizing his passive loyalty to the Party as the weak-willed race trading of an Uncle Tom. After she has issued a final insult against his masculinity, asking him if she has married a "Marxist or a mouse," he finally accepts defeat and agrees to continue to organize beyond the scope of Party orders. Bob's refusal earns him the support and admiration of his wife and Damon, but the consequences of standing his ground (and deliberately disobeying the Party's demands that he stop organizing black workers) cost him his life. We learn second hand that the Communist Party has double dealt with the Office of Immigration and informed on

⁷⁵ Although she remains virulently critical of the Party, Sarah Hunter is a Marxist. All of her attacks on her husband have to do with his failure to take up Marx instead of blindly following Party doctrine.

Bob's illegal residency.⁷⁶ As a result, Bob is deported back to Trinidad, a nation also embroiled in Cold War geopolitics,⁷⁷ where his death is immanent.⁷⁸

Through the comparatively minor story of Sarah and Bob Hunter, Wright offers a utopic point of contrast to the novel's surfeit of well-worn ideological positions, including its representation of the Communist Party's plethora of ethico-political sins, the Fascist racism of Langley Herndon, and the intellectual sophistry and socio-political vacuity of Damon and District Attorney Ely Houston. Although Sarah Hunter's political integrity results in tragedy, her non-aligned Marxism is the novel's closest approximation to Wright's own political position. Sarah's didactic speeches to her husband regarding the necessity of an unmediated approach to Marx's thought and the devolution of the Communist Party's commitment to racial equity carry the weight of Wright's own voice. Significantly, what distinguishes Wright from Sarah Hunter is the extent to which the latter has thrown off the yoke of subjugation.

This final point brings us to our concluding question: if Wright's position is clearly beyond Damon's, if his understanding of the revolutionary import of Marx's thought is more closely aligned with the Hunters (and particularly Sarah Hunter), why the overwhelming focus on a subject position he clearly finds reprehensible? The answer to

⁷⁶ On page 294-295, we learn that Hilton, a high-ranking Communist official, habitually informed on non-compliant West Indian members of the Party. Bob was personally warned that the Party would "drop an unsigned note to the Immigration folks" if he "didn't behave" 295.

⁷⁷ Wright was almost certainly referencing both the global and local effects of the "Red Scare" in the Caribbean between 1950-1954. Anti-communism was escalated by fears around the Guatemalan revolutionary government led by Jacobo Árbenz, which led to his ouster via a CIA sponsored *coup d'état*. Additionally, Trinidad's Minister of Labor, Albert Gomes, was a staunch opponent of Communism.

⁷⁸ Midway through the novel, we learn that Bob left Trinidad under threat of imprisonment by the colonial government, who opposed his political activism: "Ten years ago I had to run off from Trinidad to keep the British from putting me in jail for Party activity. If I go back, they'll snatch me off the boat and take me to jail for *ten* years—Ten years of jail in the tropics is death—" 295.

this question is twofold. First, Wright used books to work through ideas, not only those that he found “life-furthering,” but those “harmful to man,” those it was necessary to “fight” and “seek to destroy” (qtd. in Fabre and Kinnamon 164). These ideas were never abstract in the sense that they were separate from lived experience.⁷⁹ In both his literary and non-fictional work, Wright maintained a relentless focus on actually existing forms of political and psychological destruction. In *Native Son*, Wright worked through his tendentious relationship to Communism and a rudimentary form of cultural nationalism (Bigger’s final conversion) linked to Stalin’s Black Belt emendation through a pointed rejection of white paternalism via Bigger’s murder of Mary and his dismissal of his Communist attorney Boris Max.⁸⁰ Although aspects of the novel were misread—particularly its critical objective—the subjects of Wright’s critique were relatively transparent. In *The Outsider*, the social allegory is less accessible, especially to a reader unattuned to Wright’s highly individuated Marxist program. Known adversaries including the Communist Party and proponents of Fascism are present in the novel, but they make up only part of Wright’s critique. Much more significant to Wright is Damon’s failure to understand the contemporaneity of Marx, and specifically the sustained revolutionary potential of Marx outside the appropriation of his thought as an organizational doctrine

⁷⁹ See Wright’s interview “Richard Wright: I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word ‘Politics’” *L’Express* 18 October 1955. “Do you believe in defending ideas in your writing?” Wright adds that the ideas that he grapples with in his writing are never “abstract” insofar as racial oppression is maintained by “ideas in people’s minds against granting a fuller life to people of color” (qtd. in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 163-165).

⁸⁰ Stalin’s “Black Belt theory was part of a sharp “left” turn by the Communist International (Comintern) used by Joseph Stalin to mask his bureaucracy’s attack on the workers’ state. At a speech in December 1927, Stalin declared that the period of capitalist stability that characterized the early 1920s had been superseded by a “Third Period” of revolutionary crisis” See Lee Sustar’s comment in socialistworker.org. June 15, 2012. <http://socialistworker.org/2012/06/15/self-determination-and-the-black-belt>.

for the Communist movement.

Second, *The Outsider* is a novel intent on proving the necessity of its own destruction. Unlike *Native Son*, which left room for the production of a liberal counternarrative in which Bigger transcends his present conditions of poverty and ignorance through educational and economic reform, *The Outsider* eliminates such provisions from consideration. Having abandoned, after *Native Son*, the “conception of the black hero proper,” (qtd. in Fabre and Kinnamon 167), Wright created in Damon an allegorical figure representative of the self-destructive capacity of capitalist logic itself. Damon self-destructs not because he lacks intellectual, social, and economic support, but because he has transformed these material sources of comfort and security into abstract concepts in which he sees no real value. In contrast to Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon not only has had access to education, but has attended a prestigious, private university and has a personal library filled with heady philosophical tomes. Though he makes bad financial decisions that involve gambling and excessive drinking, he has a steady income, a family, a lover, and friends. While some readers of influence have come to identify Damon’s intellectual prowess and cunning with the fascist legacy of Marcus Garvey, a more apt comparison might be the uxoricidal philosopher Louis Althusser, who, like Damon, dealt in a “fatal level of abstraction” due to his misapprehension of Marx.⁸¹

In Damon, Wright fulfills his promise to never again create a consummate figure for bourgeois mourning, yet he stops short of producing precisely the “preachment of

⁸¹ Though in some ways limited by its own polemic, Geraldine Finn’s *Why Althusser Killed His Wife: Essays on Discourse and Violence* (1981), declared an inextricable link between Althusser’s murder of Hélène Rytman and his philosophy. Althusser’s “philosophical and intellectual practice cannot be separated from his personal and emotional practice: they are rooted in the same soil and have the same material, social, historical and ideological conditions of possibility and determinacy.”

hate”⁸² he so vigorously denied in his defense of the ethical import of *Native Son*.

Damon’s actions reflect Marxism’s degeneration into a lethargic political philosophy animated by ideologists so cut off from grass-roots activism that it ceased to be humanist in any meaningful sense of the term, but the novel ends on a redemptive note. Damon’s final words are not those of a criminal giving confession, but of a broken man indicting the desiccated intellectual culture of which he is a part:

“The search can’t be done alone,” he let his voice issue from a dry throat in which he felt death lurking. “Never alone... Alone a man is nothing... Man is a promise that he must never break. (585)

⁸² See Wright’s “I Bite the Hand that Feeds Me” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. (1940). “Mr. Cohn says that the burden of my book was a preachment of hate against the white races. It was not. No *advocacy* of hate is in that book. None! I wrote as objectively as I could of a Negro boy who hated and feared whites, hated them because he feared them. What Mr. Cohn mistook for my advocacy of hate in that novel was something entirely different. In every word of that book are *confidence, resolution*, and the *knowledge* that the Negro problem can and will be solved beyond the frame of reference of thought such as that found in Mr. Cohn’s article.”

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Chapter Three

The Protocols of Race in the Black Arts Matrix: Rosa Guy's Surrealist Marxism in *Bird at*

My Window

New knowledge arises out of taking radically different conceptual blocks, rubbing them together, and making revolutionary fire.

–David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (2010)

What's at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic.

–Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness” (2008)

But a hell of a lot of them just looked at your records, read the notes some simple ass [...] took down, and diagnosed you, pulling you apart according to their particular formula.

–Rosa Guy, *Bird at My Window* (1966)

I. Critical Reckonings

In the final month of his twenty-year tenure as lead book review critic for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, novelist, critic, and journalist J. Saunders Redding selected three texts for review, two books on African independence, (*Africa's Search For Identity* by Victor Ferkiss and *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* by Ghana's Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah), and a first novel, *Bird at My Window* (1966), written by Trinidadian-American author Rosa Guy (1922-2012) (Redding, “She Plays” A2). Redding's advancement of both histories as ideal Ur-texts of contemporary African politics was

tempered by his brutal assessment of Guy's debut novel. In a review ominously titled "She Plays God," Redding criticized *Bird at My Window* on cultural, political, and aesthetic grounds, blasting Guy's uneven prose style and ethically suspect dramatization of intra-racial violence and urban tragedy in the context of the black family.

Redding's many concerns with the novel's narrative instability circulated around Guy's treatment of Wade Williams, *Bird at My Window*'s murderous protagonist. Redding rejected Williams' multitudinous personality as a confused character study, and attributed Guy's incontinent drawing of an uneducated-yet-somehow-brilliant World War II veteran who suffers from alcoholism, latent incestuous and homosexual tendencies, and a deadly case of misanthropy to her generic suspension between the "inept social realists publishing in the wake of *Native Son*" and "black modernists preoccupied with stylistic difficulty."¹ Adding insult to injury, Redding mobilized his critique of the novel's formal shortcomings through a sequence of patronizing domestic metaphors. By "working without a proper recipe," bemoans Redding, "Guy has spoiled the otherwise good ingredients of love, hate, murder, and irony." Redding's portraiture of Guy as a naïve apprentice "victimized" by unfit literary masters concludes with an odd appeal to Guy herself: move beyond her current aesthetic and intellectual investments and unify her craft.

Beneath Redding's glib dismissal of Guy's inexperience was a visceral censure of a fully realized project. Guy was not, as Redding pompously communicated to his vast

¹ While Redding heralded *Native Son* as "the novel that did more to win Negro writers genuine respect than anything else yet done" he loathed the second generation of writers of the so-called "Wright school" including Chester Himes, William Attaway, and early Ann Petry (Jackson, "Irredeemable Promise" 718).

readership,² a student “victimized” by the intellectual sophistry of her “teachers,” but an experienced worker-writer in command of her craft. Before the publication of *Bird at My Window*, Guy, who was then forty-four years old, had been active in the creative arts for twenty-four years. Guy’s entry into the “Black Arts Matrix,” James Smethurst’s valuable term for the various forms of art-based activity on the Black revolutionary and Communist Lefts in the mid-twentieth century, began in 1942, when she enrolled in Frederick O’Neill’s Studio Theater Training Program in the Communist-sponsored American Negro Theatre (23). Although she did not graduate—a brief move to Connecticut in 1945 impelled by her husband’s drug and alcohol addiction disrupted her study—Guy performed alongside future black dramatic giants Harry Belafonte, Alice Childress, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier and went on to write and act in an off-Broadway play, *Venetian Blinds*, performed at the Tropical Theater in 1954.³

When the American Negro Theatre folded in 1949, Guy had already “decided to switch full time to writing,” and entered the Jefferson School of Social Research, a Marxist adult-education institute in New York also supported by the Communist Party (Angelou and Guy 8). At the same time, she joined the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (a successor organization to the American Negro Theater), and a Harlem writing group led by radical novelist, journalist, and activist Phillip Bonosky, one of Guy’s teachers in the Jefferson School. Guy impressed Bonosky, who described her in his

² Redding’s celebrity as a book critic is indisputable. Jackson cites Redding as the “most widely read black literary critic in the U.S.” (Jackson, “Irredeemable Promise” 726).

³ In an interview with Jerrie Norris, Guy explains that she wrote the play in response to “the racist black lash” against the ANT in which black actors were no longer being considered for “the many diverse roles available in any production” (Norris 11). Although the play was successful, Guy had little artistic investment in it, characterizing *Venetian Blinds* as “a one-shot deal,” a “political response,” and “after this play I started writing short stories” (Norris 11).

journal as the group's "most militant" member, one whose "deep understanding of Marx" enabled her to "sail above" contentious battles among internationalists and nationalists. In 1951, Guy, along with the novelist John Oliver Killens and the Africanist historian John Henrik Clarke, went on to form the Harlem Writers Guild, an all-black writing workshop created to support black writers excluded from the mainstream literary culture of New York City. Crucial to the "second renaissance of African American literature," and "African American women's literature in particular," the Guild facilitated the work of such literary and cultural luminaries as Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Childress, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Julian Mayfield, Louise Meriwether, Sarah Wright, and Douglas Turner Ward (Higashida 53).

As a committed internationalist, Guy's literary and cultural work extended beyond New York. Before the publication of *Bird at My Window*, Guy's internationalist commitments ranged from translational work (for the Congolese legation in the United Nations), to organized protest (Guy was an active member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage [CAWAH], which played a leading role in the 1961 demonstration at the United Nations to protest the CIA sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected president of Congo), to speeches and essays through which she announced her unequivocal support of revolutionary women in the Soviet Union and North Vietnam.⁴ In addition to her political work, Guy's early literary efforts include a six-hundred page draft of a historical novel titled "Benidine," a razor sharp critique of the effects of colonialism on African cultures in Trinidad, written during an extended stay in Haiti in

⁴ Guy, "The Black Writer as Literary Force" and "Sheroes and Heroes."

1962, and two short stories, “Magnify,” and “Carnival,” published in the Trinidadian newspaper *The Nation*, then edited by C.L.R. James, during her visit in 1965.⁵

Given the extent of Guy’s cultural profile, there can be little doubt that Redding’s presentation of Guy as a naïve upstart was done in bad faith. By April 1966, Redding had reviewed a number of publications by writers associated with the Harlem Writers Guild,⁶ participated in several conferences populated by Guild members (notably the American Society of African Culture in 1959; the American Society of African Culture in New York City’s Henry Hudson Hotel in 1959), and was slated to give a keynote lecture on “The Image Negro in American Literature” at the First Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1966, during which he would intensify his disappointment in *Bird at My Window* by identifying it, along with John A. Williams’ *Night Song* (1961), Chester Himes’ *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), and James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962), as an exemplar of the postwar desiccation of black writing (Gilyard, *Liberation Memories* 120). Beyond institutional overlaps, Redding was also a longtime friend and associate of John Oliver Killens, Guy’s comrade and co-founder of the Harlem Writers Guild.⁷

⁵ While other sources have reported that there are no surviving copies of these stories, my research shows that copies of *The Nation* do exist, in microfilm form, at the British Library. Still, acquiring these copies is no easy task. The British Library closed its microfilm unit in 2010 and entered into a partnership with DC Thomson Family History Ltd., which now has control over microfilm of *The Nation*. Direct queries to DC Thomson Family History have been met with silence, and the British Library has confirmed that DC Thomson Family History has no plans to digitize *The Nation*.

⁶ A partial list includes Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *Soul Clap Hand and Sing* (1961), John Oliver Killens’ *Youngblood* (1954) and *Black Mans Burden* (1966), Julian Mayfield’s *The Hit* (1957) and *The Grand Parade* (1961), and a special issue of *Freedomways* on W.E.B. Du Bois edited by John Henrik Clarke (1965).

⁷ Redding and Killens published together at the *Negro Digest* and *Crisis* throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

While Redding's studied ignorance is negated by historical fact, his punishing characterization of Guy and politically specious formal objections to *Bird at My Window* cannot be waved off as the conservative musings of a man anachronistically bound to masculinist narratives of triumph and a new critical propensity for formal unity.⁸ Under a different aesthetic and political rubric, members from Guy's innermost political and literary circle, the Harlem Writers Guild, echoed Redding's objections to the novel's syncretic form and ideological trappings.⁹ In particular, John Oliver Killens and Maya Angelou, two of Guy's closest friends and comrades, were so baffled by the novel that they exchanged letters on the subject. Addressing both his own and Angelou's misgivings, evidently expressed in an earlier, unpreserved letter, Killens' writes:

Yes, the novel is misguided and full of misdirection. It lacks vision and conviction, and pursues a grisly and wrongheaded programe [*sic*]. I cannot account for it! It must be, as you say, an effect of trauma. But it is no less ghastly for it! What happened? (Killens, "Letter to Maya Angelou")

Neither Killens nor Angelou identify this "programe" by name. Yet additional context, explored in more detail later on in this chapter, suggests that it was the novel's relationship to Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 incendiary report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (hereafter, Moynihan Report), and

⁸ Lawrence Jackson summarizes Redding's attachment to normatively heroic figures, and his rigid criteria for Negro Art in "Irredeemable Promise: J. Saunders Redding and Negro New Liberalism." "Redding seldom missed an opportunity to outline his criteria for good writing," Jackson writes, going so far as to provide his readers with a list of requirements. According to Redding, good writing must: 1) "Be about people, events, and things that are significant," 2) "Be aware of its own style and language," 3) "Be honest and true to itself," and 4) Be aware that truth is greater than fact" (Redding, "Saunders Redding Returns" A3).

⁹ Although a likely a motivated and overblown attack, Harold Cruse's description of Killens' imposed aesthetic regulations on Harlem Writers Guild members and his suggestion of internal strife, are germane to the present discussion (509-510).

generic move away from naturalism and toward surrealism (an aesthetic form that Killens believed served the cause of black liberation as a “hole in the head”), that bred suspicion and hard criticism (qtd. in Gilyard, *Liberation Memories* 10).

Although it was considered commonplace for mid-century black activists to embrace “multiple political crosscurrents,” i.e., ideologies as seemingly contradictory as Garveyite nationalism and Communist internationalism—two critical positions with which Guy was, to varying degrees, engaged—critical expectations for black radical literary output within radical sects remained surprisingly rigid (qtd. in Smethurst 8). Such insularity explains how Killens, who had originally encouraged Guy to “suspend the expectation of a female novelist” and “write as though she were God”—an utterance suspiciously similar to the title of Redding’s review (“She Plays God”)—could feel such shock at *Bird at My Window’s* political and aesthetic aberrations (Angelou and Guy 8). Trained in the intellectual and political traditions of the Old Left, Guy, who had been a militant activist from the age of fourteen, was groomed to reflect the revolutionary disposition of postwar black writing, defined by Killens in a special issue of *Negro Digest* subtitled “The Meaning and Measure of Black Power,” as writing that was “guided by an impulse to unite-and-fight oppression,” while providing an “accurate historical representation” of black life (Killens, “Meaning and Measure” 31). While Guy’s narrative does reflect the actually existing material conditions of the black working poor in post-WWII Harlem—a kitchenette apartment for a family of five, government officials withholding relief checks, racist and inadequate medical treatment for black veterans, chronic underemployment—structural inequity and racist biopolitics are eclipsed, at least in dramatic scope, by the novel’s psychological ambiance. Shaped by the intra-racial,

generational conflict between a mother (Evelyn, but more frequently and hereafter referred to as Mumma) and her youngest son (Wade), the majority of the psychic conflict in the novel is rooted in the non-normative educational and sexual ambitions of the latter, ambitions that, according to Mumma, threaten the integrity of the black family. Though Killens did not oppose psychological depth in narrative—his 1962 novel, *And Then We Heard Thunder*, “offered a psychological profile of a black rebel”—he openly contested the production of “distorted images” of African American masculinity (qtd. in Gilyard, *John Oliver Killens* 235). Like *Bird at My Window*’s Mumma, Killens was a racial purist who publicly opposed deviations from black heterosexual expression, whether in the form of interracial sex (he characterized the interracial romance in Alice Childress’s 1962 play *The Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* as a “political betrayal”) (qtd. in Washington 148-149) or homosexual encounters (Killens agreed with friend and Harlem Writer’s Guild associate Julian Mayfield that black writers who neglected “the great questions facing the people of the world” in favor of minor annoyances such as “dope addiction, homosexuality, incest, and divorce,” were on the wrong political track) (qtd. in Schmidt 140-141).

Criticism of Guy’s representation of black family dysfunction was exacerbated by *Bird at My Window*’s historical and ideological overproximity to the Moynihan Report (1965).¹⁰ As Cheryl Higashida argues in her essay “Rosa Guy, Haiti, and the Hemispheric

¹⁰ The report’s criticism of black women did not go unheard. In response to Moynihan’s definition of black women as “emasculating matriarchs” responsible for the delinquency of young, black men, and the apathy of grown black men, black feminists Sarah Wright, Paule Marshall, Alice Childress, and singer Abbey Lincoln assembled a panel titled “The Negro Women in American Literature” for *The Negro Writer’s Vision of America* conference, a three-

Woman” (136), Guy’s near “scapegoating of the Black matriarch” for Wade’s problems closely mirrored Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” thesis, which linked the “matriarchal structure” of the Negro community” to the “retard[ation] of the progress of the race as a whole”:

The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (Office of Policy Planning and Research)

Although no one openly accused Guy of reinforcing Moynihan’s polemic—Guy was in Trinidad at work on the novel when the report was released, and missed out on the avalanche of protest that followed—Maya Angelou, writing on the novel twenty years later, lamented the novel’s “racial pessimism,” and “disloyalty to the sisterhood.” Angelou was particularly disconcerted with Guy’s “use” of Wade’s “mama” [*sic*] as a “foil” (Angelou, “Conversation”). Though Angelou’s formal critique is limited to these surface impressions, her shifted emphasis on Guy’s “growth” as a novelist who learned, over time, not to “abandon the negative,” but to convert it into a form of “positivity and love” by “accentuating” the beauty and resilience of black women, eliminates any ambiguity related to Angelou’s impressions of Guy’s libidinal investment in one of Harlem’s native sons.

II.

day affair held at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Guy was not included in the panel.

I open by reproducing these harsh assessments of *Bird at My Window* because such exacting critique provides the precise historical, political, and methodological coordinates responsible for decades of critical misprision and neglect.¹¹ Like her self-described “literary forbearer” Richard Wright, whose postwar aesthetic—a hybrid style that combined phenomenological description with Marxist theoretical inquiry—was abjured by African American writers on the Communist Left, Guy favored a syncretic narrative style that was likewise rejected by those in her cultural and political corner (Angelou and Guy 8). As demonstrated by the overlapping formal and historical judgments of *Bird at My Window* by cultural figures as politically and literarily disparate as Redding, Killens, and Angelou, Guy’s novel was evaluated, above all other distinguishing features and autobiographical context, according to a shared aesthetic expectation for black writing, namely, that it advance—both in its content and its form—a representational model of cultural and historical verisimilitude that preserved historical accuracy and maintained black cultural integrity.¹² Far from reflecting the aesthetic quality or political value of Guy’s work, then, such criticism reveals the theoretical and methodological limitations of representational politics, including the radical and

¹¹ I emphasize negative reviews of the novel, but there are few positive reviews, only one of which (Keith E. Baird’s review in *Freedomways*) says anything substantive: Baird writes, “This is a timely book, the first in recent years and perhaps the only to date in Afro-American literature to treat with such stark power and intelligent sympathy, the shattering of hopes, the frustration of effort and the systematic, destructive demoralization of Afro-American manhood in the Harlems of America” (qtd. in Adell xv). Baird’s review, along with a handful of others (the novel was not widely reviewed), are excerpted in Sandra Adell’s Foreword to the novel’s 2001 reissue by Coffee House Press. Significantly, Adell cites, likely at the urging of Guy, with whom she collaborated, the most complimentary passages. I’ve read each of the cited reviews in full, and only two could be identified as positive.

¹² Killens and Redding in particular advanced such restrictions on the literary in the context of black writing both in speech and print. All three writers on various occasions elaborated on such expectations as a point of cultural pride. For specifics, see Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, and Gilyard, *John Oliver Killens*.

emancipatory political positions associated with feminist identity politics, institutionalized Marxism, and black nationalism, in the arena of literary fiction. Although each of these positions assumes a critical stance against the status quo, the standpoint of any representational political critique proceeds along a positivist axis of inquiry and embraces a reflectionist paradigm of interpretation.¹³ In the context of *Bird at My Window*, such presuppositions led Killens, Redding, and Angelou to interpret the novel's political negativity and uneven mode of storytelling as symptoms of some larger political and formal deficiency.

In this chapter, I will challenge these presumptions of political and aesthetic failure by rereading the novel through a more nuanced critical optic, one that registers the political value of *Bird at My Window's* narrative transgressions. Rather than understand the novel's structural syncopation as a defect to be overcome or overlooked, I will reestablish *Bird at My Window's* aesthetic as an intentionally antinomic merger of naturalist and surrealist narration.¹⁴ My emphasis here on authorial intention is drawn from Guy's own explanation of the novel as a composite of "competing forces," resulting from a fissure in Guy's original conception of the project, "a naturalist protest narrative of black

¹³ A reflectionist view of literature assumes a one-to-one correspondence between literary structures and social and political structures.

¹⁴ Beyond John Oliver Killens' lambast against surrealist writing in the context of black writing, the agonistic relationship between surrealism and social realism in the context of black literary production is described in Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Kelley distinguishes between the aesthetic programs of Marxism and Surrealism: "Surrealism is night to Marxism's day: It breaks the chains of social realism and rationality, turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice. In many ways surrealism has real affinities with aspects of Afrodiasporic vernacular culture, including an embrace of magic, spirituality, and the ecstatic—elements Marxism has never been able to deal with effectively" (192). My own position on the relationship between Marxism and Surrealism is much less divisive, and closer to Michael Lowy's emphasis on their aesthetic and political intersections, as articulated in Lowy's *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia*.

participation in racist, imperialist wars,” produced and circulated in the context of the Harlem Writers Guild in 1961, and her revision, a “deeply personal” response to three “state-sponsored murders” of Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X, and her first husband, Warner Guy, written in seclusion in Trinidad in 1965 (Guy, “Notes”). Guy describes the production of this second draft in surrealistic terms, as “an automatic and involuntary” process in process in which she “transferred impressed images” onto on a “borrowed canvas.”¹⁵ While Guy’s explanation of the novel’s gestation empirically grounds *Bird at My Window* in oppositional aesthetic forms, naturalism and surrealism, the implication of this formal merger far exceeds her one-dimensional account of historical distance.¹⁶ More than a temporal mash up of conscious labor and automatic writing, *Bird at My Window* interweaves naturalism—evidenced by the novel’s narrative focus on heredity and environment—and surrealism—demonstrated by its production of non-veristic images, to produce a complex metacritique of the critical, political, and aesthetic limits of black radical subjectivity in Guy’s contemporary conjuncture. By dialectically stripping away the positivistic remainders associated with social (or critical) realism’s injunction to

¹⁵ Here Guy conflates two incongruous surrealist modes—automatic writing and the surrealist painting technique of decalcomania.

¹⁶ Guy’s explanation provokes more questions than it does provide answers. What, precisely, is “deeply personal” about *Bird at My Window*, a novel that reflects little of Guy’s life, but instead reveals Guy’s libidinal investment in a troubled subject, the brilliant, but clinically depressed murderer Wade Williams? What is the precise relation between Williams and Guy’s specified historical coordinates: Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, and Warner Guy? To these questions I can provide few answers. Guy was by all accounts an intensely private writer. She wrote in solitude, destroyed drafts and notes for all of her published novels, and talked little about her unpublished work. Equally reticent to discuss her personal life, Guy refused in all interviews to discuss details related to her first husband’s murder, although she cites his death as an impetus for *Bird at My Window* and identifies its cause as “state-sponsored.” My research indicates that he was murdered in the Bronx in 1964, but there are no remaining records of the murder. To make matters more complex, “Guy” was an invented name. Warner’s official surname (on his father’s side) was Morgan. His mother’s maiden name was Misech (or, alternatively) Missick.

dramatically maximize the heroism of the authentic black subject—defined by Killens as a “rebel with a cause”—*Bird at My Window* neither erodes Marxist categories of analysis, nor uses surrealist imagery to privilege “unreality” or the “absurd” over political reality. Rather, *Bird at My Window* heralds a more open “awareness of reality,” including aspects [...]of the real that are ordinarily overlooked, dismissed excluded, hidden, shunned, suppressed, ignored” by expanding both the narrative and political domain of the black freedom struggle into the realm of desire (Kelley 3).

III.

Bird at My Window opens with a dazzling display of this new itinerary. Culminating in the production of a dialectical image on which the narrative’s political meaning (and value) pivots, the novel begins as a sophisticated shell game in which the uninitiated reader is confronted with a sequence of formally incommensurate introductions to *Bird at My Window*’s protean protagonist, Wade Williams. Beginning in medias res via a surrealist fragment, Wade is first introduced not as a clinically depressed murderer, but a mythic figure, a modern Prometheus engaged in cosmic battle:

He snatched the sun in his arms, squeezing it and squeezing it until it fell into tiny sputtering pieces, and he knew his job was done, even though he still felt the burning rays fanning his face and neck and rushing in little heat waves about his arms and around his shoulders. Yet they held him, wanting him to smash another sun, another world, but he was finished! Finished. Breaking the bonds that held him, he tested his freedom by dashing up the lonely dark street. Then they were upon him, dragging him

backward, forcing his arms closed, making him reach for the sun again.

(Guy, *Bird* 1)

While the surreal interplay between image, subject, and action—specifically, Wade’s compulsion to both possess and destroy the sun, at once an effect of some inner mania and the consequence of an external force (the “they,” who at once impel and hold back)—functions as a prismatic microcosm of Williams’ ruptured psyche, the destabilizing ambiguity of Guy’s hypnogogic vision is immediately reversed by the entropic language of the succeeding paragraph. Through a famous naturalist metaphor that temporarily realigns the novel with the urban realism (and naturalist determinism) of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*—incidentally, Guy’s favorite novel—we are reintroduced to Wade as a “man caught tighter than a sewer rat in a mouse trap” (1). It is through this this harsh juxtaposition of surrealist symbology and naturalist metaphor—a formal interaction sustained throughout novel’s protracted opening scene—that we learn the conditions of Wade’s confinement: neither rat nor demigod, Wade is a drugged, straitjacketed patient in the psychiatric ward of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.¹⁷

Guy’s methodological operation—her introduction of Wade as a figure legible only through the dialectical mediation of parallel aesthetic forms—is refined in the next sequence, in which we are disabused of any expectation for future synthetic resolution. In this scene-within-a-scene, organized around a crucial piece of repressed knowledge (what, specifically, led to Wade’s arrest), we are granted our only glimpse into the “real”

¹⁷ In “Maya Angelou Talking with Rosa Guy,” Guy writes on the annexation of Harlem by Columbia University, “Harlem hospital has already been taken over by Columbia Presbyterian and the impression is that Morningside Park—scene of the violent confrontation between Columbia University and the Harlem citizens a few years ago, will quietly be taken over when the State Building is up and enough whites move in to shift the balance of power in the area” (Angelou and Guy 17).

Wade Williams. Williams is a brilliant man whose life has been obstructed not primarily by race and class inequity (he demonstrates, here and throughout the novel, a preternatural understanding of these aspects of structural oppression—indeed, he is, like Richard Wright’s *Cross Damon*, the organic intellectual gone awry), nor even by the war (he confesses that France provided him with a much needed reprieve from an oppressive domestic life), Williams is disturbed by severe sexual repression. Guy establishes this contradiction between Wade’s natural aptitude for radical social critique and his violent refusal to “read the signs” of his own sexual nature by representing Wade as a Marxist savant un-phased by his confinement. Wade, who lay “stiff as a turkey in the straitjacket,” and “unable to relax a muscle,” nevertheless offers the following deft appraisal of his conditions:

He knew the score. Things were bad. Overcrowded, understaffed hospitals, doctors on rush schedules. Negroes and Puerto Ricans had it made if they were even a little smart. As it was, they were overrunning both the city hospital wards and Mattawan, and probably all of the other insane asylums in the country. Yes, if it was routine, he had it made. (Guy, *Bird 2*)

The sophistication of Wade’s insight does not reside in the acuity of his awareness of how institutional racism in the mental health industry works, but rather in his understanding of how, specifically, he can harness this specific form of racial resentment to work *for* him. Unfettered by any illusion that he exists as anything more than a reified subject to the white doctor in possession of his immediate fate, Wade prepares for the

meeting by reminding himself of the cardinal rule of “being black and getting by”:
“understandability, but not intelligence”:

A colored man was not supposed to be intelligent. That was a sure sign of insanity, especially coming from the part of the City where he lived. Understandability, but not intelligence. He held his lips firm against a chuckle. (2)

Wade’s embrace of this macabre charade is momentarily stalled by his realization that he is not in possession of the details of his arrest. Unable to reconstruct the events from the night before beyond two known quantities, violence and alcohol, and aware that a convincing performance requires that he “have all the information,” Wade decides to extract information from one of the “punk nurses” he had previously written off as a group that “didn’t fit into his class of thinking” (2). Significantly, Wade chooses to engage a male nurse with a “black, broad face” and a “tilt to his hips” (4). Successfully convincing the nurse to untether him from the bed, loosen his straitjacket, and supply him with cigarettes, Wade, who believes that he has found his mark, baits the man with a plausible scenario, a bar fight: “You’d never know what will happen from one minute to the next. There I was gassing around with some cats, and the next thing I know, here I am. I must have taken off on one of them, huh?” (4). Although the lure works and the nurse corrects Wade’s story in concrete detail, the truth—that Wade has not “taken off on” a random bar patron but beaten his sister, Faith, within an inch of her life—causes Wade to unravel (4). Feigning bravado for a few additional quips to temporarily lessen his immense guilt, Wade eventually loses it and issues a disturbing (and contextually incongruent) sexual threat to the nurse: “Listen fool, if I was to stick you in your ass,

you'd squeal like a happy pig. You disgust me" (5). By immediately linking Wade's rage to an atavistic form of black cultural prejudice—homophobia—Guy identifies sexuality as the theoretical and historical remainder of the event (Wade's abuse of Faith) around which the rest of the novel is constructed and on which its interpretation and political value will depend.¹⁸ At once a red herring and a moment of exposure, Wade's violent, sexualized response to news that he has hurt Faith—the only member of his family who loves him unconditionally—establishes the novel's hermeneutic code.

Extending this compressed moment of countercahexis into a full blown analysis in miniature, Guy literally fleshes out the significance of Wade's repressed sexuality to the pending narrative through a surrealist tableau organized around two major figures in Wade's life: Rocky (his childhood friend and lifelong object of desire) and Gladys (his current girlfriend). Augured by language that confirms that "something queer" is indeed "happening around him," the montage begins pleasurably, with the conjured image of Wade's childhood friend and self-described "soul mate" Rocky:

The sound of a voice made Wade sit up. He didn't believe it. Yet there was about the room an eeriness that said anything might happen, and he allowed a surge of happiness to fill the giant cavities of his loneliness.

"Rocky? Rocky, that's not you?"

"Yes it is Rocky, Wade." It was the same voice. Not quite so youthful but the same modulation. The same preciseness. "It is I." The room was suddenly encased in a soft glow, but the figure at the bed remained in

¹⁸ Crucially, Guy's emphasis on sexuality does not dismantle the tripartite foundation of her intersectional critique, but rather isolates a missing component in the traditionally masculinist cast of historical materialism, for which sexuality is, at best, an ancillary concern.

shadow. “Come.” Wade probed the body of the man with his hands, then finally pulled him down beside him on the bed. “Lie next to me.” But as Rocky stretched gently down on the bed, Wade grew suddenly shy. The heaviness of his tongue made him fumble for words. “Yes, it is you, isn’t it?” He kept feeling the body with his hands, testing the slimness, the clean, long graceful lines. “Yes, it is you.” This is how I figured you to be.” (10)

The unambiguously sexualized framework of this surreal encounter gives way to a higher form of intimacy—love—as Wade openly admits that his life “never got off the ground” after he and Rocky were forced apart: “I’ve done nothing but remember the times that we had together. I never got off the ground. Seems like when you left, the soul was gone. I would not be what I am if you had not gone away. I would be different, believe me” (10). Here we are not granted full access to this narrative of forced separation until much later in the novel, where we learn through a particularly brutalizing flashback that Wade’s mother, who represents a corrupt form of black nationalist insularity, has ended the friendship and restricted Wade’s future by refusing to allow Wade to accompany Rocky to a private school in Boston. Still, the abridged conversation represents more than a nostalgic look at a road not taken. Through Wade’s confession, which he identifies as “a secret that he’d never known he wanted to share,” Guy offers the reader a glimpse at a utopic, or speculative reality. In this fantasy, Wade could love another man without fearing that his sexuality will be responsible for “the death of the race.” Likewise, his sophisticated understanding of the class implications of racism would not constitute racial and domestic betrayal (11).

The unadulterated beauty of such speculation is disrupted when Rocky returns Wade to the present moment by mentioning Wade's current girlfriend, Gladys, who appears in spectral form at the invocation. In contrast to Rocky's idealized figure (his "slimness" is a reflection of the overall symmetry of his body), "Gladys the Beast," as Wade refers to her, reflects the grotesque materiality of Wade's life. Not only is she "exquisitely ugly," with her "beady eyes," "hair thinned to the point of baldness," and teeth replaced by an "ugly gold plate," but more to the point, she is an embodied reminder of his destitution (12, 32). Wade makes this identification internally, and then confesses the association to Rocky: "Gladys is my loneliness. "I look at her and see how empty my life is. If I could destroy her, I could save myself" (12). This utterance, at once a lamentation of the loss of Rocky and an admission of his present abjection, casts a permanent shadow over the hallucination's utopic dimension, as the room is taken up—and Rocky taken in, that is, subsumed—by an ever-expanding Gladys, whose head, likened to an "inflated balloon," hovers over Wade's bed. Although it is difficult to approximate the monstrous amalgam in language—the surreal description is dispersed unevenly over several paragraphs—the image possesses an auratic quality that recalls Joan Miró's 1928 painting the "The Potato," (see Figure 1), a haunting image of a misshapen woman with a balloon-shaped head, with an outstretched hand threatening to expand:



Fig. 3.1 Joan Miró, “The Potato” (1928).

This transformation is one from historical sediment—represented by the progressive temporal sedimentation of discrete figures from different stages in Wade’s life—into a single dialectical image. The appearance of this new image no longer strictly reflects either referent but rather exists as a new, expressive form that contains both the utopic force and its agent of destruction, and demonstrates the novel’s methodological innovation. Potentially overlooked as gratuitous (and possibly gynophobic) phantasmagoria that formally and politically disrupts the production of a proper race or class-based critique, this image is the textual feature on which the novel’s critique pivots: it is the novel’s dialectic at a standstill. Following Frankfurt school theorist Walter Benjamin, who developed the paradoxical concept of the “dialectical image” to critique available modes of Marxist historical interpretation, including the Hegelian “devolution of historical analysis into a fantasy of synthesis,” or the orthodox Marxist inversion of Hegel, which, “in its preservation of Hegel’s insistence on the logical structure of

development [...] generates the significance of historical appearances without any real engagement with those appearances themselves,” Guy produces an image designed to encompass an aspect of black revolutionary subjectivity—homosexual desire—still very much on the fringes of Left analysis/critical and literary inquiry (Pensky 180). Rather than simply insert a black, gay revolutionary subject into this moment of black internationalism, Guy deploys an avant-garde aesthetic technique: the surrealist montage. Through the montage, Guy issues an intersectional political critique that thinks through the implications—political and cultural—of Wade’s historical positioning as other, not as a figure closeted for the benefit of whites, but as one sacrificed on the alter of intra-racial cultural expectations.

Guy’s sophisticated metacritique of the constraints placed on representations of desire and sexuality in the context of revolutionary black writing may not be enough to constitute a queering of Marxism. Indeed, as the story is given over to a succession of violent catastrophes on the order of Greek drama—twice attempted matricide, accidental sorricide, two revenge murders, and the preternaturally slow death of a father injured by a year-old gunshot wound, we lose track of this surreal moment. Yet her use of a “graphic image to counteract modes of perception and cognition that have become second nature,” prepared her for a lifetime of critical, literary engagement with sexuality in young adult fiction (Pensky 179). Working in this new genre, Guy was free to explore homosexuality within black urban communities, this time in the context of young women, with significantly less critical regulation and much greater fanfare.¹⁹ Although is

¹⁹ Guy’s debut young adult novel, titled *Ruby* (1976) is cited in the *Encyclopedia of Lesbian Histories and Cultures* as “the first YA novel with lesbian content and the first gay and lesbian

impossible to say with any precision the degree to which internal criticism of *Bird at My Window* influenced Guy's move away from literary fiction—black Left writer Kristen Hunter, who also shifted from literary to young adult fiction around the same time, did so at the urging of her agent for financial reasons—Guy would never write another novel that so thoroughly challenged the heteropatriarchal foundations of black revolutionary aesthetics.

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Chapter Four

Sarah Wright's Unsung Marxism:

This Child's Gonna Live and the Aesthetic Dimension of the Cuban Revolution

When our revolution is judged by future generations, one of the issues they will consider is the way in which we managed to solve the problems affecting women, both nationally and socially, although this is one of the revolutionary challenges that will require the most tenacity, willpower, constancy, and effort.

—Fidel Castro¹

It was then, that I, then working strictly in verse, took the leap into the novel form and began working on *This Child's Gonna Live*.

—Sarah Wright, in response to the Cuban Revolution²

Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment.

—Karl Marx³

I. Scenario

In the summer of 1960, a group of African American writers and critics traveled to Cuba, where they were granted full access to the fledgling nation and its leadership (Young 18-19). Neither the first nor the most famous African-American cultural figures to visit the island in the wake of the Revolution—Joe Louis, peerless in his celebrity standing, took both titles—the group would nevertheless have an immense influence on the shifting

¹ Castro, “Speech Concluding the 2nd Congress of Cuban Women's Federation.”

² Wright, “The Lower East Side.”

³ Marx, Letter of 12 December 1868.

strategies of the African-American literary and cultural Left in the 1960s and 1970s. Having “witnessed a new revolutionary experiment,” in Cuba, the July sojourners (to be discussed individually and collectively below) returned to the U.S. with “new ideas about African-American culture, community, and the likely prospects for black revolution” (Young 19). Understanding anew the “relationship between culture and politics, the First and Third Worlds, armed struggle and revolution,” the sojourners would become leading figures in the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, inspiring also the emergence of the U.S. Third World Left (Young 19).

Though hardly a neglected event, the narrative around the July Sojourn remains constrained, consigned to a discourse inimical to Marxism and feminism, even in their non-aligned forms. Measured solely by those representations that dramatize the expedition within the framework of cultural black nationalism, the scope of its influence has been overdetermined by the narrative and political musings of the delegation’s anti-Marxist minority: Robert F. Williams, Harold Cruse, and above all, LeRoi Jones, whose 1960 essay “Cuba Libre” has since become the event’s master text. While Jones, an African American eccentric active in the anti-colonial and black nationalist movements is far from the prototypical figure associated with cultural privilege, his narrative account of the July sojourn, so thoroughly ingested by the ascending New Left intelligentsia, has resulted in the suppression of the trip’s female constituency, led by Marxist poet, novelist, and activist Sarah Wright.

The extent of this neglect is disconcerting. In contrast to the ubiquitous “Cuba Libre,” only a handful of studies in which the trip is referenced include Wright on the delegation’s roster, and none, including the recent influx of excellent studies on the

postwar black feminist Left, mention her major work, *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969), as an outgrowth of the trip.⁴ In this chapter, I explore the two-tiered cause for this double-omission. In the first section, I revisit the event at the source of Wright's invisibility. Guided by information retrieved in Wright's uncollected papers, including correspondence between Wright and major Cuban officials, I reconstruct the events leading up to the July sojourn. By placing Wright at its center, this narrative reveals the extent to which vital historical content has been buried in the "functional coherences" resulting from the strange alliance between black nationalism and the State Department (Foucault, *Society* 7).⁵

Following this act of historical recuperation, I address the political implications involved in the uncritical elevation of "Cuba Libre" to master text. Following U.S. historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, I maintain that politics in the service of the State determines what is remembered and what is forgotten, shaping dominant forms of historical reportage and subsequent forms of interpretation (Hall). In the context of the July sojourn, the polarized historical fates of Jones (fêted even in his notoriety) and Wright (nearly forgotten) serve as metonymic reminders of the pervasiveness of such politics, which persist even in the study of radical movements. Although Jones and Wright are, from many angles, on the same side of the Revolution, Jones' very public hostility to Wright's Marxism (and the Marxism of her associates, also grounded in the Old Left) expressed in "Cuba Libre" positions him closer to the state sponsored anti-Communism that annexed so many peripheral Leftists and radicals during the Cold War.

⁴ See Gore, Higashida, McDuffie, and McDonald.

⁵ "Functional coherences" is a term from Foucault's lecture "Society Must Be Defended" (1975) used to describe the systematic suppression, in normative historiography, of politically inconvenient facts, methods, and modes of understanding.

In the chapter's second half, I turn to the intellectual and material labor of *This Child's Gonna Live*, and emphasize the centrality of the Cuban Revolution to the novel's ten-year production. Set in a rural oystering community on Maryland's Eastern shore on the dawn of the Great Depression, this act of contextual relocation does not easily map onto the novel's mise-en-scène. Yet on nearly every occasion that Wright wrote or lectured on the novel, she credited the Cuban Revolution, and Fidel Castro's visit to Harlem for its existence. Bypassing methodological allegiances of traditional Marxist textual analysis and formalism, I propose a hermeneutic that challenges conventional understandings of how the political is mediated in literary prose. In so doing, I restore to Wright's only published novel both its historical context and prospective theoretical vision, offering a new model of reading a revolutionary Marxist aesthetic from an avowed, but unsung, revolutionary.

II. The Scene

On July 26, 1960, at the invitation of Fidel Castro, a group of African American writers active in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), attended a mass celebration of the 26th of July Movement's victory over the oppressive Batista regime.⁶ Along with thousands of Cuban nationals and nearly one thousand Latin Americans in solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, the African American delegation embarked on the long and tortuous journey from Havana through the Sierra Maestra mountain range. Their destination was a makeshift stadium near the Moncada Barracks in Oriente Province, the site of the opening phase of the Cuban Revolution seven years earlier. There Prime

⁶ The FPCC was an organization established in New York in April 1960 in support of the Cuban Revolution. The group opposed U.S. sanctions on Cuba, including the 1961 federal embargo against the fledgling socialist state. In 1963, the FPCC disbanded after federal agents had them evicted from their headquarters.

Minister Castro would speak in commemoration of those lost in the hard fought triumph of the dispossessed.

Organized by president of the New York Chapter of the FPCC, the African American novelist and journalist Richard Gibson,⁷ the delegation was comprised mostly of young writers and activists, many of whom were without major publication.⁸ Although the invitation had been extended to and initially accepted by more prominent African American literary figures including the leading dramatist Alice Childress, a newly repatriated and radicalized James Baldwin, veteran poet Langston Hughes, and co-founder of the Harlem Writers' Guild, the committed novelist John Oliver Killens, each eventually declined, fearful of federal retribution.⁹ In lieu of their eleventh hour refusal to make the trip, all would reaffirm their Internationalist commitments and solidarity with Cuba by contributing to "Los Negros," a special African American issue of the Cuban magazine *Lunes de Revolución* (1959-1965) edited by the adopted Cuban national, Robert F. Williams.¹⁰

⁷ Notorious in France for his central role in the "Gibson affair," the name given to a sequence of events in 1957 involving Gibson, fellow African-American journalist and novelist William Gardner Smith, and the unsuspecting satirical cartoonist Ollie Harrington that nearly resulted in the deportation of the latter, Gibson had returned to the United States somewhat disgraced, but no less determined to reestablish his Internationalist credentials. In addition to his leadership role in the FPCC, Gibson was executive secretary of the Liberation Committee for Africa also based in New York.

⁸ Of the group, only Mayfield was well known, having been an actor and director for many years, and having published a novel, *The Hit*, in 1957.

⁹ Due to archival inconsistency, there is some debate over the details of John Oliver Killens' decision to remain stateside. In his excellent critical biography on Killens, *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism*, Keith Gilyard writes that it was not fear but a delay in documentation that kept Killens from visiting Cuba (152).

¹⁰ The special issue was designed to reinforce Cuban support for the black American struggle, and to link racist ideology with anti-communist, anti-Marxist political rhetoric. Visuals designed to "make the clearest possible analogy between reaction at home and abroad" supplemented these essays (Gosse 148). Arranged to non verbally affirm the

Gibson, who had received these regrets long after arrangements for twelve had been arranged, needed to fill four additional spaces already accounted for financially and announced publicly. Toward filling these vacancies, he turned to the Harlem Writers Guild, then command central of the Marxist wing of black Left Internationalism.¹¹ Guild member Sarah E. Wright, who was also the principle contact between the Guild and Cuba's Minister of Agrarian Reform, Antonio Núñez Jimenez, elected to bring her husband, Jewish Communist and Julliard trained violinist Joseph Kaye¹² and two friends from Philadelphia, poetic and political collaborator Lucy Smith of *Give Me A Child* (1955), and Laura Meek, whose father Bill Meek had recruited Wright to join the Philadelphia chapter of The Artists, Scientists, and Professionals (ASP) group shortly after she moved to the city from Washington D.C. in 1948. After minimal deliberation, Wright's elected replacements were officially accepted by FPCC leadership, leaving Gibson with the less daunting task of finding only one additional traveler.

Rather than risk rejection from subjects he knew to be interested, but whose own political vulnerability made acceptance unlikely, Gibson deviated from typical political channels, turning instead to the bohemian haven of Greenwich Village. Unquestionably

hypocrisy and inhumanity of American racism in the context of American core values, photos of demonstrations, such as those in Little Rock, were placed alongside segregationist propaganda (including two postcards that read 'Governor Faubus, Save Our Christian America' and 'Race Mixing Is Communism.' The magazine's cover, which featured juxtaposed images of a slave poster 'Virginia 1829,' with a photo of a black school boy walking by a National Guardsman, 'Arkansas 1957,' itself challenged the American narrative of progress and racial uplift. See Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*.

¹¹ Other organizations, including the CPN, were also active in the Black Internationalist struggle. Yet within these, a strong current of black nationalism (however critical of Garveyism) compromised the group's Marxist vision.

¹² As a Jewish-American, Kaye did not figure into the delegation proper. There was some protest to Kaye's inclusion—Jones, Williams, and Cruse all expressed some disappointment with the last minute inclusion of a white man.

unorthodox, Gibson's maneuver was not altogether misguided. News of a recent schism at *Yugen* magazine between married editors LeRoi and Hettie Jones over L. Jones' proposal of a special issue on the Cuban Revolution had reached FPCC headquarters. Piqued by what appeared to be a reversal of Jones' antipathy for collective politics, Gibson phoned the Beat poet. Initially perplexed by the invitation, Jones' curiosity gave way to consent.¹³ In an act that would alter the historical record of the July sojourn, Jones arrived at the Idlewild Airport on July 23, 1960, and encountered, for the first time, his travel mates.

III. Competing Nationalisms

Along with the Bandung Conference (April 18-25, 1955), Kwame Nkrumah's visit to the United States (July 1958), the All-African Peoples Conference in Accra (December 1958), and Fidel Castro's reciprocal visit to Harlem three months later (September 1960), the July Sojourn is considered an inaugural event in the emergence of a postwar black International Left. But whereas these other occasions yielded multiple public accounts that supported the production of a complex multidirectional and contradictory historiography, the historical significance of the July Sojourn, its cultural and political value, has been overdetermined by its proximity to the postwar anti-colonial revival of cultural black nationalism.¹⁴

¹³ In "Cuba Libre," Jones recounts his surprise in the invitation: "A man called me on Saturday afternoon some months ago and asked if I wanted to go to Cuba with some other Negroes, some of whom were also writers. I had a house full of people that afternoon and since we had all been drinking, it seemed pretty silly for me to suddenly drop the receiver and say, "I'm going to Cuba" (Jones 126).

¹⁴ Bandung was an attempt to build an Afro-Asian alliance against all forms of colonialism. While Western colonialism was an obvious target, growing concerns about Soviet Russia's imperialist policies and practices in Central Europe and Central Asia were also discussed. Though a consensus condemning "colonialism in all its manifestations" was officially

That black nationalism would constitute an officious historical framework requires some explanation. The second half of the twentieth century is rife with examples of State-sponsored violence against Black Power activists both at home and abroad. The U.S. sponsored assassination of democratically elected Congolese president Patrice Lumumba (1961), the State Department's systematic elimination of major players in the Black Panther Party, the Jackson State massacre, and Reagan's refusal to grant political asylum to Zimbabwean nationalist Ndabaningi Sithole, are only a few of countless atrocities enacted in the era of Cold War national security between 1966 and 1987. Moreover, J. Edgar Hoover's notorious public declaration in which he identified the Black Panther Party the "greatest threat to the internal security of the country," hardly constitutes a national endorsement.

While the existence of such an odious public record has the potential to render the advancement of a thesis aligning black nationalism with cultural privilege absurd, the ensuing paradox is one that is upheld historically by the existence of two black nationalisms, distinguished by the adjectives "cultural" and "revolutionary." Though there is much overlap between these trends—both sects promoted black liberation on a global scale, and endorsed black self-determination, Pan-Africanism, and armed self-defense—they did not enjoy a harmonious existence. Cultural nationalists, who advanced

reached, the conference generated a range of responses among its supporters. The most famous, and arguably the most representative of these responses occurred in the form of a debate between Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois. While both opposed imperialism in any form, Wright and Du Bois had very different responses to existing forms of Pan-African politics. Where Wright adopted a critical position toward actually existing pan-Africanism, Du Bois remained optimistic. For more on the marked difference between Wright's radical negativity and W.E.B. Du Bois utopic distant reading (the U.S. State Department denied Du Bois a passport to travel to the conference), see Wright, *The Color Curtain*, and Du Bois, "The Bandung Conference."

a thesis of political, cultural, and economic separatism, charged Revolutionary nationalists, who worked toward the universal abolishment of the class system for all races and ethnicities, with upholding a “reactionary and white supremacist ideology” (Maglangbayan 103). In the words of one especially bombastic cultural nationalist, “the idea of an alliance with Left-wing white supremacy is a still born infant which black Marxist fanatics resuscitate each time they muster enough force to rear their heads in the black community” (Maglangbayan 103).

At the root of what may initially appear as gratuitous pedantry among otherwise allied political formations is a vital difference in each group’s breakdown of critical subjectivity. Topically, the conflict boiled down to the categories of class and race. While cultural nationalists saw the class struggle as a “war between [white] brothers,” (Robinson 183), those aligned with the Black Marxist Left understood their social identities, including their cultural alienation as Negro Americans, as an effect of a power structure designed to keep blacks as permanent members of the laboring class. Crucially, it was not the cultural nationalists’ interest but their embrace of nationalism that bemused the Black Marxist Left. Black Marxists were not without the racial “group feeling” that led cultural nationalists to disassociate race and class, but understood the appeal to nationalism as a “reflex expression” of their oppression (Wright, “Blueprint” 105). As the Cold War ideological position par excellence, nationalism was something that must be “possessed and understood” but ultimately “transcended” (Wright, “Blueprint” 102).

While cultural black nationalists admonished the compromised racial politics of black Marxism, its separatist ethos brought it ever closer to the position of the State. In

contrast to Marxist political formations, who sought nothing less than the destruction of the capitalist order, cultural nationalist organizations did not destabilize the State's most prized security measures, including a strong anti-labor climate, intolerance for working class insubordination, and racial disunity. Although cultural nationalism was a volatile (and occasionally violent) social movement, its implementation of deliberately obtuse forms of expression, its lack of a coherent revolutionary theory, and its trenchant animus for Marxism rendered it a comparatively benign form of rebellion (Smith 45-50). Because cultural nationalist ideology further perpetuated the dividing lines that sustained racial capitalism, brokerages between cultural nationalists and the State Department were formed.

No doubt jarring to contemporary logic, separatist collaboration with the State was far from anomalous. Arrangements between black nationalists and the State to forge a disciplinary front against the Marxist Left reaches back to the 1930s, when black cultural separatists, in league with the police, conspired against local Communist circles by disrupting meetings and intimidating members (Solomon 171). With the advent of the Cold War and the postwar reprisal of black cultural nationalism, new brokerages were formed. Local intimidation was replaced by collaboration with newly minted federal institutions.¹⁵ Unable to reach an African American community excluded from the domestic containment policies that reinforced American culture's revived romance with the middle class, government officials supported internal strife within black communities where it existed. The repressive measures exerted by anti-Marxist cultural nationalists

¹⁵ The National Security Act of 1947 prompted the development of a succession of defense agencies within the State Department, including the Central Intelligence Agency (1947), the Department of Defense (1949), and the National Security Agency (1952).

were among the most profitable forms of antagonism. Leading cultural nationalists, including those who desired economic reform, represented Marxism as an anachronistic ideology sustained by a majority white Old Guard Left whose commitment to African American liberation was motivated by an innate, though possibly unconscious, desire to regulate black radicalism.

By representing the Marxist Left's position toward blacks as false altruism perpetuated by a white paternalist establishment, cultural nationalists not only strengthened the anti-assimilationist, anti-Marxist political position upheld by government institutions, but adopted a critical position that reinforced the self-contained, self-referential interpretive practices of post-war intellectual culture.¹⁶ Just as historicist and political methods of literary interpretation were eschewed during the peak years of the Cold War for their "crude" use of the art object as a "mere sign" of external events (Krieger 188), Marxism was charged with manufacturing an ideological fog over its "culturally starved" black constituents (Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism" 76). By obscuring the primary relationship between black Americans and their African heritage, Marxism was pronounced another form of intellectual colonialism.

It was this milieu, which brought together cultural nationalists and the State in a collective injunction against Marxism, to which the delegate of the July Sojourn returned after their historic expedition. While all seemed to agree that Cuba sharpened Harlem's awareness of racism and class exploitation as a global problem, friction over the historical dimensions of the revolution and its capacity to function as a model for discontented blacks in the U.S. annulled any kind of consensus. In its place, a one-sided

¹⁶ In this way, black nationalism can be seen as a cognate to New Critical ideology developing in the postwar university.

public battle instigated by the group's anti-Marxist minority, LeRoi Jones and Harold Cruse, over the specific character of the Cuban Revolution, was introduced.

According to Cruse and Jones, the revolution was fundamentally “un-Marxian” and vehemently anti-Communist (Cruse, *Crisis* 230). “The fact of the matter,” wrote Cruse, “was that the Cuban revolution was not only made without the Communists but despite them” (Cruse, *Rebellion* 184). Cruse and Jones believed that although Castro was eventually “inveigled by Cuban Communists into proclaiming ‘I am a Marxist to the day I die,’” he was, at his core, an anti-Marxist guerilla (Cruse, *Rebellion* 184).¹⁷ Based on this magnificently misguided interpretation, the two began a crude but publicly successful campaign to discredit their travel mates with ties to the Old Left. Only Robert F. Williams, the unaffiliated renegade who called for “more Nat Turner than whitey’s Marxist-Leninism,” was spared (Williams qtd. in Tyson 293).

While Cruse contested their “left-tinged conformity” with the clear eye and sharp tongue of a rebuffed associate, Jones castigated the Black Marxists on aesthetic grounds. For both men, Marxism was synonymous with delayed historical progress and fatuous confidence in integration. As such, it threatened to activate a causal nexus that could disturb their intended takeaway: a revolutionary project built around black cultural and political autonomy. Just as the pair had suppressed Castro’s Marxism, so the impressions of the delegation’s Marxist contingent must be likewise eliminated.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cruse went so far as to declare the Revolution a success because it excluded all Marxists from participation.

¹⁸ Despite obvious political biases, Cruse and Jones’ selective knowledge should not be immediately cast as a form of evasion. Though Cruse, the prickly historian, should have known better and more before making such wrongheaded public declarations, little was known of the details of the Revolution’s seven-year process even within established radical organizations in conjunction with the Communist Party. This lack of knowledge extended to

Although the culture was primed for such a denouncement, the suppression was secured by the publication of LeRoi Jones' "Cuba Libre" (1960). While Cruse (a former Harlem Communist once slated to be the next great African American Marxist theoretician) was the seasoned politico, his reputation as a socially awkward paranoiac severely narrowed his influence.¹⁹ By contrast, Jones' cultural star was on the rise.

In the essay, Jones chronicles the Revolution's mass celebration from the perspective of a poet dubious of the political sphere. Emphasizing his outsider status at every turn, Jones enters the revolutionary site as a countercultural interloper impervious to political appeals. Gradually, his resistance is worn down. By the time he reaches the Moncada Barracks and meets Fidel, Jones has transformed.

Crucially, this transformation is instigated not by his peers but by internationals also traveling through the Sierra Maestras. Two young Mexican radicals, poet Jaime Shelley and a graduate student in economics referred to only as Señora Betancourt, are especially influential. From them Jones learns that his disaffected individualism, considered within his immediate social circle an acclaimed form of rebellion, only serves to reinforce the mercenary logic of capital.

the top administrators of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, including Richard Gibson, who had hand picked the majority of the delegation. Because Castro had not yet publicly declared Cuba a revolutionary state in alliance with Western Marxism or Eastern Communism, Jones and especially Cruse were able to retool the revolution's character, and history, with little resistance.

¹⁹ Though Cruse's political education began with Marxism (a trajectory that began in 1945 at the Communist-led George Washington Carver School in Harlem and led to his membership in the Communist Party the same year), by 1952 he emerged as one its harshest critics. After seven years in the Party, working as a cultural critic and occasional film reviewer for the *Daily Worker*, Cruse had come to a position of "absolute dissension" (320). The details of Cruse's opposition remain contentious.

While the comments and objections of these young revolutionaries mirrored those expressed by the Marxists within his own delegation, Jones remains closed off to the corresponding lessons of his compatriots, whom he considers aesthetically “inept,” politically antiquated, and interpersonally “dull” (Jones, “Cuba Libre”). By crediting his incipient political sensitivity to those removed from his own cultural milieu, Jones is able to reflect political and affective states appropriate to the revolutionary atmosphere without attaching himself to the antediluvian cultural and political practices of the Old Left. Ignoring that the two groups are part of the same international community of Left cultural workers, Jones opens his essay with an evisceration of the Marxists within his African American cohort:

At the Idlewild Airport, the 20th, we straggled in from our various lives, assembling at last at 3 P.M. We met each other, and I suppose, took stock of each other. I know I took stock of them, and was disappointed. First because there were no other, what I considered, “important” Negro writers. The other reasons were accreted as the trip went on. But what I could get at that initial meeting was: One embarrassingly dull (white) Communist, his professional Negro (i.e. unstraightened hair, 1930s peasant blouses, militant integrationist) wife who wrote embarrassingly inept social comment-type poems, usually about one or sometimes a group of Negroes being mistreated or suffering in general (usually in Alabama). Two middle-class young Negro ladies from Philadelphia who wrote poems, the nature of which I left largely undetermined. One 1920s “New Negro” type African scholar (one of those terrible examples of

what the “Harlem Renaissance” was at its worst. One 1930s essayist who turned out to be marvelously un-lied to. One strange tall man in a straw hat and feathery beard, whom I later got to know as Robert Williams and who later figured very largely in the trip, certainly in my impressions of it. (“Cuba Libre” 126)

Though he did not identify each individual by name, Jones’ caricatures were barely coded. Decrypted, the descriptions correspond to the following delegates:

- 1) The embarrassingly dull Communist = Joseph Kaye (Sarah Wright’s husband)
- 2) The dull Communist’s “professional Negro” who wrote embarrassingly inept social-comment type poems = Sarah Wright
- 3) Two middle class Negro women from Philadelphia = Lucy Smith and Laura Meek
- 4) 1920s “New Negro” scholar = John Henrik Clarke
- 5) Marvelously un-lied to essayist = Harold Cruse



Figure 4.1 “Wright in Cuba.” This photograph depicts the July Sojourners in 1960.

Jones' skill in the rhetoric of insult revealed nothing more than the extent of his ignorance about African American resistance in Harlem. Nevertheless, his mischief had grip. Jones' assessment of Sarah Wright proved especially injurious. Whereas his condemnation of Clarke incorporated his status as a scholar (Clarke was a brilliant and well-known Africanist, two facts Jones could not deny), his account of Wright, who operated outside the security of institutional affiliation, buried her cultural and political value in a series of fallacious, but culturally resonant clichés.

Jones' characterization of Wright as an artless drone dramatizing rehearsed scenes of suffering in Alabama was empirically false. A Maryland transplant living in New York via Philadelphia, Wright had a background in theater and journalism, two areas in which Jones' was also deeply involved. While Wright's poetry did use local events to mobilize global critique, her work went beyond the generic expectations of protest poetry, especially the narrowly defined parameters presumed by Jones and his ilk. In "Play on a Witch," first published in Wright's 1955 collection of poetry titled *Give Me a Child*, co-authored by Lucy Smith, Wright collaborated with the avant-garde ballerina Elfriede Mahler (who would later "defect" to Cuba) to create a full-bodied, neo-expressionist translation of the poem. The result was an experimental dance performance choreographed by Mahler to the prosody of Wright's verse.²⁰

Beyond his rebuke of Wright's competence as a poet, Jones' introduction of Wright as the chattel of her dull, white, Communist husband reinforced vile narratives about Jewish hegemony in black culture gaining ground in the early 1960s. As the

²⁰ As the title suggests, the performance dramatized the repressive political conditions that had reached fever pitch under Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror.

delegate with the both the lengthiest (beginning in 1952) and the most extensive connection to revolutionary activity in Cuba, Wright was the group's political veteran. Yet because Wright's political stripes were earned outside vetted forms of cultural belonging, Jones' brutal description passed as brutal truth.²¹

As the first narrative of the sojourn to be published, "Cuba Libre" would have commanded much interest. Still, given the essay's principle features, best characterized as brazen anti-Marxism and unremitting misogyny, the extent of the essay's fanfare—which far exceeded U.S. anti-Communists and apostate Marxists—was something of a surprise. As early as 1957, Cuba had replaced the Soviet Union as the "embodiment of socialist hopes" (de Beauvoir 409), and had become the *cause célèbre* of many leading public intellectuals sympathetic to Marxism, from C. Wright Mills in the United States to the *deux solitudes et un duo*, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. How had an essay that placed its denunciation of Marxism front and center won over the International Left?

Three factors contributed to the essay's unanticipated success: 1) the timing of its publication, 2) its placement in *Evergreen Review*, and 3) Jean-Paul Sartre's support. The extent to which the essay profited from its publication in the ultra chic *Evergreen Review* cannot be overstated. As the premier magazine for postwar avant-garde political and theoretical work (its inaugural issue featured contributions by Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, and Michael Hamburger), *Evergreen Review* granted "Cuba Libre" the internationalist cachet it otherwise lacked. The essay's position within the issue further obscured its political weaknesses. Situated between reprints of works by late, great

²¹ Inarguably the most widely read account of the trip, Jones' essay was swallowed whole by "budding New Left circles in and beyond New York City" (Johnson 253, n. 20), who seeded Jones as the Black Castro Harlem so desperately needed.

Marxists Bertolt Brecht and Albert Camus, Jones' essay was shrouded in a sea of Marxist prose.

So positioned, Jones work reached a new audience. Jean-Paul Sartre, referenced in "Cuba Libre" for his participation in a Revolutionary Writers Conference held in Havana earlier that year, was particularly taken with the young poet. Jones' biographical candor, his willingness to be humbled by the Revolution, and his desire to admit the necessity of unmediated political commitment in the context of artistic production appealed to Sartre, whose own theory of commitment, first expressed in *What is Literature?* (1949) had long been under attack by avant-gardeists.

Although Sartre read the public nod in "Cuba Libre" as a political endorsement by a repentant formalist, Jones' inclusion of the French existentialist was more likely by way of pure information. Actual similarities between the two essays were tenuous at best. While both Jones and Sartre projected a simplistic (and static) image of revolutionary commitment in Cuba, their representations were at odds. Whereas Sartre's idealism fetishized Cuba's proletariat—his attempt to theorize "The Cuban Personality" included descriptions of the "gaiety of the peasants" and "Black dynamism"(Sartre, "On Cuba" 53)—Jones' romance with the revolution, focused on the singular presence and command of Fidel, revealed his naïve understanding of the revolutionary struggle.²² Jones' lingered on scenes that featured Fidel's magnetism, incorporating gratuitous

²² From his gratuitous descriptions of fashion models thronging around the white guerilla to his detailed account of Castro's larger than life presence among the crowd, Jones was in obvious awe of Castro's command.

descriptions where women, including “fashion models” thronged around the “tall Cuban,” waiting for a kiss (“Cuba Libre” 138).²³

Despite his notoriously low tolerance for any position that questioned Marxism’s philosophical and methodological sovereignty,²⁴ Sartre overlooked the essay’s anti-Marxist position and read Jones as a contemporary Richard Wright (Sartre, “On Cuba”). Whether Sartre transposed the complexity of R. Wright’s non-aligned Marxism onto Jones based on his knowledge of the complicated history between African Americans, the Communist Party, and Marxism, or if he simply allowed the context in which he read “Cuba Libre” to determine his understanding of Jones’ political affiliation, is unknown. Whatever his rationale, Sartre championed Jones’ essay, and continued his public support throughout the decade.²⁵

The story of how “Cuba Libre” emerged as the authorized narrative of trip is key to understanding its command in the study of postwar Black Internationalism. Although Jones’ “Cuba Libre” had little immediate impact on the activist circles he had so contemptuously dismissed,²⁶ his exclusionary framework over inscribed subsequent histories of the momentous event. As was the case in Sartre’s selective reading, contemporary historians, cultural critics, and New Left radicals were captivated by their perception of the essay’s psychological eloquence and political lucidity. Yet where Sartre never mistook Jones’ story for History, the emerging discourse developing around the

²³ Despite his attempts to suggest otherwise, Jones’ fascination with Castro’s personality barely deviated from his pre-Sojourn attraction to the Revolution. Then and now, Jones treated the Revolution as a “case of Hollywood proportions.”

²⁴ For one example, see Sartre’s break with Camus (Aronson).

²⁵ Though they had never met, Sartre led a campaign to free Jones’ from prison after trumped up conspiracy charges for his leadership role in the 1967 Newark riots had him sentenced to three years.

²⁶ As far as my research has taken me, no public rebuke of “Cuba Libre” exists.

postwar resurgence of the Harlem-Cuban bond over-identified the essay's narrative arc, organized around Jones' political conversion, with revolution more generally.

Though "Cuba Libre" was not the sole catalyst motivating others to "go south,"²⁷ subsequent studies of Black Internationalism have since coalesced around Jones' essay. Of the dozens of monographs²⁸ that identify the centrality of the July sojourn to various forms of cultural production, from the jazz, blues, theater, literature, and poetry of the Black Arts Movement to contemporary slam and performance poetry, rap music, and flash mob activism, only a handful, including Timothy B. Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, Cynthia Young's *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*, and Cedric Johnson's *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, and Kevin Gaines' *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*. By contrast, only a handful name Sarah Wright as a participant, and none, including LeRoi Jones' autobiography *The Autobiography of Amiri Baraka* (1984), which perfunctorily acknowledges Sarah Wright's "attendance" (243), mentions either the self-effacing poet Lucy Smith or Laura Meek.

Together these texts collectively advance Jones' "Cuba Libre" as the *locus classicus* for understanding black cultural expression in the context of the Black Arts Movement. According to these histories, Jones' candid account of his Cuban experience documents

²⁷ In the years that followed, a wave of black revolutionary organizations would also make the trip. two groups from Detroit—the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and, perhaps most famously, many members of Black Panther Party, including Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Assata Shakur, Stokely Carmichael and Party affiliate Angela Davis traveled to Havana, which had, since the summer of 1960, become both a training ground and a political haven for black revolutionaries (Young 17).

²⁸ See Alexander, Anderson, Bader, Belletto, Davidson, Gennari, Gosse, Hemmer, Houen, Irele, Johnson, Jones, Joseph, Nelson, Tietchen, Tyson, Washington, Woodard, and Young.

not only his personal conversion from “politically disengaged Beat poet to Black radical,” (Young 14) but locates the political awakening of an oppositional culture—of which Jones has long been figured as progenitor—in a specific text. Understood in this sense, “Cuba Libre” at once provides the reader with a narrative account of the political foundation at the helm of the production of a militant aesthetic and positions Jones at the center of the pending black revolution, both of which are figured as outgrowths of the July Sojourn.

In their collective advancement of “Cuba Libre” as a prescient historical document, these exaltations overlook what the essay reveals about Jones’ limited comprehension of revolution generally, and the Cuban Revolution specifically. As it is expressed in “Cuba Libre,” Jones’ understanding (and eventual appropriation) of revolution is rooted in his impatience for all that he perceived to be “old guard.” Bored by the revolutionary process, a subject associated with the bromidic reading practices of the Old Left, Jones’ early interest in the revolution was instead spurred by a cult of personality, specifically a preoccupation with the chimeric presence of Guevara and Castro. In his autobiography, Jones describes the onset of his interest in characteristically dramatic terms:

This was 1959, and for the last few months I had been fascinated by the headlines from Cuba. I had been raised on Errol Flynn’s Robin Hood and the endless hero-actors fighting against injustice and leading the people to victory over the tyrants. The Cuban thing seemed a case of Hollywood proportions. (Jones 27)

If the concreteness of what Jones witnessed in Cuba in 1960 convinced him that revolution existed beyond the silver screen, he remained hooked to the spectacle.²⁹ As Jones' commitment to black revolutionary activity gained momentum, the theatrical nature of his early interest continued to inform his plan of action. Together, Jones' polemical mandate for the production of "poems that kill" and the call for an Internationalism comprised of a worldwide alliance of black men (his gendered pronouns never wavered) against the white man), revealed an impressionistic relationship to revolution in which he bracketed all tenets of social inequity—especially gender and class inequities—that did not advance the ascendancy of black men.³⁰

Less than one year after he returned from Cuba, Jones formed the Organization for Young Men (OYM), a group comprised of black artists from the Village (including Harold Cruse, Calvin Hicks, Archie Schepp, A.B Spellman) who opposed the dusty practices of the Marxist Left. Proponents of flamboyant displays of protest, the group staged various street scenes that would have left the viewer agitated but confused. Due to the inexperience of its members, OYM quickly merged with On Guard For Freedom, a revolutionary nationalist organization started by Sarah Wright, John Killens, and other associates of the Harlem Writers Guild. The result of the merger is depressing if predictable. While Jones accepted the group's pro-integrationist position, he quickly grew impatient with what seemed like their infinite deferral of action. After a few months, Jones and his associates forced Wright out of her leadership role. While Killens was

²⁹ "The idea of a "a revolution had been foreign to me. It was one of those inconceivably "romantic" and/or hopeless ideas that we Norteamericanos were taught to since public school to hold up to the cold light of reason. That "reason" being whatever repugnant lie our usurious "ruling class" had paid their journalists to disseminate" (Jones, "Cuba Libre" 14).

³⁰ See Jones, "The Legacy" (182).

initially more forgiving of the group's anti-Marxism, he too was eventually edged out. With the Harlem Writers Guild repositioned in the distant periphery, the group redirected their focus away from a mixture of revolutionary study and universal reform, and staged events that promoted Jones' nationalistic focus on the advancement of black men. Jones' praxis, best described as a "make it new" methexis, was nourished by orchestrated audience participation.

Cultural historian Van Gosse sees this selective form of revolutionary interest as an emblem of the bohemian cast of the New Left, who took its direction not from history, but from popular media and culture. The Cuban Revolution in particular became, for these young radicals coming out of a position of historical irreverence, a "convenient shorthand" for freelance violence (Gosse 148). Other than a general appropriation of violence, there is little to support a correlation between Jones' methods and the revolutionary practices of Cuba's guerilla intelligentsia. Jones' relationship to Revolution would be better characterized as impressionistic than instructive.

While it is most likely the case that contemporary representations of the July Sojourn built upon Jones' account reproduce his value judgments unconsciously, their equation of "black liberation struggle" with the "black nationalist struggle" reinforces the kind of cultural and political gatekeeping at work in "Cuba Libre" and Cruse's *Crisis of the Intellectual*. As a result of these fixed, ideological parameters, the historical and political purchase of the July Sojourn has been circumscribed by its relationship to the anti-colonial Black Nationalist revival of the 1960s and 1970s. Though the event would be unthinkable without the sustained efforts of the delegation's Black Marxist Left, their

contributions and organizing efforts have been sacrificed at the alter of Black Arts.³¹ In the next section, we will turn to Sarah Wright, who dramatizes this conflict in *This Child's Gonna Live*.

IV. Exceptional Networks: Sarah Wright and Elfriede Mahler

Although Jones' barometer for radicalism excluded Wright, her involvement in the July Sojourn to Cuba far exceeded the parameters of a passive participant. Unlike Jones, who began to follow Castro and Guevara's revolutionary struggle only after the revolution achieved a public form of success, and Sartre, whose support halted in the moment he traded his allegiance from Fidel to Mao, Wright began tracking the revolution during its opening phase in 1952, when Castro and his cohort of guerilla intellectuals openly opposed Batista's coup. Wright had become interested in the Castro-led Cuban rebellion shortly after its onset through her friendship with Jewish-American ballet dancer turned naturalized Cuban citizen Elfriede Mahler. The two women met in Pittsburgh at Mahler's solo performance, "Hard Time Blues," at the Irene Kaufman

³¹ The eclipse of Marxism by Black Nationalism in the production of a narrative of the postwar struggle for black liberation is nothing new. In an interview, Cedric Robinson's addresses this very problem in poignant terms:

At the time I was writing *Black Marxism* and *Black Mass Movements* I felt strongly that Black nationalism as it was being pursued by spokespersons like Stokely Carmichael and Louis Farrakhan was a failed enterprise. As a peevish and perverse inversion of the political culture and racialism which had been used to justify the worst excesses of the exploitation and oppression of Black people, it served as a fictive radicalism, a surrogate mirage of the Black struggle. So both of these works, politically, were written to address the misconceptions and conceits of Black nationalism in historical terms: to examine how our ancestors responded to the seductions of this construction of the struggle and their visions of the future social order. (Interview with Chuck Morse)

Settlement Theatre (IKS) in 1946.³² Mahler's performance was one act in the "Women's Congress 3-Way Program," an interracial cultural symposium that sponsored the three major wings of the performing arts: dance, music, and drama. Although it was an unnamed avant-garde anti-lynching play brought Wright to Pittsburgh, it was Mahler who stood out.

A professional ballet dancer and choreographer with an enduring if mostly unfocused interest in Marxism, Mahler became radicalized in Havana, where ballet was an art form firmly on the side of the revolution. Through conversations with Cuba's prima ballerina Alicia Alonso, Mahler learned the details of Batista's coup, including the extent of U.S. involvement.³³ Though the two shared political sympathies (both supported the Soviet Union), Mahler had little in common with Alonso's style, which was rather traditional. Aware of the distance between them, Alonso encouraged Mahler to become acquainted with the island's Afro-Cubans, whose style was less restrictive, though no less sophisticated.

With each visit to Havana, Mahler spent less time at vetted cultural venues. Instead, she used her recreational time to get acquainted with the island's most disenfranchised population. Although Mahler conversed with Afro-Cubanos living within the city's center, most had family working in U.S. owned sugar plantations in Cuba's eastern most region, and spoke to Mahler of their former lives as rural peasants.

³² Located in the Hill district of Pittsburg, an historically Jewish neighborhood comprised of "wood frame tenement buildings," the IKS theatre brought the hallmarks of Greenwich Village theatre, including "stage modernism" and progressive politics, to Pittsburgh (Conner 99).

³³ Though the two shared political sympathies (both supported the Soviet Union), Mahler had little in common with Alonso's style, which was rather traditional. Knowing this, Alonso encouraged Mahler to become acquainted with the island's Afro-Cubans, whose style was expository, though no less sophisticated.

Mahler learned that the combination of entrenched racism and geographic isolation was only the beginning of an all-encompassing narrative of sequestration supported by U.S. hegemony in the sugar industry.³⁴ Longing for an interlocutor with whom she could share this information, Mahler relayed the details of this inequity in a letter to Wright in 1952, beginning with a description of the island's biopolitics (Mahler, Letter to Wright 1952).

Like so many others to visit the island before her, Mahler compared Eastern Cuba, known as Cuba's *zona negra* (literally, black zone), to the American South. Those living in the zone were denied access to the island's economic, educational, and political resources, and were deemed primitive by an increasingly metronormative populous. Mahler's emphasis on the confluence of poverty and illiteracy among the mostly Afro-Cuban rural poor resonated with Wright, whose own hometown of Wetipiquin, Maryland, situated along Maryland's Eastern Shore, was similarly drawn.³⁵ For years Wright struggled for a way to dramatize these rhyming predicaments.

Mahler, who would "defect" to Cuba just thirteen months after the Revolution, educated Wright on more than the plight of the Cuban peasantry. She also wrote to Wright about her plans to create a network that would link Afro Cuban dancers throughout the island. Because the Afro Cubans in the city were under "greater pressure

³⁴ In spite of their isolation, Afro-Cubans possessed a rich cultural legacy. Their form of dance, a composite of Haitian, African, and Afro-Cuban Voodoo, impressed Mahler, who would later found the Dance company, Danza Libre, in Guantanamo, the epicenter of Afro-Cuban culture.

³⁵ One of the most rural and impoverished regions of the state is Maryland's Eastern Shore. Although the Eastern Shore counties are within a two-hour drive of the nation's capital, the communities in spirit and sense of place have been more like the deep South when it comes to racial attitudes.

to assimilate,” they found it easier to suppress “the music in their blood” rather than stir up trouble among Cuba’s cultural elite (Mahler, Letter to Wright, Date Unknown).

The details of the early days of Wright’s relationship to Mahler are neither gratuitous nor digressive. Wright’s relationship to Mahler not only locates her investment in the Cuban Revolution in its first phase, but captures the nuance of Wright’s early engagement with non-orthodox forms of Marxist cultural production—a background essential to the non-representational role the Cuban Revolution plays in Wright’s novel, *This Child’s Gonna Live*. The combination of revolutionary interest in artistic and agrarian reform impressed Wright.

Despite her preoccupation with Cuban unrest and the assurance of Mahler’s backing, Wright bracketed the subject for nearly a decade. Two factors, the pain of her largely unresolved family history and its inchoate but undeniable connection to the plight of the Cuban peasantry, and a sudden ambivalence toward orthodox forms of literary social protest, slowed Wright’s progress. Until she visited Cuba in 1960, Mahler remained her primary outlet.

V. Two Traumas

In the same year that Wright began corresponding with Mahler about the Cuban Revolution, she published her first poem and experienced a devastating betrayal. The deferral of Wright’s discursive entrée in one area did not keep her from writing altogether. Nor did it keep her from politics; Wright’s moratorium was limited to the representation of psychological, rather than physical, suffering. Yet rather than risk the pain associated with her own past—which, as we will see in *This Child’s Gonna Live*, included an almost ritualistic cruelty espoused and carried out by her own people—

Wright divested from her own life and relied for content on the sorrows and joys of others. If Wright's pain is refracted through these poems, the connection is difficult to see.

As was the case for many committed writers before her, including Theodore Dreiser, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin (all of whom Wright admired), Wright scoured local newspapers for content. In her poem "To Some Millions Who Survive Joseph E. Mander, Senior" (19 May 1952), Wright responded to the tragic—if heroic—death of Joseph Mander Sr., a middle aged black father who drowned in Philadelphia's Schuylkill river in an attempt to save a seven year old Jewish boy from certain death. Wright stayed awake for thirty-six hours writing and revising the poem for immediate publication in the modest but popular regional newspaper, the *North Penn News*. Wright radically fast-forwarded her process to ensure Mander's commemoration, but remained critical of her decision. Ultimately unable to overlook her misgivings, Wright inscribes her ambivalence in the poem's transition from the first to the second stanza:

/1/ Sunday strollers along a sewage-choked Schuylkill
May soon forget where he died;
And many will point with second-hand authority
To the place in the liquid darkness
Showing only
where death
gave birth
to a hero.

/2/ But they might glory in any
Novel bit of newsprint knowledge
Quite as pridefully:

Great men often become great curiosities
Too often become conversation pieces
And nothing more.

This reversal caught the eye of Left poet Walter Lowenfels. Lowenfels, who had moved to Philadelphia from New York twelve years earlier, had a special interest in the black resistance and used his position to promote the work of up and coming African American writers and artists. Although Lowenfels' patronage of African American literary expression long predated his interest in Wright, his attention to an African American woman poet came at a time when he was under fire by feminists within and outside the Communist Party for an ostensibly misogynist story published two years earlier.³⁶ Despite his promise to "reexamine the question of men and women and sexism," Lowenfels never regained his former status (qtd. in Weigand 93).

Largely due to Lowenfels' patronage, "To Some Millions Who Survive Joseph E. Mander, Senior" launched Wright's career as a poet. Yet the legacy of his mentorship is double-edged. Through his position in Philadelphia's *Daily Worker* and his remaining connections in the paper's Harlem branch, Lowenfels had Wright's poem published in the political magazine that had launched the careers of many black writers she admired. His tireless promotion of the poem also resulted in a raised statue of Mander

³⁶ The story, titled "Santa Claus or Comrade X," centers on the tribulations of a man mired by the domestic complaints of his wife and daughters. It was published in the *Daily Worker* on December 25, 1949.

accompanied by Wright's poem etched in bronze. Yet the cost of Lowenfels' support was high. Lowenfels accepted Wright's poem, "To Some Millions Who Survive Joseph E. Mander, Senior" (1952), for publication only to revise it without Wright's consent. While Lowenfels' promotion of the poem inarguably jump-started Wright's literary career, his appropriation of her work in the service of Left nostalgia stayed with Wright, who remained soured by what appeared to be a direct relationship between paternalism and literary success. Although she would maintain a public silence on the subject until her death in 2008, her literary, political, and historiographical practices were reshaped by an insatiable desire for unadulterated knowledge.

The experience with Lowenfels taught Wright the limitations of the Leftist cultural and political scene—where work done behind the scenes or beyond the fray was often absorbed by culturally visible (and politically viable) expressions of social action.[sentence needed] Rather than continue to work her way up through the Lowenfels connection, Wright partnered with Lucy Smith, a poet and activist who Wright knew both from ASP contacts and long walks through Hamilton Park. Though Smith, who had published a book of poetry titled *No Middle Ground* (1953), was in many ways the literary veteran, her extreme introversion kept her from developing a broad audience. The two worked on a collection of poems titled *Give Me a Child* after a poem of Wright's. The book was published by a modest press in 1955.

Unique in that Wright benefited from it professionally, this conscious if selective act of erasure was neither the first nor the last that Wright would experience. Lowenfels'

betrayal resembled both the routine effacement and exploitation of her youth,³⁷ and foregrounded her alienation and eventual expunction from the July sojourn to Cuba—two traumas that would inform the structural logic and influence the content of *This Child's Gonna Live*. Collectively, these traumas constituted a pattern in Wright's life that would, once confronted, inform both the mood and the structural logic of Wright's first novel. Still, it would take the habitual screams of "Nigger Whore" issued by a neighboring tenant in her Jim Crow apartment building on New York City's Lower East Side just days after she welcomed Castro to Harlem to finally convince Wright that her story had a universal quality.

Rather than allow these incidents to persist as an unproductive, menacing force, Wright harnessed her anger and disappointment into the critical energy she needed to reexamine her past in light of her present situation. Although she reveled in the work of many writers in her literary circle, particularly John Oliver Killens and James Baldwin, Wright noted that the narrative truths and traumas within her own region of origin—a no-man's land technically below the Mason Dixon, but close enough to the North that its urban centers tended to follow Northern trends in racial codes—lacked literary representation.

³⁷ He was raised in a severe, religious community where women were subjected daily to emotional and physical violence. (Wright was discouraged from writing secular poetry, or engaging in any worldly activity that did not somehow benefit the Church or its leading parishioners.) Abuse, sometimes from men, sometimes from one another, was common. Although all women in the community were subordinate to men, there was no communion among them. A hierarchy that resembled that of the town's men folk was in place, and those women in the community who held prestigious positions in the Church were the most revered. Those who fell out of line, particularly with respect to the town's sexual code, were shamed publicly. In sharp contrast to the feminist utopias imagined by Zora Neale Hurston, the women in Wright's all black community were ruthless.

While these cultural and historical silences convinced Wright of the political salience and urgency of her story, Wright remained stymied by the novel's generic framework. Unpracticed in prose, Wright turned to literary models of her political forebears for guidance. While she admired the work of many novelists in the protest tradition of Richard Wright, she remained critical of the emancipatory power of those forms of African American literary expression that pursued the troika of vengeance, violence and death without the possibility for redemption. Through their myopic focus on "the agony of the human condition," such texts approximated the "one-dimensionalism" of "white racism" (Wright, "The Responsibility" 5-6). Still less attractive were those texts that edited out the struggles of black life in the U.S. in order to represent a false sense of beauty, security, and personal fulfillment. "It is," wrote Wright in the same speech, "a primary reality that our people are not free, do not act freely, and are trapped in a web of social, economic, and political arrangements not made by themselves [...]. As writers "we have a responsibility to master all the implications of this reality" (7).

Wright continues to think through these issues in preparatory notes for *This Child's Gonna Live*, and presents her conclusions in abbreviated form in the novel's Preface. While "all great art is life affirming," she writes, "the task of the artist is to expose that which is life-denying, life-threatening, to strip that which is negative in life from its frequently seductive wrapping, to lay bare its ugliness" (viii). For Wright, the ugliness of poverty and racism, classism, goes beyond, or more accurately, lies beneath what is materially manifest. For Wright, the two tasks of narrative are as follows: 1) to represent reality and 2) to challenge, or "accuse" this reality. Though such aims appeared,

in previous iterations of protest literature, to exist in formal opposition, Wright intuited the political benefit of their mutual representation. The “seductive wrapping” to which she refers and dramatizes in the novel is an ultimately superficial form of black resistance that reinforced the values of external oppressors.

It is no coincidence that Wright’s understanding of literary representation anticipates Marcuse’s aesthetic theory put forth a decade later in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1977). With Wright’s reading notes as our guide, we can track her engagement with Marcuse back to 1960, when she first read *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (1958). Like Marcuse, Wright remained critical of aesthetic escapism while at the same time recognizing the political and psychological necessity of aestheticizing experiences. Where Marcuse’s paradoxical attachments were to the “classics of realism and the materialism of Feurbach,” and then to the formation of a “kingdom of beauty and love” (qtd. in Kellner 15), Wright’s romantic fixation, on an object, flowers, is tempered by her awareness that these “flowers in the field” are “irrigated” by “rivers of tears and blood of lynch victims” (Wright 6). Wright continued to read Marcuse throughout the 1960s, and was especially moved by *One Dimensional Man* (1964), which she incorporates into various lectures throughout the 1970s and 80s.³⁸

Wright’s study of literary form and revolutionary theory, combined with repressed trauma of her youth (reopened by new but related forms of alienation, pain, hope and fear), resulted in the creation of a parageneric text. Through a composite of

³⁸ See Wright’s lecture, “The Responsibility of the Writer as Participant in the World Community,” given at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD, in 1971.

autobiography, historiography, the Russian epic,³⁹ and the tenets of naturalist fiction, Wright tells the story of a black family in the depths of economic, physical, and psychological collapse. Ultimately, though, each genre is emptied of its supervisory role via the singular voice of the novel's protagonist, Mariah Upshur.

Through syncopated rhythms, and jarring temporal juxtapositions, Wright chronicles two seasons of the life of Mariah Upshur, a poor, traumatized woman living in the "long tailed dismal swamp" (13) of Tangierneck, Maryland, with her husband, Jacob, and three children Horace (Rabbit), William (Skeeter), and Jesus (Gezee). Mariah has already lost one child, Mary, shortly after birth, and is pregnant with another. Mariah's pregnancy is laden with fear. A combination of postpartum depression, deep-seated religious guilt about its conception (the baby is not Jacob's but Dr. Greene's), and general misery about her circumstance has spoiled the pregnancy.

The novel opens on the dawn of the Great Depression, the economic crisis that produced the 20th century's most hardened fascist regimes and extensive network of resistance. Yet the way in which the global economic crisis functions in the novel has little in common with traditional forms of U.S. depression era literature, from Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), narratives in which the Depression serves as an impetus for organizational change. Nor does it quite fit into the cache of postwar fiction that revisits the Depression, such as Lloyd Brown's *Iron City* (1951) and John Oliver Killens' *Youngblood* (1954). Although the novel is set in the period of the Depression, and

³⁹ Wright especially admired Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokov's three-volume epic *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1965). Wright had planned to write at least one other book that would narratively follow *This Child's Gonna Live*, but never finished her revision.

opens with descriptive language that unequivocally announces its political affiliation— [the sun] “was gonna come up blazing red and hoe”—the historical and political reach of *This Child's Gonna Live* exceeds its dramatized chronology. While Wright depicts the corporeality of poverty in all of its naturalistic misery—sallow faces, atrophied limbs, and distended stomachs are ubiquitous; abuse is rampant, as is illiteracy and other brutal social realities—the novel's naturalism, its determinacy, is challenged by the form of its telling.

Wright deploys modernist techniques, especially those that distort the narrative's temporal frame, including flashbacks and retrospective interjections where the traumatizing scene is either deferred or withheld to communicate an account of a life that would, were it to conform to the standards of the classic naturalism, otherwise go untold. Beyond what could, if formally isolated, be described in much the same language as William Faulkner or Toni Morrison, the psychological and political take away of *This Child's Gonna Live* is suspended in a dialectic that dramatizes the political tensions between utopic-revolutionaries and cultural nationalists.

Moving beyond orthodox and outdated class divisions that pitted the working classes against the bourgeoisie, Wright emphasized the black working class's acquiescence to the needs of capital. Impressed by the cultural risks taken in *One Dimensional Man*, Wright dramatizes the limitations of an insular black community with a cultural psychology consonant with the interests of capital. This tension is represented primarily through Tangierneck's obsession with the land as an economic abstraction—as property. Comprehending their relationship as one marked by their “lack of property” or ownership of “property ” rather than as one marked by the transparent antithesis of

“labour” and “capital,”⁴⁰ the majority black citizens of Tangierneck strive to own the plots of land on which they live. In their striving for what they perceive to be an a more complete and secure existence, they not only fail to grasp the extent of their oppression, but nurture a system that would suffer by their indifference. While Wright, who was well versed in DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction*, if not Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, sought to the represent this striving (and Mariah’s disinterest) for the land as a central contradiction to black existence, her complex representation put her risk for accusations of race trading from black artists less concerned with complex representation. Rather than succumb to the growing number of voices who warned that such representation would reinforce cultural stigmas already in place, Wright retained a negative utopic sensibility. Rather represent an ideal world, she would instead foreground ideological divisions in black culture, focusing especially on under-discussed clashes within the ostensibly unified black working class.⁴¹

Further risking accusations of cultural betrayal, Wright indicts both men and women for perpetuating the oppressive ideals of capital onto their people. Although Wright faults both men and women for their complicity, she sustains a gendered distinction between social and political acquiescence. Whereas the novel’s male characters, due to their greater integration into American labor force and cultural

⁴⁰ See Marx, “Private Property and Communism” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (xxxix).

⁴¹ Mired in divisions among oppositional methods off the page, Wright had little trouble generating compelling material that represented the complex relationship between these sects. Still, Wright’s allegorical novel must not be confused with roman à clef. Despite key ideological overlaps between the political values upheld by the novel’s cultural nationalists (unnamed as such) and those who played such a key role in Wright’s life (from her family to major players in the Black Arts Movement), there is no evidence that supports a one to one correlation between any of the novel’s characters and figures from real life. *This Child’s Gonna Live* is not lived reality shrouded in a façade of fiction.

dominance over black women, tend to represent the greatest political threat to a socialist overhaul, socially, women police the attendant cultural values that result in the reproduction of compliant ideological subjects.

One of the most oppressive alliances in the novel is an all female church sect identified as the “Committee of her [Mariah’s] Judgment.” Comprised of more prominent members of the church, the committee’s sole responsibility is to publicly shame and cast out female members of the congregation who have committed adultery. With the accused men left untouched (recall, from the novel, that “boys is the first choice of God”), the women are physically abused inside the church, where they are made to confess their sin only to leave the ceremony unpardoned and dispossessed of any social value. In sharp contrast to her female literary forbears, especially Zora Neale Hurston, and in anticipation of the next wave of black female writers, including Toni Morrison, Wright indicts oppression among the female constituents of an all black community.

Although Wright rejected the revanchist impulse of male and female cultural black nationalists on humanist and political grounds, her criticism must not be mistaken for denunciation. In the novel, Wright favors a dialectical, if occasionally tortuous approach to the conflict between these two sects within the black working class. Nowhere is this dialectic more prominent than in the marriage of Mariah and Jacob Upshur. Inarguably the two characters in *This Child’s Gonna Live* who convey the most sophisticated principles of black nationalism and utopic Marxism, Mariah and Jacob remain committed despite unremitting ideological opposition. Aside from routine

disagreements that afflict any marriage, the two are at odds over the twinned issues of land and property.

While the communication between the couple approximates abuse, Wright employs a formal device—parallel inner monologues—to reveal the extent of their understanding through their anger and disappointment. Alternating from chapter to chapter, Wright explores the inner lives of a couple beaten down by systematic abuse. Wright also uses these occasions to expose the limits of each position. While Jacob occasionally imagines a life free of the grime and pain of *The Neck*, he refuses to think beyond or outside of dichotomous pairings. Any attempt to go further ends with Jacob comforting himself by reciting inherited patriarchal verse from the Bible and from the oral tradition within his culture, such as the one below, which is directed at Mariah.

Pull off them shoes I bought you

Pull off them socks I bought you

Pull off that hat I bought you

You know you mistreated me

Pull off that wig I bought you

Let your devilish head go bald. (Wright 103)

Although unafraid to confront the contradictions that have marked her life, Mariah's intellectual and affective resources permit her to examine exit strategies only insofar as they are attended by the potential repercussions to follow. Far from offering a neat calculation where the information is checked, balanced, and neatly synthesized, Mariah's imagined conglomerate is one of dreamworld and catastrophe. The previous

image is one offered by Susan Buck Morss in her brilliant study, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, which attempts to dislodge the concept of utopia from the Stalinist project. Wright, herself engaged in such a project while writing *This Child's Gonna Live* (recall her interest in Marcuse's *A Critique of Soviet Aesthetics*), appears to share Buck-Morss' thesis: that although the image of collective utopia must be maintained, its association to any form of state or national advancement must be severed.

In contrast to the complex dialectic that exists between Jacob and Mariah is the traditionally oppressive hierarchy maintained by the couple's parents, Momma Effie Harmon, Pop Rogie Harmon, Percy Upshur and Bertha Ann Upshur.⁴² Mariah's parents ridicule their daughter for her prospective political vision and abuse her for her suspected infidelity. The following lines, spoken by Mariah's mother in response to Mariah's desire to leave The Neck to forge a better life for herself and her children, evoke all three forms of censure:

All of this talk about you going away to the cities to make something of yourself don't mean a thing, cause you still don't see nothing but the flowers on the bushes. Ain't a decent woman enough for you to be? You'd better pray for God to send us a pretty day tomorrow so we can get out of here and pull some holly out of this swamp. We got to pay off this land. (Wright 10)

⁴² While all four are aligned with the cultural nationalist position, Jacob's parents own, not merely work, the land on which they live. This difference explains the nature of their attacks on their children.

What begins as a generic reproach of Mariah's personal and political naïveté quickly becomes a misdirected confession about the family's inability to pay off Tangierneck's wealthy and corrupt landowner Bannie Upshire. Momma Effie cloaks her own obsession with the family's debtor status in a principled harangue against Mariah's irresponsible utopic scheming. The proximity between the mother's fear based confession to her daughter's inspired suspension of oppressive truths offers a dialectic look at a traditionally bifurcated issue: the political function of utopia. For Momma Effie, utopia is a position of luxury, one that must be earned; as such, it is a position unavailable to the working classes. Yet Effie's thought process, laid bare in her interpretation of the possibility of historical difference as a personal and cultural affront, reveals both her own political and cultural nescience, and her latent desire for systematic otherness.

Through such scenes, Wright emphasizes the socio-historical contrast between the preceding and the rising generations of Tangierneck residents. While Mariah and Jacob possess a relatively simple utopic vision—of themselves in an urban environment away from green winters and, perhaps more importantly, the constraints of cultural and family allegiance—their capacity to imagine, even where their imagining is saddled with doubt, indicates Wright's unwavering belief in historical progress outside reified understandings of this progress as continuous and causal. A relatively orthodox Marxist in this respect, Wright is not interested in the elaboration of a "future politics," but in foregrounding the possibility of radical change in the present moment.

In view of Wright's painstaking, and painful, exploration of utopia in the face of extreme poverty, utter joylessness, and death, the novel's enigmatic end is something of a surprise to the reader. Comprised of a series of reversals that, were the reader not

habituated to the interruptive logic of Mariah's traumatized brain,⁴³ would read like a game of fort-da, begins with Mariah's return to Tangierneck from a season working in the Hillards' prosperous strawberry fields located miles from the hellish marshes of her people. Clear that her homecoming is not permanent—her first words, also the chapter's opening lines, are “I ain't come back for to stay”—she has returned for the funeral of her best friend, and Jacob's half sister, Vyella Upshur. Just days before Vyella's death, Mariah received a letter from her sister-in-law wherein the latter, also a well respected member of the Tangierneck church, confesses to multiple abortions and to having committed at least one act of incest with Jacob that resulted in the birth of Ned, her eight year old child. Well aware that her friend has been ex-communicated for lesser sins, Vyella urges Mariah to share the news with the congregation at her wake.

Mariah, whose dream it has been to condemn her oppressors in the moment of her own absolution, returns with full intent to fulfill Vyella's request. Almost immediately, she is met with resistance from the “Committee” who senses both her remove and resolve. For a time, Mariah is able to ignore their incessant threat that she do “Vyella's memory no harm” (261). Turning into herself, Mariah engages in a familiar dialog with a part of herself untouched by the world:

Don't answer her back, Mariah. Go on. Go on. You ain't even answered Jacob's question about what was in that letter... Gonna answer them all when you get in that church. Gonna tear out your breasts on the streets of Jerusalem. Gonna rip them from the sockets in the church of Tangierneck. They gonna be surprised what I say. (Wright 261-2, italics original)

⁴³ The tension between the will to confront traumatic events and to suppress them is the central dialectic to psychological trauma.

Even as she maintains her position of strength throughout the long funeral march, Mariah's incessant narration of the scene of which she is a part—of the line that “wound on, moaned, hesitated” and alternated between “crying sorrow” and “chattering”⁴⁴ about Vyella's efforts to build up Tangierneck's infrastructure—forecasts her fragility (264). Despite her efforts to keep a critical distance from the event, the walk through Cleveland Field, Tangierneck's burial ground where her son Rabbit was recently laid to rest, causes Mariah to dissociate. Lost in the grievous “madness tugging at her brain,” Mariah exits the field and enters the church from which she has been excommunicated. Upon entering, she met by her mother who grabs her violently and warns that if she makes trouble, she'll “make mincemeat out of [her] on this church aisle” (267). With the “church a-looking at her” (268) Mariah attempts to conserve what remains of her resolve but ultimately folds. Standing at the nave, the site of her beating eight years earlier, Mariah returns Vyella's letter to its place in her pocketbook, where her fingers come into contact with the thick stack of puckered and grimy cash saved from working the strawberry fields. Mariah strokes the money that was to afford her pending move to the city, and, despite every impulse in her body to do otherwise, vows to contribute to the town pool to build a new school in Vyella's name.

In the little space left, Wright has Mariah undergo the most dramatic of the final chapter's reversals. After Mariah has fled the church and evaded all attempts to usher her to the burial site, she returns to her old shack. Initially, she imagines that the interminable toil will “help her to forget and keep on marching” (269). But as she tries to settle into

⁴⁴ “Line chattered about how if it hadn't been for Vyella all these important white people wouldn't be down here today. All the big shots that's gonna give us the rest of the money to build this school—build this Neck up to something—give us jobs to pay off the land...” (Wright, *This Child* 264).

her duties, she is confronted by Jacob who once again admits that he has not saved the money he has promised, and needs to borrow from her savings “for the land.” Jacob’s mention of “the land,” the primary source of conflict between them, causes Mariah to disconnect. Clearly in the mood for confession, he follows this with another, non sequitur, admission: “You know Vyella was nothing but my adopted sister. Why would I have anything to do with her” (270). The proximity of these two confessions causes Mariah to dissociate. Leaving her money on the table, Mariah issues a set of instructions to her children for the following week, exits the house, and, as if in a trance, makes her way to the Gut, where she goes to end her life.

In a scene that appropriates the descriptive language of Kate Chopin’s gorgeous tragedy of domestic naturalism, *The Awakening* (reissued in 1964 by Capricorn after being out of print for fifty years, and thus, in circulation during the period of *This Child’s Gonna Live* production), Wright describes Mariah’s submergence into the Gut. Like Edna Pontellier, Mariah imagines herself “going on and on out to the ocean,” but in contrast to the bourgeois depressive, Mariah cannot expel her children from her thoughts, and, with “tears mixed all up in the Water of the Gut” begs for her children to live (272). With no transition to indicate her emergence from the water, Mariah returns home. Encountering Jacob en route, who declares his shock and concern at Mariah’s waterlogged hair and clothes, Mariah refuses to communicate with him and speaks only to herself. Her final words: “*Kiss my ass, Jacob.*”

Given my proposition that the novel operates on multiple levels as an allegorical critique of cultural black nationalism, Mariah’s return home risks being read an act of resignation. Yet what may be perceived as a lack of resolve, or, more gravely, a betrayal

of the novel's utopic impulse, is a temporary retrogression within the novel's dialectical hermeneutic. Although Mariah has not acted on her utopic wish, to flee the country for the city, the utopic form of her thought, evidenced by her desire for self-determination for herself and her children and her capacity to think beyond her material circumstance, has endured. For Wright, utopic representation is not a matter of wish fulfillment, nor does it necessitate the reflection of incremental change. Ultimately, Wright's purpose in *This Child's Gonna Live* is not to promote a viable political or economic strategy. The novel's utopic finish can be gleaned by Wright's final message: a reminder to the reader that the productive force of art is qualitatively different from that of labor: "its essentially subjective qualities assert themselves against the hard objectivity of the class struggle" (Marcuse 37).

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Conclusion

Constructing an African-American Marxist Avant-Garde

The trouble, however, is that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future.

—Hannah Arendt (*Between Past and Future*)

Because our struggle now has entered a quiet phase, do not think that we are not fighting. We are fighting the same old battle for freedom with other weapons...

—Richard Wright (*Black Power*)

I. On Method

In the Preface to *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1961)

Hannah Arendt explains the fragmentary form of her monograph as a “sequence determined by content and history” (15). Comprised of eight essays written between 1952 and 1961, each essay offers a particularized response to the political situation of post-WWII Europe, an historical moment—or “thought-event”—when “tradition began to fail,” and the “human mind had ceased to function properly” (10). Individually, each essay comments on the instability of a formerly stable political frontier: history, authority, freedom, education, culture, and the social. Taken together, however, these essays permit Arendt to pursue a more capacious and speculative form of inquiry: what it means for intellectuals to think and write in a moment of epistemological and political crisis. Moving dexterously between “past and future” and “criticism and experiment,” the

monograph's form reflects Arendt's theorization of the postwar moment as one "determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet" (14, 9). For Arendt, the unity of these essays, "is not the unity of a [realized] whole," but a composite of coordinates that begin to form a new political constellation of unknown magnitude (15).

Although confined to a European context, Arendt's refusal to impose a monolithic framework on singular, but related, postwar political phenomena resonates with my own ambivalence about unifying the discrete, but historically and politically connected, literary projects of African-American Cold War writers. My decision to unite these authors under the banner of an "emergent" aesthetic tendency—the avant-garde—reflects this ambivalence (Williams 122).⁴⁵ Rather than attempt to theorize the post-World War II moment as an authentic (and coherent) revolutionary moment of opposition, or to seek out a rubric more familiar to literary historical analysis of the African-American Left, such as one organized by a common geography, gender, sexuality, or institutional affiliation, I've attempted to preserve the non-identity of each author's expression of Marxist dissent in the form of individual case studies that do not, as in Arendt's calculation, add up to a "unified whole."

As a "*critique* of representation" the avant-garde "can only contradict itself as a stable form of representation." (Watten 46, italics original). Linked, as they are, by a resolute commitment to a position of anti-racist, anti-colonial class-consciousness

⁴⁵ Here I draw from Raymond Williams' definition of the "emergent" in his classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Formations that are in an emergent relationship to dominant culture are not only "new meanings and values, new practices and kinds of relationship," but specifically those which are "substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel" (123).

grounded in the Communist Left, the authors that animate this study are equally concerned with their own subjective relation to the calcified models of literary commitment that dominate their respective milieus: Richard Wright's literary foray into the institutionally unsanctioned territory of theoretical Marxism in *The Outsider* is shaped by his alienation from the Communist Party and French philosophical Marxism; Sarah Wright's feminist revision of the U.S. Left Depression narrative is at once an effect of and coded response to her marginalization in official forms of cultural and political belonging; and Rosa Guy's appropriation of surrealist techniques to challenge the representational constraints of critical social realism is inspired both by personal tragedy and a radical disidentification with masculinist tropes in black revolutionary writing.

What I alternatively call African-American literary Marxism, or the African-American literary Marxist avant-garde, then, refers to the varying aesthetic practices of authors who reflect suspiciously on the meaning making apparatuses that dominate their immediate intellectual, literary, political, and cultural circles. Through an aesthetic practice of *disarrangement*, a term drawn from Jacques Rancière's "Ten Theses On Politics" (2001), the normative distribution and arrangement of political of historical matter are re-presented as metacritique (Rancière 36).⁴⁶ No longer a mechanism used to

⁴⁶ Some Marxist critics, and here I am thinking of Pierre Macherey, deny the higher value of literary disarrangements of the political. Given that literary disarrangements "have no independent reality" outside the text and contain no transferrable value, the process of reading literature "with and against" politics is meaningless (Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production* 209). My own thinking, however, is more in line with Rancière, who describes as emancipatory this strategy of using the aesthetic to "propose to politics" various "re-arrangements of its space" in order to "produce new political effects" (Rancière, "Ten Theses" 119). While there is no direct line of communication between the art and politics, they are not "two permanent and separate realities about which it might be asked if they *must* be put in relation to one another." (Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 25-

affirm the consciousness of a movement, or advance a new form of historical subject, aesthetic practice becomes a means of transforming, rather than representing, the politically and historically irresolvable.

Identifying the specific character of this transformation is not immediately apparent, and so the reader (or interpreter) must engage in a practice of “deep reading.” As in a symptomatic reading, the reader must consider a text’s gaps and silences, its contradictions and absences, in order to make “the lacunae perceptible” (Althusser, *Reading Capital* 86). But the “unveiling” of meaning in these aporetic moments does not *only* indicate “repressed” matter inaccessible to the author and newly available to the reader (78). The process of “rewrite[ing] the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code” can also reveal truths more or less intentionally generated by the author (Jameson *Political Consciousness* 60). To recover the revolutionary import of an aesthetic practice, the interpreter must neither reduce literary interpretation to a mere description of surfaces nor abstract an author’s aesthetic labor from its specific historical context.

This methodological negotiation between surface and depth, and between close reading and archival reconstruction, is an implicit critique of the psychoanalytic investment in a textual “unconscious.” Rather than reduce a text’s contradictions to veiled operations of unconscious thought and gaps and silences to “repressed matter,” the method advanced in *Beyond the Blueprint* takes into account the dynamic and idiosyncratic interplay of a mélange of “conscious” contexts—cultural, historical, environmental, temporal, and biographical—as guided by the aesthetic form of a specific

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text. While each text contains “its own gloss,” (Todorov 1), the contextually-nuanced narrative that gives that gloss meaning exists elsewhere, in an unanswered letter, a preface to an edition long out of print, a photograph, an unpublished manuscript.

II. What’s Left?: Building an Archive

Beyond the Blueprint joins a growing field of dedicated Left scholarship invested in the “intellectual decolonization” of the Cold War era (Wald, “From Triple Oppression” 25). Its particular contribution is a historically informed formalism, a method that aims to resuscitate the political and aesthetic value of lost, forgotten, and maligned literature produced in the middle of the “most fateful of all centuries” (Wright, *White Man Listen* 78). It is my hope that in addition to offering a modest corrective to the political legacies and literary imaginations of Richard Wright, Rosa Guy, and Sarah Wright, this study will encourage others to expand the archive of mid-twentieth-century African-American Marxist writers beyond the constraints imposed by institutional affiliation (in particular, the Communist Party) and aesthetic expectations and conventions associated with Left literary “commitment.”

Hardly a self-contained study, *Beyond the Blueprint’s* political, historical, and methodological aspirations exceed its imposed parameters. The chapters on Sarah Wright and Rosa Guy, for example, only begin to suggest their contributions to post-45 black Marxist internationalism. A more complete narrative of Guy’s contribution to the Harlem anticolonial Left would require inquiry into her various political commitments to the struggles of Afro-Caribbean subjects in Trinidad, Haiti, the United States, and the United Kingdom. A starting point for such inquiry exists in a series of lectures given by Guy between 1965-1985 that link the “plight and protests of urban Afro-Americans” in

the U.S. (as exemplified by riots in Watts, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Harlem, Newark, and Washington D.C. in the 1960s and early 1970s) to the resistance movements of Afro-British under Margaret Thatcher (i.e. riots in Liverpool and Brixton in the 1980s) (Guy, “Black Youth and the Riots”). What might these lectures, when read alongside Guy’s extensive literary corpus, contribute to extant studies on post-45 transatlantic black radicalism spurred by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993)?

A more complete vision of Sarah Wright’s feminist critique of masculinist, nationalist aspirations for property in *This Child’s Gonna Live* begs the recovery of its sequel, an unpublished manuscript titled *Twelve Gates to the City, Hallelujah!*, presently held in the Emory University Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library. Ellisonian in her compulsive crafting and re-crafting of literary prose, Wright “worked on [the] sentences” of *Twelve Gates to the City, Hallelujah!* for thirty years (Wright, Letter to Joseph Kaye, 1995). Wright’s aesthetic investment, combined with the epic reach of her ambition to produce a trilogy organized around the unsung contributions of black women to the making of a pro-womanist future of black self-determination, poses a powerful challenge to masculinist assumptions that have shaped the narratives and priorities of African-American literary history.

Although further reaching in scope and context, my two chapters on Richard Wright only begin to suggest a framework for future inquiry into the unexplored political valences of Wright’s postwar aesthetic. What might my narrative of Wright’s Marxist evolution teach us about *Savage Holiday* (1954), Wright’s pulpy exploration of white subjectivity, or the complicated form and content of his anticolonial ethnography of

revolutionary Ghana, *Black Power* (1954)? Finally, how does one reconcile Wright's move away from capacious, historically and politically fraught narratives into the minimalist aesthetic of the haiku form? Was this move an attempt at emotional catharsis in the wake of his mother's death, as suggested by Julia Wright in the Introduction to her father's posthumously published *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon* (2012), or a symptom of Wright's political fatigue?

As Alan Wald urges in his conclusion to *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2012), "the mission for future scholarship is to reverse enforced forgetting" (Wald 316). To remember is to look beyond the blueprint to the rewards that accompany the recovery of literature produced in this remarkable, if overlooked, moment of revolutionary energy.

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