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RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE DAILY WORKER: A NATIVE SON'S JOURNALISTIC APPRENTICESHIP

by

DEXTER JEFFRIES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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Abstract

RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE DAILY WORKER: A NATIVE SON'S JOURNALISTIC APPRENTICESHIP

by

Dexter Jeffries

Adviser: Professor Neal Tolchin

Before Richard Wright was a writer of fiction, he was already composing newspaper and magazine articles for various left wing publications during the early 1930's. Being a journalist, practicing the trade of writing and recording events in an objective and methodical manner, is a classical sort of apprenticeship for American writers. Between the years 1936 and 1938 Richard Wright was the Harlem Editor of the Daily Worker. He wrote and edited over two-hundred articles. These articles contain the roots of his fiction. In them one can observe Wright's early fascination with Marxism, the price African Americans paid making a transition from rural to urban life, and the positive capacity for integrating politics and art. This paper will examine those articles, looking for trends and

patterns in his writing that would later manifest themselves in his fiction. In addition, it will seek to explore how a fiction writer compromised and mediates reality, if it is too ugly and grotesque to bear. This was the balancing act that confronted Wright on a daily basis, and it obligated him to occasionally reconfigurate reality, which an artist should do but a journalist should avoid. Mediating these antithetical forces was Wright's legacy as a reporter and editor for the Daily Worker.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this dissertation could not have been written and finished without the first rate work and assistance of Steven Pantusco. His patience, stamina and courage placed the articles from the Daily Worker comfortably into my hands. He made this dissertation not only a possibility, but a reality. Semper Fi! This project has a history to it that begins with Professor Leonard (Lenny) Kriegel's tutelage and encouragement during my early graduate days at City College when he would boom at me, "Somebody has to do something about Wright's radical days." He was right. It is dedicated to him and another mentor who unfortunately did not live to see it come to fruition, Professor Addison Gayle. Professor Addison Gayle was my first advisor at the CUNY Graduate Center; he quietly advised and counseled me to explore new literary territory in his patient and gentle way.

A kind word must be extended toward Professor Evelyn Barrish who was very supportive and did not flinch at working with new material and new authors.

No one writes hundreds of pages flawlessly without assistance; therefore, this work could not have been completed without the proofreading skills of Alan Carr. Despite his busy days he found time and interest to read and reread my work.

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My advisor, Professor Neal Tolchin, retrieved and saved a doctoral student by believing in what I had to say and that I could overcome many obstacles and hurdles of a professional and personal nature. There is a fine thread and connection between Professor Kriegel, Professor Gayle and Professor Tolchin. They love literature and have helped anyone with a commensurate passion.

Finally, I must thank my Mom and Dad, Stanley and Marilyn Diaz, who brought me up in a house that was filled with an abundance of books and the love, reassurance, and confidence to read them.

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Chapter 1 - Natchez to Chicago: A Native Son's Most Important Journey

Richard Wright was born in the Jim Crow South in 1908. Because of these two facts involving time and place, he was irrevocably cast into the maelstrom of America racism when it was at its zenith. Legally enforced racial segregation, rigid and unyielding with all of its social, economic and psychological consequences initially determine his identity and consciousness. Later, during the 1920's Wright was to participate in one of the largest migrations in history, that of one and a half million African-Americans from the rural south to the urban north (1890-1930). Wright survived the early years of The Great Depression on the hard, cold and wind swept streets of Chicago, maintaining a threadbare existence because of his good fortune of having a temporary position at the U.S. Post Office. Hunger had been a theme of his early life. Ten years later, not completely satisfied with the reception that his most famous book Native Son had received, "Wright had been trying for a long time to make white Americans understand the black world they refused to confront partly because they were responsible for it" (UQRW 251). His efforts to make "white Americans understand" resulted in the writing of Black Boy, 1945. Chapter after chapter of Black Boy sounds the theme of near

starvation:

> Once again I knew hunger, biting hunger, hunger that made my body aimlessly restless, hunger that kept me on edge, that made my temper flare, hunger that made hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent's tongue, hunger that created in me odd cravings. No food that I could dream of seemed so utterly delicious as vanilla wafers . . . (BB 89)

His problem of physical sustenance was allayed by the salary that his government job provided. He nurtured his mind by attending meetings of the John Reed Club and later highly structured meetings of the American Communist Party. Without any conscious effort on his part, Wright slowly evolved into an archetypal American writer as he explored all of the social and political boundaries that existed in the United States at the time. Perhaps it is a contradiction of sorts to think of Wright in this sense since he is Black. It is a bona fide paradox when one acknowledges that the color of his skin, the badge of denigration that flung him to the outer margins of society,

was also responsible for imbuing so much of his work with a sense of universality.

Wright was the quintessential outsider and itinerant wanderer, a genuine Hawkeye, an Ishmael. He travels throughout the South, journeys across the United States and later, like a character in a Henry James novel, discovers himself an expatriate in Europe for the last fifteen years of his life. Like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, he teaches himself the craft of writing based on the practical experience that comes from the world of journalism. Just as Mark Twain surfaced as a reporter in Virginia City, Nevada, and Ernest Hemingway served his apprenticeship with the Toronto City Star, Wright commences his writing career as the editor of the Harlem edition of the Daily Worker. Embryonic ruminations can be seen in his short story collection, Uncle Tom's Children published in 1938. He experimented with poetry and after discovering the novel, in 1940, published a book which set a sales record for Harper and Row, Native Son. Wright's work "sold 200,000 copies in less than three weeks, breaking a twenty-year record at Harper's" (UQRW 186).

As a young man, Wright suffered all of the indignities that the American caste system of second class citizenship could heap upon him. African Americans were routinely

lynched, burned or tortured during his formative years; John Hope Franklin records that, "in the last sixteen years of the nineteenth century there had been more that 2,500 lynchings...In the very first year of the new century more than 100 Negroes were lynched and before the outbreak of World War I the number for the century had soared to more than 1,100" (FSTF 322). Lynching was so prominent, so pervasive, that Ida B. Wells felt compelled to publish, A Red Record, Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States. She commenced keeping this data in 1892. For every Black life destroyed without any semblance of a redress of that grievance, an imperceptible shudder unsettled the Black political world of the time in America. The silence of Black artists in reaction to this era of legalized repression was a reflection of a complacent community completely cognizant of its impotence. Now, it is difficult to believe that Billie Holiday's recording of "*Strange Fruit,*" that Jazz classic about the lynching of Blacks released in 1939, was the first time the brutal public torture of Black people was condemned by a celebrity of stature.

Wright was the first Black writer to shatter this unnerving and repressive silence. He was in a category all by himself. Irving Howe's essay, "Black Boys and Native

Sons," recognized this:

> The Day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible the repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. (TCI 3)

Surely, Black voices fostering some sort of resistance abound before Wright stretching from Phyllis Wheatley to Frederick Douglas in the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. Francis Watkins Harper held forth as an orator-poet for the abolitionist movement from 1854-1865. In addition, her sentimental novel Iola Leroy (1892) appealed to a large reading audience. In the later half of the 19th century there is Charles Chestnutt's The Conjure Woman, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry. A contemporary of theirs would have been Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins who founded

the literary magazine, Colored American in 1900. 1901 saw the publication of Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery. In 1903 W.E.B. DuBois' monumental The Souls of Black Folk presented a comprehensive historical and sociological analysis Black America, profoundly stating that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line--the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, and American and the islands of the sea" (DuBois 221). An enigmatic figure, Jean Toomer crossed all genre boundaries with his poetic and lyrical Cane (1922). Lastly, a master of dialect because of her linguistic and anthropological training at Columbia University and an early African American feminist, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) became a literary milestone for a generation of African American women writers.

However, Wright is the only Black author to disrupt that false calm that existed between the world of Blacks and Whites. It is a world (the first quarter of the twentieth century) in which Booth Tarkington can freely use the word "nigger" and other derogatory remarks as often as he desires in this popular story for children, Penrod (also known among a generation of youngsters as The Adventures of Penrod and Sam):

> Penrod's familiar nose had been as close with only a ticklish spinal

> effect upon the not very remote descendant of Congo man-eaters. The result produced by the glare of Rupe's unfamiliar eyes, and by the dreadfully suggestive proximity of Rupe's unfamiliar nose, was altogether different. Herman's and Verman's Bangala great-grandfathers never considered people of their own jungle neighborhood proper material for a meal, but they looked upon strangers--especially truculent strangers--as distinctly edible. (Tarkington 240)

In 1933, a respected publishing company, MacMillan, brought out an anthology for college students, American Literature: The Rise of Realism 1860-1888 which contained in the section titled "folklore, Negro," a series of racist little ditties by Thomas W. Talley, written in a contrived Negro voice and dialect with stanzas like this:

> Fer w'en a Nigger gits lazy,
> An' stops to take short naps,
> De weeds an' grass is shore to grow
> An smudder out his craps (Talley 26)

F. Scott Fitzgerald was just as unconscious as he describes African Americans in The Great Gatsby as "three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry" (Fitzgerald 69). F.W. Dixon, author of the ever ubiquitous Hardy Boys series, employed "like a nigger in a woodpile" any time he required a metaphor depicting lazy and slovenly behavior on the part of a white character.

Wright was the first prominent Black author to demolish and upset the complacency of the American literary conscience in a significant manner, one which could be neither ignored nor co-opted. The nightmarish Chicago landscape of Native Son, Bigger's murders of Mary and Bessie, and finally his numbness to his own feelings, were an assault on the racist hierarchy of the United States. The autobiographical work Black Boy and the short story collection Uncle Tom's Children attacked a three century-old tradition of racial apartheid in the United States and held for all to see the caste system of peripheral citizenship which effectively excluded Blacks from any positive facet of society.

Claude McKay, the Jamaican born poet who achieved fame during The Harlem Renaissance, captured this marginalization

in the poem "Outcast." Here with a tone and style heavily imbued with a romantic sensibility the Jamaican born poet writes:

> For the dim regions whence my fathers came
> My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs
> Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
> My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
> I would go back to darkness and to peace,
> But the great wester world holds me in fee,
> And I may never hope for full release
> While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
> Something in me is lost, forever lost,
> Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
> And I must walk the way of life a ghost
> Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.
>
> For I was born, far from my native clime
> Under the white man's menace, out of time. (McKay 372)

Wright's main character was America too, and his writing was to plague the American conscience. After reading Wright's Uncle Tom's Children, Eleanor Roosevelt responded in her column in the New York Post writing, "it is beautifully written and so vivid that I had a most unhappy time reading it," (UQRW 163) demonstrates just how much prodding was to be required of the American psyche before it would be provoked to commence any sort of formal action. Wright was pleased to hear that Mrs. Roosevelt was emotionally overwrought. At the same time, he passionately hoped that she would be the catalyst behind some legislative action that would directly improve the lives of Black Americans during the 1930's.

Wright's body of work also possesses a concern for man's dilemma that manifests itself in characters embarking on journeys which result in moral victories and reaching of ethical resolutions. Before Wright, American's literary protagonists drifted to the fringe before their vision clarified. Huck Finn is compelled to raft down the Mississippi with Jim, and Tom has to flee the wrath of Aunt Polly before they can attain the introspective distance demanded of one if they are to be transformed into an official outsider. In order to undergo his metamorphosis into an official satellite circling the American consciousness, Hawkeye must abandon the settlement and the "sound of the axe" to join Uncas and Chingachgook in the Mohawk valley before he can achieve the remoteness which guarantees his autonomy, thereby enabling him to comprehend the true significance of the waning of the frontier way of life. In order that he better understand the universe and his relationship to it, Ishmael must disengage himself from the activities of New Bedford and go whaling. Jake Barnes pursues the path of the ex- communicant by remaining in Paris after World War I.

However, Wright's exploration of isolation and exile generated a modality new to American literature. None of Wright's characters are under the same imposition, a

physical dismissal to the outer boundaries of society. Neither contract nor obligation demands that they depart society in order to reevaluate it, reassess and rethink their values, hopes, dreams and fears. It is not necessary to embark on a journey or a quest. Wright's characters are different, inherently because of the color of their skin. Bigger Thomas, Bobbo, Lester, Mann, Big Boy, Cross Damon of The Outsider, or Fishbelly of The Long Dream, are born permanent outcasts.

The contrast can be richly illustrated with the following example. When Huck relinquishes the raft, when Ishmael is plucked from the vast and rolling Pacific by Captain Gardiner's ship, "The Rachel," their voyages as American Adams (Lewis 5), as explorers making discoveries about humanity, perhaps reinventing themselves, these investigations into their identities are concluded. However, for Wright's characters their "blackness" is fixed. Color and the contemptible societal denigration that accompanies it does not terminate with return passage to New Bedford. To be Black in America means that one is cast irrevocably to the fringe of society. African American characters in Wright's world are immutable strangers with eyes trained from birth to be introspective. Big Boy, for instance, as portrayed in "Big Boy Leaves Home," possesses a

cultivated scepticism, a self-seeded cynicism that is best delineated in the following passage:

> "Yuh see," began Big Boy, "when a ganga guys jump on yuh, all yuh gotta do is put the heat on one of them n make im tell the others t let up, see?"
> "Gee thas a good idee"
> "Yeah, thas a good idee"
> "But yuh almost broke mah neck, man" said Bobo.
> "Ahma smart nigger," said Big Boy, thrusting out his chest. (UTC 23-24)

Wright's special perspective on American life and its obsessive passion for racial rancor was constantly being engendered throughout his life. In 1941, he committed the ultimate transgression in a racially segregated society when he married Ellen Poplar, a white communist, from Brooklyn, New York. With this being an *illegal* act in every southern state at the time and frowned upon throughout the rest of the country, Wright's marriage placed him in the vulnerable position of arousing hate and antipathy when he escorted his wife on any daily domestic routine. Even the liberal, bohemian and iconoclast Greenwich Village of Thornton Wilder

would greet Wright with an ample dose of racial animosity:

> He still had to have his hair cut in Harlem, go only to certain restaurants he knew would serve him and be called "boy" by the neighborhood shopkeepers. His Italian neighbors were unabashed in their hostility, making disagreeable remarks and muttering threats against the "nigger." In the spring of 1947, gangs of young white hoodlums began to invade Greenwich Village, throwing Blacks out of the restaurants and molesting interracial couples. Richard began to be afraid for his family. He was just as enraged to be insulted on the streets when walking with Ellen or another white woman as he was when served salted coffee (a popular trick on Blacks at that time), but he contained himself. (UQRW 312)

In the 1950's he was to experience another formidable dimension of exile when his isolation was further compounded by a previous ten-year commitment to communism and left wing

politics which he had terminated in 1942. As a member of the communist party, Wright recognized that America had an additional cross for a quintessential outsider to bear; it was imparted to him that there were severe remonstrations for maintaining political allegiances which were no longer congruent with the national mood and temperament. By remaining a communist for more than ten years, Wright clearly demonstrated his loyalty to an organization which was to provoke one of the most spurious political hysterias in American history and one of the most malignant witch hunts in the twentieth century. Although Wright left the American Communist Party in 1942 and lived in Europe as an expatriate from 1945 until his death in 1960, America neither forgave nor forgot his earlier political commitment. Despite his relocation to France, Great Britain, Spain, and Africa, Wright was to experience subtle and at times more explicit forms of political harassment throughout the 1950's. Retaining his passport for long periods of time was a favorite tactic of the United States State Department during this era.

Wright's predicament in the 1950's was particularly painful when one realizes that there existed a racial estrangement in his life that effectively erected barriers between him and white society but also between himself and

the Black community. Black writers and critics, particularly James Baldwin, seemed to betray Wright, after initially supporting him and employing him as a source of inspiration and a role model. In Baldwin's essay, "Alas Poor Richard" published in Nobody Knows My Name (1961), he argues that Wright was so damaged during his youthful years in the South, that he possessed internal demons that would prevent him from ever coming to terms with his Blackness, his heritage, his culture, and his people. Consequently, because of this alienation from a definitive Black consciousness, Baldwin and others felt that Wright could not be a legitimate spokesman for the Black experience. Though this generation of writers and thinkers was originally inspired by Wright's great works, Native Son and Black Boy, he was no longer Black enough nor was he sufficiently proud.

Oedipal generational conflicts aside, there are some assessments that can be made regarding the literary ramifications of Wright's life. First, Wright's experience qualified him to approach and navigate his way through themes of isolation and resistance in a manner which is simultaneously personal, social and universal. When studying the reverberations of being placed on the fringes of mainstream society, Houston Baker wrote in Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance:

> Relegated by a national white consensus to marginality, a position resonant only with *different* expressive possibilities ("and often communicating by horns"), the *New Negro* seeks community and self-consciously pursues democratic advantage through the medium of race.
>
> Words of Richard Wright's narrator in *Black Boy* come to mind: 'I did not embrace insurgency through open choice.' (Baker 81)

Baker's critique is precise and the selection of that particular line from Black Boy is cogent. Wright's connection to the American Communist Party and the ensuing journalism he did for the party newspaper could be summed up in that manner, a reluctant "insurgency," a poetic insurrection. Black authors are traditionally, almost by default, placed in this position. To rebel is also an inherent quality of the artist. T.S. Eliot had argued this point rather brilliantly in 1924 in "The Tradition and The Individual Talent." For Wright, what were the literary ramifications of a coupling of the artist with rebellion,

but a more formalized revolt that demands the writer's conscience and active participation. Wright recalled how this realization struck him to the core of his existence when he first joined the John Reed Club in Chicago:

> It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. My cynicism--which had been my protection against an America that had cast me out--slid from me and, timidly, I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. My life as a Negro had led me to feel--though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself--that the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself; for I felt that without a common bond uniting men, without a continuous

> current of shared thought, like blood
> coursing through the body, there
> could be no living worthy of being
> called human. (AH 63)

Wright's successful handling of such literary themes as isolation and resistance is a result of him being able to digest this sort of experience and therein imbuing it with a social and personal framework. Wright, though not as aesthetically innovative, profound, and adroit as Baldwin or Ellison, maintained a consistency throughout his work. From his short stories contained in his first major publication, Uncle Tom's Children, to his major works, Native Son and Black Boy, and even in his less successful books such as The Long Dream and The Outsider, one is continuously offered a vision of the individual inextricably engaged in a fierce struggle with an omnipotent society. The determinants of the struggle are multiple: class, race, family, ideology, and the irreducible core of human personality. The multiple perspectives that he was capable of bringing to bear on the struggles of his protagonists accounted for a significant portion of the richness, resonance, and relevance of his best work. Whatever defects Wright's work might possess, and the charges range from a "style too simple and too naturalistic to be truly literary," to a vision obscured by

Marxist doctrine, Wright confronts readers with events and characters, who have, as Baldwin says, permanently "scarred and scalded" the American consciousness.

Wright's early and background life is far removed from that of the literary politico he becomes some day, attending clandestine meetings of the John Reed Club in Chicago and such. To be born an African American in 1908, in Natchez, Mississippi, meant that without some sort of radical intervention, Wright's life could have been formulaic, controlled and nightmarish. Richard Wright's life commences at a time in American history when DuBois' "color line" is a monumental obstacle. Encouraged by the state and federal government, racism laid waste to the Black community at the turn of the century. American racism, as it manifested itself in the south, was an illness, a pathological disease with twisted social and psychological machinations. It was responsible for the warping of the fabric of American life. John Hope Franklin's monumental From Slavery to Freedom gives an apt appraisal of the general conditions of the violence present in American life:

> In the very first year of the new century more than 100 Negroes were lynched, and before the outbreak of World War I the number for the

century had soared to more than 1,100. The South was far ahead of the rest of the country, but several Northern states, notably those in the Midwest adhered to the ancient practice of total disregard for the law. Although the impression was widely held that most of the Negroes lynched had been accused of raping white women, the records do not sustain this impression. In the first fourteen years of the twentieth century only 315 lynch victims were accused of rape of attempted rape, while more than 500 were accused of homicide, while the others were accused of robbery, insulting white persons, and numerous other 'offenses.' Regardless of the alleged crime of the victim, lynching in the twentieth century continued to be an important part of the system of the system of punishment in the United States. (FSTF 323)

Wright was born into a world of post Civil War serfdom. Slavery was abolished in 1865. Reconstruction, as an era of progress and reform, was snuffed when Rutherford B. Hayes, in 1877, removed all Federal troops from the South. Within a few years, with so many reactionary forces waiting in the wings, including many officers who had served in the Confederate army, and former plantation owners, whatever progress that had been made was quickly arrested and rescinded. Southern states hobbled the lives of Blacks with the infamous Black Codes that limited freedom of movement and choice in ways suggestive of the recently dismantled Apartheid of South Africa. Enrollment in chain gangs swelled as Black southerners were "pressed" into this legal form of slavery for the smallest infraction of the law. Of course, some times, just being a human being who refused to be abused or denigrated was more than enough to land one in this form of servitude.

It was during the years 1880-1930 that certain structures of American society (following the lead of racial theorists in Western Europe) embraced similar theories of racial superiority. It was an unfortunate period in American history since not only were these theories expounded and freely articulated, but many of them were put into practice. Maturing into a young adult during the years

that these sordid ideas were being applied was to have a profound affect on the reality that Wright grew up in. In those fifty years the intellectualization of racism within the academic community was accomplished, and it was consequently integrated into the college curriculum for American students. Thomas Gossett points out in Race: The History of an Idea in America:

> There was, for examples, Nathaniel Southgate who became dean of the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard. In 1884 he wrote an essay, 'The Negro Problem,' published in the Atlantic, in which he viewed with sympathy the attempts in the south to disenfranchise the Negro. Shaler had been a pupil of Louis Agassiz; he subscribed to the old theory that a Negro child is just as bright as a white child until the age of puberty, but beyond this point his 'animal nature settled like a cloud over that promise.' In addition, the Negro's innate nature and uncontrollable immorality made him unfit for an independent place in a

> civilized state.' What progress the Negro has made he owed to the discipline of slavery. As a free man, the Negro showed a strong tendency, which was probably ineradicable, to return to his naturally savage state. Convinced that the Negroes were a dying race, Shaler recommended that they be scattered over the United States to prevent their becoming an overwhelming burden for any one section. Because they were incapable of higher education, their schools should be limited to instruction in the lower grades since 'as a race they are capable of taking pride in handiwork.' (281)

Wright's social problems were exacerbated and intensified by a family life that was riddled with the desertion of his father and an interminable transience as the family moved from one home to another. The Wright family had already been living in poverty even before the father's removal. After his departure, their poverty rivaled that of a Dickens novel with the family living hand to mouth, on donations, and charity from other relatives;

all of this left a permanent mark on Wright's life. He suffered physically from continual hunger for many of his early years and discovered himself to be undernourished and underweight into his mid-twenties:

> In order to continue working for the post office, that autumn Wright had to have a medical examination which he failed, as he had feared he would. More rest, and a diet of milk and steak had not compensated for twenty years of under-nourishment; he did not weigh the minimum one hundred and twenty-five pounds required. (UQRW 77)

Moving through the South from one small town to another, living an existence that parallels the Joad family of Steinbeck's epic, The Grapes of Wrath, there was little room for stability of any kind. Mississippi to Tennessee, Tennessee to Arkansas, and then back to Mississippi, left Wright a vagabond. When the Wright family finally settled in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1920's, it was there that he received the longest uninterrupted stretch of his formal education. This lasted only a few months for by the "age of twelve I had only one full year of formal schooling" (BB 87).

Somehow, not withstanding these wretched conditions of hunger, a mother whose parenting skills included brutal beatings and a matriarchal grandmother imbued with Seventh Day Adventism who sought to justify this Spartan existence, Wright's own perseverance drove him to be the valedictorian of his high school. In this barren home where reading anything but the Bible was forbidden, he achieved another success with the clandestine publication of a short story titled, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre." It was published in a Negro newspaper, the Southern Register, in 1924. Wright's ability to endure and dream is summed up in a retrospective closing of Chapter Seven of Black Boy:

> I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital had striven

> to keep out of Negro life; I was
> beginning to dream the dreams that
> the state had said were wrong, that
> the schools had said were taboo. (BB 148)

Because he possessed a sensitivity that made him vulnerable to the social and psychological antagonisms that surrounded him, Wright was more than vaguely aware of the need to escape this brutal and repressive world. He was to work at odd jobs despite his qualifications for more skilled positions. A Jim Crow world severely limited his social and economic life. A Jim Crow world, as Wright points out in despair, can ruin and distort one's sense of himself. Wright actually contemplated that perhaps the only solution to the pain of segregation and permanent second class citizenship was a violent act of protest that would automatically ensure a violent end to his own life. Suicidal, no doubt, Wright placed his most solemn thoughts into words. In Chapter Ten of Black Boy Wright described his worst fear with, "above all, I wanted to avoid trouble, for I feared that if I clashed with whites I would lose control of my emotions and spill out words that would be my sentence of death." By the time Wright was seventeen, he readily acknowledged that he would not spend the rest of his life in the American South.

With a dream of heading to the North, he saved his money in a miserly manner, sometimes only a dollar a week. Wright was patient. He had to be. Leaving, or better put, escaping the South was permeated with its own special brand of intrigue and paranoia. James R. Grossman's recent study, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration, provides a highly detailed account of what a trip from the South to the North demanded from a Southern Black who was resourceful enough to start the journey:

> Some localities applied more direct pressures to keep blacks off the trains. In Macon, Georgia, police forcibly evicted several hundred Chicago-bound blacks from the railroad station. Unsure he could continue to intimidate 'surly' blacks without more firepower, the chief of police promptly requested forty rifles to augment the pistols and clubs carried by his men. Outside nearby Americus, police boarded a train and arrested fifty would-be migrants. At Summit, Mississippi, local officials simply closed the

> railroad ticket office and had the
> trains pass through without stopping.
> "The southern whites are trying very
> hard to keep us from the north,"
> understated an anxious Lousisianian
> hoping to leave for Chicago as
> soon as possible. (LOH 48)

Fortunately, Wright beat the odds.

With Wright's entrance into Chicago in 1925, a new phase of his life commenced, socially, economically and most important, politically. The Chicago of the late 1920's was a relatively integrated metropolis compared to Memphis. It is "Laughing, the stormy, husky, brawling, laughter of Youth, half naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation." Sandburg's vision could have had an additional line about "Black and white, living shoulder to shoulder." Wright was in awe as most southern Blacks who journeyed to northen cities were during The Great Migration. The short story "City of Refuge," (1925) by Rudolph Fisher, captured the exuberance of a rural peasant as he sets foot on the concrete sidewalk of New York: "Done died an' woke in Heaven. In Harlem, black is white. You have rights that cannot be denied you; you have privileges, protected by law.

And you have money. Everybody in Harlem has money." Wright experienced similar feelings, though not in such a bombastic manner. The threat of physical violence was dissipated. He could now eat in restaurants, indulge in the luxury of borrowing books from the public library, and even, as he points out in American Hunger, sit any where he pleased on a trolley car:

> The streetcar came. Aunt Maggie motioned for me to get on and pushed me toward a seat in which a white man sat looking blankly out of the window. I sat down beside the man and looked straight ahead of me. After a moment I stole a glance at the white man out of the corners of my eyes; he was still staring out of the window, his mind fastened upon some inward thought. I did not exist for him; I was as far from his mind as the stone buildings that swept past in the street. It would have been illegal for me to sit beside him in the part of the South that I

had come from. (AH 2)

In the early chapters of American Hunger, Wright illustrates how the heritage of his early years in the south were deeply embedded in his consciousness. For instance, while working a delicatessen, he learned that the United States Post Office was issuing an exam. Knowing that this was a first rate opportunity for him at the time, he applied for the exam but was dismayed to discover that it was going to be administered on a workday. The dilemma for a southern black, as he reveals in the following passage, goes far beyond just creating a subterfuge for getting a day off from work:

> In the south it would have been an unwise policy for a Negro to have gone to his white boss and ask for time to take an examination for another job. It would have implied that the Negro did not like to work for the white boss, that he felt he was not receiving just consideration and, in as much as most jobs that Negroes held in the south involved a personal, paternalistic relationship, he would

> have been risking an argument that
> might have led to violence. (AH 8)

Wright took the day off without notice and was placed in the awkward position when his employer cornered him a day later and informed him that there was no reason to be deceitful; the owner, an old Jewish man, would have gladly given Wright the day off. Guilty as he may have been and painfully conscious of how he was removed from the South physically, but had really not progressed psychologically, this was the most important decision Wright was to make since his job as a postal clerk was to put him into direct contact with a new world. This world of literature and politics was going to have the most profound influence on his life. Margaret Walker's account follows:

> It was in the Chicago Post Office
> that Wright first met his radical
> and intellectual friends, including
> Abe Aaron. For the first time in
> his life, he made friends with white
> as well as black men--Irish, Jewish,
> and Negro--and ended the terrible
> isolation he had known from the
> world of books and the arts,

literature and writing. (DG 62)

Because of a particular score on a civil service exam and his ability to gain the needed weight, Wright's life was altered in a manner unimaginable to him, and it and it had little to do with being a member of the United States Postal Service.

Wright's Chicago

In his introduction to the Great Depression classic, The Disinherited, Daniel Aaron wrote the following assessment of that historical epoch:

> Although no titanic literary figure emerged during the Great Depression with the Balzacian grasp of its details or the Tolstoyan insight to comprehend its social turbulence, the Thirties produced in large quantities a kind of tendentious reporting or "reportage," as it was called, and short stories and novels which explored the American jungle. Some of the articles and books were almost literally messages from the pit written by people with names that sounded outlandish at least to old stock Americans. And their subjects seemed unusual and shocking as well; the despair of the jobless; the routine of a worker in an auto factory, a steel mill, a textile plant; the downward careers of

> box-car hoboes; the techniques of "pearl diving," "rolling drunks, constructing Hoovervilles" "Roosevelt Roosts"; the planning and execution of a strike. These writers, for all their naivete and crudity, were uncovering their own lives, announcing what they had seen and done. They added a fresh impetus to the movement of literary realism and helped to break down the barriers between literate and unliterate America. (Aaron ix)

This description in most respects, can be applied to Richard Wright. The notion that one simply had to report, as opposed to just writing, creating and composing is a provocative thesis. Why? What was there about the America of the 1930's that stimulated such a response from its talented minds? The immediacy of the crisis was no doubt the catalyst, no question. With a quarter of the population out of work, traditional economic institutions collapsing all around them, the American people felt that something approaching an apocalypse had been brought to their door

steps. When Franklin D. Roosevelt, said that, " We have nothing to fear, but fear itself," he was articulating in an eloquent fashion the deeply rooted psychic terror that permeated the American consciousness.

The Great Depression was a national crisis of a proportion that could only be rivaled by the one which confronted Lincoln when the southern states seceded from the Union in 1861. What was different as Aaron points out was the "social turbulence" that the country was experiencing. Long held social hierarchies based on a ladder that extended back to the Massachusetts Bay colony were being upset and the ideas and notions that supported these taxonomies were being diluted in front of the eyes of those who had benefitted from their kinship with them. This crumbling of the social order also put new pressure on the literary world. One is always struck when recollecting the American artist's reaction to The Civil War, how placid and accommodating, how complacent it was. Our greatest writers, James, Melville, Thoreau and Emerson were locked in a sort of numbness that prevented them from integrating the events of 1861-1865 into a coherent artistic vision. Only Whitman, the newspaper reporter for the Long Island Star and editor

of the Brooklyn Eagle seemed to be able to incorporate the real war that would never get into books in his monumental work, "Drum Taps."

The proletarian tradition in the United Sates has its roots going back to the turn of the century. Walter B. Rideout in his detailed and well informed, The Radical Novel in the United States, recognizes Jack London as being the first self-described working class author of any importance. Jack London, known by a generation of youth for his adventure books White Fang and The Call of The Wild also authored The Sea Wolf and The Iron Heel, books that present the seamy side of proletarian life; he earned the acknowledgment from Upton Sinclair who labeled him " one of the most revolutionary figures of America's history."

London's writing spanned years 1900-1913. There was a gap of almost thirty years before another wave of working class fiction appeared on the American scene. The Great Depression brought about a sense of violation, a sense of affliction that pervaded the American terrain with ugly sights and sounds, sights and sounds that previously would have never made an appearance in the work of mainstream authors. Poverty and suffering were omnipresent. This

time, there would be a generation of seers to record, tell, and spread the word. This time there would be magazines like The Anvil, New Masses and Left Front. These journals offered new writers never heard of like Jack Conroy, Michael Gold, Edward Dahlberg, Tess Slessinger, an opportunity to voice their radical opinions, their protest. Richard Wright was to add his African American voice to this important collective of intriguing and vibrant writers.

Jack Conroy, one of the more important proletariat writers, recalled the first impressions Richard Wright made upon him after first joining the local John Reed Club. In Conroy's memoir, A Reminiscence, Wright is mentioned:

> One of my *Anvil* contributors (who prudently wrote under a pseudonym out of deference for his superiors at the post office where he was a mail sorter) had told me of a young Negro fellow worker who cherished literary ambitions and was 'pretty good.' This turned out to be Richard Wright, and I referred both of them to the John Reed Club. (AR 32)

1917: The Bolsheviks take Petrograd by storm, led by Lenin, inspired by Trotsky and a myth is born that will capture the world's imagination. John Reed's Ten Days That Shook The World becomes a classic informing Americans with first hand reportage about "The Revolution," and the consciousness of an entire generation of young American writers and thinkers is forever marked with a sense that power and authority can be successfully challenged, overthrown; the people can wrest control from the most entrenched regime in history; the workers and farmers can make a difference forming a new society based on entirely new principles with the worker as the prime mover and shaper of his destiny. And most important of all, this movement, this upheaval was destined to spread around the world, liberating all peoples everywhere. Oppressed peoples, whether it be colonial slavery or wage slavery, possessed a new spirit of emancipation.

This revolutionary message touched the Black community in the United States. Cyril Briggs, an editor of the Amsterdam News felt the need for a more aggressive approach, created his own magazine, the Crusader, which was distributed throughout Harlem in 1919 and 1920. Briggs

later was to become one of the first Black members of the American Communist party:

> Excited by the anti-imperialist orientation of the Bolshevik Revolution and by some examples of anti-racist activity by American racial groups (he mentioned an IWW strike in Bogalusa, Louisiana, as evidence of new possibilities), Cyril Briggs began to call on blacks to form "alliances with the liberal and radical forces of the country--of the world." (CIH 6)

As far as major influences on a generation's conscience, Marx and Freud possessed the power, the appeal, the intellectual and spiritual charm to build a new system of values. In the 1920's Freud had given writers and thinkers a new vocabulary, a new manner of interpreting the world. Ten years later, Karl Marx is the progenitor of another inspired vision. His careful critique of capitalism from a scientific laboratory-like perspective was to become the foundation of such writers as Max Eastman, Waldo Frank,

Michael Gold and Granville Hicks. In essence just as Freud's study of human development raised a whole new constellation of questions that forced people to be more analytical, less accepting of the human condition as a simple given, Marx's critique of the capitalist system offered a jarring and sweeping condemnation of one of the West's proudest achievements and caused millions to wonder:

> In any case at the end of the twenties, a kind of demoralization set in . . . There was suddenly very little money around, and the literary delirium seemed clearing. The sexual taboos of the Age before had been dismissed both from books and from life, and there was no need to be feverish about them; liquor was legal again, and the Stock market lay gasping its last. The new "Classes" of intellectual--it was a feature of the post-boom period that they tended to think of themselves as "intellectual" rather than "writers"--were

> in general sober and poor, and they applied the analysis of Marxism to the scene of wreckage they faced. This at least offered a discipline for the mind, gave a coherent picture of history and promised not only employment but the triumph of the constructive intellect. (Wilson 940)

Mark Naison's Communists In Harlem During The Depression (CIH) documents the special appeal of communism to African Americans during the 1920's and the 1930's. Harlem was already open to any sort of intellectual cross fertilization because of the literary movement which had commenced immediately after World War I, The Harlem Renaissance. Harlem was not only the demographic nexus of the Great Migration (1915-1920, the movement of one and a half million black rural inhabitants from the South to the urban areas of the North). Harlem had also been designated by history, economic vicissitudes and chance, to be a cultural Mecca. As Nathan Huggins puts it, Harlem was the "capital" of the Black World:

> It was just that sense of a possibility

> and power that persuaded many black men and women to come to Harlem in the years around the Great War. Blacks who wanted to be where they could reach the widest audience--to organize and inspire blacks throughout the world, to cajole whites to reform. Those Negroes who had pretensions of talent and intellect wanted to be where, to greatest effect, they might convert their skills and minds into personal and racial success. Many saw Harlem as the retort where the best achievement of colored people would be crystalized into the hard, permanent stuff of the race's positive future. (Huggins 15)

Within this Harlem, because of its highly potent and fertile soil, one can see what sort of galvanization would occur when the political and romantic appeal of Communist-revolutionary politics, and the proletariat taking control of the means of production into his own hands, was coupled

with this evanescent environment. And the allure of communism on the Black populace became all the more stronger with the onset of The Great Depression. If any one group was actively searching for some sort of structure, it was America Blacks who were witnessing the collapse of a special moment that had revitalized their sense of what America could be under optimum conditions. Despite the racism and the discrimination for those ten years, something very special and unique had come out of Harlem. The art, the literature, the film and music, all seemed to say, American could be reformed, and the products of that reform were destined to be exquisite and elegant works of art. However, this era of rebirth came to a devastating end:

> Just like their contemporary white intellectuals, who, though often grudgingly, took the American economic and industrial apparatus for granted, these black intellectuals seemed unprepared for that rude shock which was to make their paeans to

> Black art and identity echo false. Nobody could have anticipated the Great Depression, but the Negro Renaissance was shattered by it because of naive assumptions about the centrality of culture unrelated to economic and social realities. (Huggins 303)

With that new reality facing them squarely in their face, Black Americans were forced to drop the possibilities of a new world founded on the production of aesthetically pleasing works of art; hence, communism with its almost mathematical and scientific precise predictions of how the world could be altered and reformed, Marx's message, touched many receptive ears. With Marcus Garvey in jail, (a fallen idol who had promised that the answer for Black Americans lay in a return to Africa, literally and symbolically) his Universal Negro Improvement Association in shambles, communism was going to be adopted up this beleaguered community just as a baton is passed on in a relay race. Communism possessed, with its own peculiar "religious" passion, another set of answers for American Blacks:

> Even before the Depression, however,

> Harlem Communists felt optimistic about their future in the community. The activists of the Harlem Tenants League, and the response to the election rallies, had demonstrated that some Harlemites were dissatisfied with conditions in the 'Mecca of the World of Negroes.' Black communists viewed the romantic image of Harlem as a myth fostered by politicians and businessmen who sought to profit from segregation. (CIH 23)

This was the Harlem that Richard Wright was to plunge into when he left his job at the U.S. post office in Chicago and headed east in the hopes of being a writer.

Wright had been "practicing" the trade of writing since leaving the South. Chicago had been a special experience for him since it not only gave him the economic foundation he needed to bring about some stability in his life, but his post office job had placed him in contact with many special people, some of whom were directly connected with this post high school writing experience. Once he joined the John

Reed Club of Chicago, his writing experience was to evolve in a rather accelerated fashion. Surprisingly, it was the ideological appeal that struck Wright:

> The revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force. It was not the economics of Communism, not the great power of trade unions, not the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the singularity of the experience of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. (Fabre 97)

In 1934 Wright began to write poetry, and he begins to have his work published in small left-wing magazines.

Wright possessed this need to express, as he called it, the "Negro experience." When one reads his articles for the Daily Worker, perhaps that is the lasting impression. That before he could enter the world of fiction, he had to take the reality of the Black American experience and study it, was an epiphany for him. He was well aware in the early 1930's of his weaknesses as a writer and thinker:

> Something was missing in my imaginative efforts: my flights of imagination were too subjective, too lacking reference to social action. I hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living, for a knowledge of the forms of life about me, for eyes to see the bony structure of personality, for theories to light up the shadows of conduct. (AH 43)

Wright's education was indeed sketchy. Having graduated from a "Jim Crow" school (Smith-Robertson, Mississippi) in 1925, an education so shabby and inadequate that when he was in Chicago, he asked to return to school and upon entering the Hyde Park Public School, was placed in

the tenth grade. It was 1931; the depression was in its second year.

Wright's association with the John Reed Club put him into contact not just with literary associates who were practicing the craft, giving each other feedback at meetings but he is also reading scores of Marxist and Leninist pamphlets. With his entrance into the American Communist Party, his vision of the world and his relationship to it was greatly altered. At the time the American Communist Party was a highly centralized organization. Wright was fascinated by the party's inner workings and envisioned his own individual projects, not just poetry writing, but painting a broader picture of what left wing politics meant to an African American in the early 1930's:

> I sat through several meetings of the club and was impressed by the scope and seriousness of its activities. The club was demanding that the government create jobs for unemployed artists; it planned and organized art exhibits; it raised funds for the publication of *Left Front*; and it sent scores of

> speakers to trade union meetings. The members were fervent, democratic, restless, eager, self sacrificing. I was convinced and my response was to set myself the task of making Negroes know what Communists were. (AH 67)

The effort that Wright refers to was transformed by Congress into the Federal Writer's Project. Because of the nation-wide scope of the program, Wright ended up in New York in 1936. He had joined in Chicago, but trouble with certain factions of the Communist Party had left him rather disenchanted and when the opportunity came to be transferred to New York, he accepted the offer enthusiastically. By proceeding to New York under the auspices of the Federal Writers Project, Wright was going to accomplish two of his goals. First, he would remain in contact with a literary world that any publisher could only dream of: Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Maxwell Bodenheim, Arna Bontemps, Ralph Ellison, Stuart Engstrand, Fenton Johnson, Willard Maas and Frank Yerby. In addition, the Communist Party of Chicago felt that despite their arguments with Wright, he was an asset that perhaps with a different environment would

continue to flourish and perhaps find a median between his obligations to the Communist party and his strong desire to create his own work.

This bargain was his appointment as editor of the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker. Wright was ecstatic at how his fortune had changed so quickly since he knew that he was in a deadlock with the Chicago Branch of the American Communist party. His enthusiasm for the work to be done in New York dwarfed his success on the U.S. Post Office service exam which ranked him first and offered a full time and permanent position with a salary of $2000.00 a year, a noble sum during The Great Depression. However, Wright was to face problems of a different nature when he arrived in New York in the Spring of 1937. True, many problems had been ameliorated within the ranks of the American Communist party, and this was his foremost concern. Yet, Wright could not have known that New York, albeit like Chicago, a major cosmopolitan area, had experienced a tidal wave of artistic activity and production in the late 1920's that had not been paralleled anywhere else in the country.

That artistic upheaval was The Harlem Renaissance, and he would discover that the challenges of this literary epoch

were going to rival the problems he had experienced with the American Communist Party.

Chapter 2 - The Harlem Renaissance: An Age of Reformation Via Romanticism and Communism

The Harlem Renaissance: when the two words are placed adjacent to one another, Harlem and "renaissance," perhaps the term oxymoron comes to one's mind when they picture the landscape of Harlem today, a poverty stricken two square mile stretch of urban blight; it possesses the inner city cancers of drugs, AIDS and tuberculosis and a health regimen that the New England Journal of Medicine labeled as worse than Bangladesh. The violence is so pervasive that the Amsterdam News could state that a young black man, aged eighteen through twenty-four, would have a better chance surviving the Normandy landings in 1944 than making it through the perilous terrain of Harlem today. These are the present conditions.

However, seventy years ago, while Richard Wright was in Chicago, experiencing the Marxist dialectic and how that analysis would be applied to the problems of the American Negro, for approximately twelve years, there was a literary and artistic revival in Harlem that can be compared and contrasted with America's previous Renaissance of the 19th century, when Melville, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson and others established what was to be the literary tradition of the United States. Artistic activity, consisting of plays,

novels, poems, paintings, music and sculpture, enough that it is analogous, at least in output, with other renaissances of European fame.

The Harlem Renaissance was a special time in the history of the African American experience after the diaspora; it produced a plethora of writers, poets, painters and musicians that permanently changed the cultural landscape of America and left a legacy and standard that the Black artistic community readily acknowledges seventy years later. However, it does not stand alone without precedent. The Harlem Renaissance had its historic counterparts with what occurred during the 1840's and 1850's in the United States when America was consciously searching for its literary tradition, a search for an ancestry that would result in the dawning of a new identity and a new literature. And just as there was a harkening back to the Romantics of England in the works of those writers, tendencies can be discerned between certain writers of the Harlem Renaissance. If Emerson was listening to Coleridge, it can be asserted that Countee Cullen and Claude McKay were hearing the same poetic reverberations in Keats and Wordsworth. In <u>This Was Harlem</u> Jervis Anderson makes the following assessment of some of the major Black poets of the Harlem Renaissance. His first remark is in regard to Claude

McKay:

> Besides, in the work of the great white poets he admired--Byron, Shelley, Keats, Blake, Burns, Whitman, Heine, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud--he could 'feel their race, their class, their roots in the soil,' and he said 'likewise I could not realize myself writing without conviction.'
>
> In 1921, two other black poets, younger than McKay, attracted public attention. One was Countee Cullen, a seventeen-year old student from De Witt Clinton High School, in Manhattan, whose "I Have a Rendezvous with Life.' published in his school magazine, *The Magpie*, was praised for its natural lyricism and for the precocity of its tragic feeling and insight. The other was Langston Hughes, then nineteen, who had recently graduated from Central High School in Cleveland. His *'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'* was

> published in *The Crisis* (the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and displayed a maturity of reflection that was considered remarkable. (TWH 197)

The Harlem Renaissance possessed a distinct romantic ambience to it. For the purpose of this essay *romantic* will be defined within the framework that, first, the writers, particularly the poets who were practically all novices, were duplicating what they were familiar with. They searched, embraced and employed extant traditions. Artists who possess no tangible tradition must first work and refine what they are familiar with and for his generation of literary people, they felt at ease with the readily available models of the day: 19th century British and American literature. Secondly, many of the poets of the Harlem Renaissance were themselves intrinsically connected to certain principles and elements of Romantic English poetry. If anything, the creative output of the Harlem Renaissance shows how desperate this generation of writers was for a literary tradition that it could call its own. It could be said that because of their adherence to and due to the influence of the English Romantics on them, they therefore were ingrained with this sensibility.

In addition to this, as David S. Reynolds has clearly demonstrated in his recent work, Beneath The American Renaissance, the 19th century's literary renaissance was powered in part by a larger set of questions that an expanding America was grappling with. There were other matters besides a people attempting to define its national identity. The most profound question of the day, a question that tormented the common man as well as the intellectual, North and South, was, would the United States be half free and half slave or would it be all free. This problem was one that Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman confronted in their poetry and prose.

Reynolds feels that the American Renaissance of the 19th century was an era that was significantly conscious of a much-needed reformation. Besides the issue of slavery, American thinkers and writers were examining health care and how the mentally ill were treated, social problems like alcoholism and the role of the factory and the machine as it transformed the lives of thousands of men and women who had dwelled for a century or two on a farm. In one of Emerson's public addresses, "Man the Reformer," presented in 1841, he stated: "In the history of the world the doctrine of Reform had never such scope as at the present hour." Eight years later in 1849 the words of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience

struck a similar chord but in a more vibrant and militant manner:

> In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army. (CD 238)

Here Emerson and Thoreau exhibit the ability to forcefully question domestic issues as well as foreign affairs. Advocacy and agency were key elements of this first literary Renaissance.

Similarly, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were focused on reform and the question was still similar in nature. Seventy years after the first American Renaissance, the major social issue of the times still centered around how the racial problem of the day was to be solved. In his prophetic work, The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois, had

predicted that the "The problem of the Twentieth century will be the problem of the color line." DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larson, and Zora Neale Hurston were intensely interested in creating art, and they were intensely concerned and engaged with bringing about some reform of the national conscience of the day. Segregation of schools, libraries and all public facilities, the disenfranchisement of most southern Blacks, public lynchings and burnings, and the lack of economic opportunity, these were the obvious targets of reform. The African American writer, philosopher and artist was imbued with a sense that forging ethnic or racial identity could result in the building of new nations, new freedom. They were witnesses to the geopolitical alterations of the map of Europe. With the close of World War I, the democracies of the world had created new nations along ethnic lines with a resulting new definition of nationhood. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were living realities that self-determination was in vogue. Why not, then, would this radical revolution include African Americans. With a proclivity for the romantic, this coupled with international models of new worlds created in Europe or liberated in Arica, they sought to build a better America for black as well as white.

Many of the social problems occurring before and after

World War I in the United States were directly connected to racism and the resulting discrimination that relegated American blacks to an unofficial caste system in the American South and ambiguous sense of freedom and opportunity in the North. The statistics measuring Black professionalism of the era are sobering:

a. There were 2100 Negroes in college in 1917.

b. Of that number, 300 attended white colleges

c. By 1927, 39 Black students earned their doctorates.

d. There were 1700 doctors, 1200 lawyers and 2100 academics and administrators in 1927.

Whether one looks to our fiction or nonfiction of the era, racial animosity is at the nexus of many writer's thoughts and observations. By 1919 the aggravation of racial antipathy approached and passed a point of melt down because the United States was being transformed into an international power whether it wanted this or not, and more progressive ideas were being disseminated about freedom, independence and ethnic nationalism. The wave of recent immigrants that had come at the turn of the century and right before World War I saw themselves in direct economic competition with American Blacks. This fueled the fear and hatred that existed between whites and blacks.

The resistance to modification of the status quo in

regard to race was strong and inbred, and no other writer captures the intransigence of racist feeling in the United States among the "native" population better than James T. Farrell in Studs Lonigan. In the second volume of this magnificent trilogy documenting the life and times of the Irish in Chicago, Farrell captures the mood of the mob during the summer of 1919, which is now known to historians as the "Bloody Summer of 1919":

> Studs Lonigan gripped a baseball bat and swung as if stepping into a pitch. He said that when he cracked a dinge in the head, the goddamn eight ball would think it had been Ty Cobb slamming out a homer off Walter Johnson. And Andy Le Gare tried to tell everyone that in close fighting they should kick the niggers in the shins. Tommy Doyle said the niggers were never going to forget the month of July, 1919. Studs said that they ought to hang every nigger in the city to the telephone poles, and let them swing there in the breeze. Benny Taite said that for every white man killed in the

> riots, ten black apes ought to be massacred . . . They only caught a ten-year old Negro boy. They took his clothes off, and burned them. They burned his tail with lighted matches, made him step on lighted matches, urinated on him, and sent him running off naked with a couple of slaps in the face . . . They walked down to the el station and bought a paper. The headlines said that with the militia out, peace and order were being restored in the riot-stricken black belt. They cursed, and said they would get the niggers in spite of even the whole United States Army. (Farrell 70-71)

In reaction to horrors like this and many others that colored the landscape of that era, Claude McKay wrote one of his most famous and resolute poems, "If We Must Die." The call for reformation that Reynolds mentions was demanded here on the most basic level. According to Jervis Anderson, there was no doubt about the form and function of this poem: "In 1919 Max Eastman's magazine, The Liberator, published

another of McKay's sonnets, "If We Must Die." It had been written during the 'red summer' of that year, in which scores of blacks were beaten or killed, and it brought to black poetry a new spirit of race militancy. The poem, quoted in its entirety here will illustrate Anderson's point and its use of the sonnet exhibits the self-conscious need of the poets of that era to align themselves with a literary tradition whose poetic diction would inherently elevate the tone and resonances of the work:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs,
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood must not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
>
> O Kinsmen! we must beat the common foe!
> Though far outnumbered let us show us brave
> And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like me we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Melvin Tolson, (1898-1966) another poet of the Harlem Renaissance, sounded the same theme of passionate resistance in several of his poems. "An Ex-judge At The Bar" is a fine example of a lyric tinged with irony attempting to reconcile the contradictions of Black soldiers having fought in World War I, for democracy, and returning to a land of virtual apartheid. The sarcastic tone displays a certain choler

that is difficult to suppress:

Bartender, make it straight and make it two--

One for the you in me and the me in you.
Now let us put our heads together: one
Is half enough for malice, sense, or fun

I know, Bartender, yes, I know how the Law
Should wag its tail or rip with fang and claw
When Pilate washed his hands, that neat event
Set for us judges a Caesarean precedent.

What I shall tell you now, as man is man,
You'll find in neither Bible or Koran
It happened after my return From France
At the bar in Tony's Lady of Romance.

We boys drank pros and cons, sang *Dixie;* and then
The bar a Sahara, we pledged to meet again.
But lo, on the bar there stood in naked scorn
The Goddess Justice, like September Morn.

Who blindfolds Justice on the courthouse roof
While the lawyers weave the sleight of hand of proof?
I listened, Bartender, with my heart and my head,
As the Goddess Justice unbandaged her eyes and said:

'To make the world safe for Democracy,
You lost a leg in Flanders fields--our, our?
To gain the judge's seat, you twined the noose
That swung the Negro higher than a goose.'

Bartender, who has dotted every *i*
Crossed every *t*? Put legs on every *y*?
Therefore, I challenged her: 'Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him who first cries, 'Hold, enough!'

The boys guffawed, and Justice began to laugh
Like a maniac on a broken phonograph.
Bartender, make it straight and make it three--

One for the Negro . . . one for you and me.

The time of change was imminent, and people who lived

through the age were incredibly aware that the atmosphere of the Black intellectual was charged electrically in an unprecedented manner. Alain Locke felt the pressure so great that he issued his own manifesto, his own African American declaration of independence. He summed up this new way of thinking, seeing and feeling in the following lines from his essay: "The New Negro":

> In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norns who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the The New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phrases

> of contemporary Negro life. Could such a metamorphosis have taken place as suddenly as it has appeared to? The answer is no; not because the New Negro is not here, but because the Old Negro has long become more of a myth than a man. (Locke 513)

Richard Wright was this new man, but with his sworn allegiance to the Communist Party, where would he fit in this new social and artistic landscape? Would he have to compromise at a time in the history of the Black community when the demand for collective enterprise was unanimous and unprecedented? Black leaders, official and unofficial, had already made some important concessions. Booker T. Washington was a politician, educator and writer. He had proven how a creative work, his autobiography, could be utilized as a tool to articulate one's political and philosophical position. In his classic, Up From Slavery, he issued a political compromise that was to haunt two generations of black progressives, from DuBois to Alain Locke. In Chapter XIV, which gives an account of his address given during the Atlanta Exposition of 1895, Washington spoke words of infamy:

> As we have proved our loyalty to

> you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sickbed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, read to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to human progress. (Washington 148)

Washington had conceded that second class citizenship was acceptable in social and political terms as long as an economic entrance was guaranteed. Political power required the vote and for the Southerner, even if he could tolerate the segregated presence of the Black in his everyday life,

viewed this as anathema. Lastly, his book had set a precedent for the twentieth century African-American liberation movement since it was a creative work that told his life story but also exceeded those boundaries by mixing politics and literature. At the same time he established another precedent since he broke with Frederick Douglass' use of autobiography (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave 1845) as a weapon and tool for Black social and political progress.

Black leaders of the day envisioned a three-pronged assault on the fortress of mainstream American, envisioning avenues of approach through economic, social and political structures that already existed in the United States after World War I. However, by the mid 1920's, just when Wright is learning about Marxism with his comrades at the United States Post office, some Black thinkers were contemplating the notion that perhaps the arts and humanities could be utilized as a more viable and visible avenue for chastening a nation that was sleeping in terms of its racial awareness. Charles S. Johnson issued a manifesto that announced the guidelines for this transformation. Books, plays, poetry drama, all the literary arts possessed potentiality as powerful and untapped resources. In his preface to Book of American Negro Poetry he explained why:

> The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. . . .And nothing will do more to change the mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art. (Johnson 3)

However, there was a caveat which was issued by the same thinker about "protest literature" and harnessing a text to serve two purposes, being politically informative and artistic. Johnson's message which appeared in the influential Black journal, Opportunity, was intriguing because it required the artist to plant an artificial barrier between himself and his politics:

> . . .to encourage the

> reading of literature both by Negroes and about Negro life, not merely because they are Negro authors but because what they write is literature and because the literature is interesting; to foster a market for Negro writers and for literature by and about Negroes; to bring these writers into contact with the general world of letters to which they have been for the most part timid and inarticulate strangers; to stimulate and foster a type of writing by Negroes which shakes itself free of deliberate propaganda and protest. (WHIV 97)

Johnson wanted to use the creative arts as a strategy for integrating Black Americans into America, but the art itself was not to be a vehicle of self expression. Wright and others desired to use the arts, but not exactly in the same manner as envisioned as Johnson. Johnson drew an unyielding and entrenched line between the arts that were political, art that advocated protest.

After World War I, when a real tide of energy had

enveloped the Black community, writers felt the pressure to act and did not want to miss an opportunity to create literature that would have some social and political significance and simultaneously retain aesthetic integrity that would be respected by the literary world, no easy task, pleasing both masters. Jervis Anderson suggests breaking with "tradition" since this conscious deconstruction of one's artistic sensibilities does not guarantee the authentic birth of an organically produced endowment:

> In their apparent break with the aesthetic and cultural attitude of of their elders, most of the New Negro writers did bear a resemblance to the Harlem race radicals and nationalists, who had revolted against the established black leadership; they could be said to represent in art what the race militants had represented in politics--not an appeal to compassion and social redress but a bold assertion of self. (TWH 197)

Alain Locke had issued a sociological manifesto; Charles S. Johnson had produced vibrant African American

poetics in his essay. Wright found himself heralding a declaration of his own. These manifestos were mandated by the conditions and circumstances of the time since there was a social and cultural vacuum that had to be filled. Locke, Johnson, they all found themselves confronting the same problems; however, as Wright proved, he felt he managed to negotiate the two antithetical "masters" that Johnson had found to be irreconcilable. In one of Wright's most important essays, his own literary manifesto, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," which is in reaction to the atmosphere cultivated and championed by Johnson and Locke, he had emphatically stated:

> Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic

> ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (RWR37)

In American Hunger Wright imagined a more active role for the writer. Wright and anyone who possessed this spirit were to find themselves slightly at odds with their colleagues in the arts since he felt that the barrier between politics and arts should not be adhered to. Had not Waldo Frank already warned Jean Toomer, one of the most authoritative voices of The Harlem Renaissance and the author of Cane, not only to avoid politics, but to avoid even the slightest hint of acknowledging a racial lineage? In a letter to Toomer, Frank wrote, "The day you wrote as a Negro, or an American, or as anything but a human part of life, your work will lose a dimension" (Lewis 71).

When Wright was in Chicago, it was there that he discovered art and literature through the meetings of the local John Reed Club. At first, dubious as to what he might find or be confronted with if he were to join this fledgling organization, Wright was looking for a particular niche. It was a difficult time for the Black artist, any Black artist. Perhaps he would not be a thorough devotee of the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance, but at least he would be allowed and encouraged to explore other roads of expression:

I did not want to feel, like an animal in a jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile. I did not want to make individual war or Individual peace. So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from books. In my concrete relations with others I had encountered nothing to encourage me to believe in my feelings . . . But it seemed to me that here at last in the realm of revolutionary expression was where Negro experience Could find a home, a functioning value and role? Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited, and there were none of the same lispings of the missionary in it. It did not say: 'Be like us and we will like you, maybe.' It said, 'If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone.' It urged life to believe in life. (AH 64)

By the 1920's the Civil War had been over for more than fifty years. World War I was concluded and thousands of Black Americans had served in the American army, most ignobly in segregated service units (this had been the tradition since the days of the Union army and the Civil War); other Black units that had been attached to the French army were permitted to fight and gained honor for themselves and their units. Black Americans had done what had been hypocritically requested of them; they had fought to make the world safe for democracy, but it was a democracy that existed in America's imagination, not in a practical or tangible reality in Mississippi, Alabama or Georgia. It did not necessarily manifest itself in every Northern state either although conditions were on the whole superior.

When these Black soldiers returned to the shores of the United States, those from the South and some from the North were greeted with the enduring racist discrimination that they had been relieved of during their tours of duty in Europe. Hate, anger and blood filled the streets of America during the bloody summer of 1919. American whites had been afraid justifiably about the effects that equal treatment would have on Black soldiers who had been to France or Germany. Their apprehension was pronounced, and they even attempted, in a crude and twisted manner to alter the social

mores of other countries in order to maintain a social regimen of racial discrimination. In one infamous case, American officers requested that French officials introduce racial segregation in all public facilities. The French did not dignify the ludicrous request with a reply (Franklin 346).

Just as in our fictional depiction of American racial attitudes in Farrell's novel, we can also turn to nonfiction, with an excerpt of, From Harlem To The Rhine, a text about the First World War to better understand the climate of racism that permeated the American landscape which predates World War I. When one grasps that southern whites were fearful of the profound psychological and social effects that the war might have, one will begin to comprehend the combustibility of racial contact when it is recognized that southerners were not only concerned about a Black soldier's future response to his treatment in Europe; they were anxious about how Northern Blacks would react when they were initiated into the medieval world of the South which was an inevitability since so many army training camps were located in that part of the country. Before Black American troops were sent to fight for democracy, they received training at different camps and bases throughout the United States. When the town of Spartanburg, South

Carolina, was informed that a Black regiment from New York was to be transferred there, the repercussions were swift and vicious and were manifested in a letter from the mayor and the Chamber of Commerce. The mayor sent a letter to the War Department:

> I was sorry to learn that the Fifteenth Regiment has been ordered here, for, with their northern ideas about race quality, they will probably expect to be treated like white men. I can say right here that they will not be treated as anything except negroes. We shall treat them exactly as we treat our resident negroes. This thing (sending a colored infantry regiment) is like waving a red flag in the face of a bull, something that can't be done without trouble. We have asked Congressman Nicholls to request the War Department not to send the soldiers here. Mayor Floyd's letter was quickly amplified by a joint declaration from the Spartanburg

Chamber of Commerce: We asked for the camp for Spartanburg but at that time we understood that no colored troops were to be sent down. It is a great mistake to send Northern negroes down here, for they do not understand our attitude. We wouldn't mind if the Government sent us a regiment of Southern negroes; we understand them and they understand us. But with those Northern fellows it's different. I can tell you for certain that if any of those colored soldiers go into any our soda stores and the like and asked to be served they'll be knocked down. Somebody will throw a bottle. We don't allow negroes to use the same glass that a white man may later have to drink out of. We have our customs down here, and we aren't going to alter them.

It was suggested that the Fifteenth might make an appeal on its own behalf to the military authorities at the camp. The reply was to the effect that it would be futile for the military authorities to attempt to regulate the customs of the country, and the situation would simply have to be accepted. No attempt, it was said would be made to alleviate things by the establishment of 'Jim Crow' soda stores or restaurants, because there are already a number of such enterprises devoted exclusively to the negroes.

These shops, however, visited by newspaper men, proved to be almost without exception, dingy poorly stocked. It is believed that the soldiers will not be satisfied with these shops and will try to get something better.

> In the event that the Fifteenth does come here, it is planned to send a committee of citizens to call upon Major General O'Ryan and ask him to explain to the Negro soldiers the difference between South Carolina and New York City. Then, if the Fifteenth is willing to accept the order of things, all will be well; if they chafe under the restriction, 'the customs will be observed just the same.' (Little 50)

This section of the study will focus on both of these issues, *romanticism* and *reformation*, and how they influenced and affected the artist and his work of the Harlem Renaissance.

Another method of orientating one's self to the complexities of The Harlem Renaissance is to see it as the second half of the American Renaissance and its attempts at reformation in the 19th century. The social ills of America at the turn of the century still dramatically had their nexus of race relations. With the Supreme Court decision in 1895 of Plessy vs. Ferguson, it seemed that the country had again decided on a legal administration of the race issue

just as it had done in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision. However, immediately after the 1895 decision that legitimatized racial segregation in public facilities, there were people and organizations prepared and now galvanized to resist. Perhaps, the word resistance should also be incorporated into this analysis, since art, for the American black had been intrinsically connected with revolt, rebellion and emancipation. W.E.B. DuBois' publication of The Souls of Black Folk was one of the first literary manifestations of this revolt. Others soon followed for DuBois was aware that to accept the status quo of the day was to promote and encourage the psychological death of his people. To accept legalized segregation, was to cultivate and condone a form of second class citizenship which, for him, was a movement toward a more rigid society set along racial lines.

This first reaction, at the turn of the century, was only a small ripple in the lake of racial politics. It would really take World War I and the experience of the nation defining itself once again, this time as an international world power, to provide the final catalyst for reform. Americans were to lose their many nativist notions bordering on isolationism and a sort of Huck Finn adolescent-retreating to the "territory," and what was to

replace it was a more sophisticated and urbane view of the nation and its relationship to the rest of the world. And, just as you would not be able to keep the boys on the farm after they have seen "Gay Paris," neither would you be able to return Black men to the backs of trolley cars after riding trains and taxis unencumbered around Europe. The "colored" man who had gone off to be a soldier in World War I, after serving gallantly when permitted in the front lines of France and Germany, was to return as, Alain Locke was to label him, "a New Negro."

So dramatic and decisive are the consequences of World War I for the American black, that Nathan Huggins dated the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance as 1919; it is that year that the victorious American army returned from Europe and with it, thousands of Black soldiers who had proven themselves in combat. The collective experience of this accomplishment gave birth to a new state of black consciousness:

> Their victory parade in New York City February 17, 1919, signaled something more, therefore, than the return of soldiers from war. These men had done more than most to prove themselves men and Americans, and they accomplished

> their feats under the most trying circumstances. They had come close but they had never succumbed to their rage . . . They had gone through it all and brought back victory without blemish. It must have been a proud day for them and for the black New Yorkers who watched them. (Huggins 55)

Another change that was to have dramatic and startling consequences for the black artist was the largest migration in history, the removal of one million black citizens from the American South to the American North. The American literary spirit that attempted to document and explain its ramifications was moved to duplicate what some of the poets of the English romantic era did when they were confronted with an England that was experiencing an incredible physical as well as spiritual transformation at the conclusion of the 18th century.

Wordsworth and Blake witnessed the massive alterations that industrialization and urbanization brought to England. The factory and the city not only overshadowed but also threatened nature. In reaction, the English Romantics gravitated toward nature as setting, image, and in many cases the substance of their poetry. Ultimately, nature

came to represent an orientation, a life different from the one rising above them.

The English Romantics, with their proclivity for meditative reveries, perceived that they were dwelling in an age of new beginnings and great possibilities. The Black writers of The Harlem Renaissance, inspired by history, the end of World War I, and the dawn of a new spirit of liberation in colonized Africa, also saw the dawning of an age of new freedom and infinite expansion. Infinite promise became the province of the Black writer. They too wished to be spontaneous and to write with limitless aspirations. For them, they saw inspiration in a literary tradition that they were familiar with, the English romantics.

In addition, it could not be denied that there was a new mood of liberation in Sub-Saharan Africa long under the heel of European colonial rule during this post World War I era. The Black American thinker and artist made connections between the birth of an age of new freedom and infinite expansion across the Atlantic, and what might be achieved here on social and political fronts. A Pan-African movement came into its own and this quickly spawned innovative and brilliant images. Generating a new dynamic energy, Africa, as a positive ideal began to dominate the artistic imagination of the poets in particular. Inestimable promise

became the province of the Black writer. Africa, long cast as a barbaric and savage "dark continent" now instilled pride and longing. Black poets and writers wished to be spontaneous and to write with limitless aspirations as is illustrated in Countee Cullen's sonnet, "Yet Do I Marvel":

> I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind.
> And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
> The little buried mole continues blind.
> Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
> Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
> Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
> If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
> To struggle up a never-ending stair.
> Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
> To Catechism by a mind too strewn
> With petty cars to slightly understand
> What awful brain compels his awful hand.
> Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
> To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Cullen and McKay, the major poets of their day, were inspired by a literary tradition that they were familiar with, the English romantics. Consequently, they were to a large extent to become the models for many of the poets of The Harlem Renaissance.

The last major figure of this era who is germane to this discussion would be Jean Toomer. With the publication of *Cane* in 1923 he created a enigmatic and idiosyncratic structure by overlapping short stories with poetry, a small drama and a novella and interspersed with puzzling abstract drawings. One of his largest concerns was the futile and

doomed transition of the Southern rural black who migrated to the urban centers of the North and were subsequently crushed by concrete and steel. The Southern black, naive, a peasant of almost Tolstoyian magnificence, is ruined. With his or her obsolete skills, antiquated virtue, a still born hope is inevitably vanquished. Toomer's peasant women and African earth-mothers, ignorant to the point of denying their own demise, stand out as one of the most powerful "romantic" images to be produced by The Harlem Renaissance. Becky, Fern, Esther, Carma, and Louisa, ethereal creations of Toomer's imagination, were emblazoned in the conscience of a generation. Toomer's birth of Karintha was the most startling:

> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
> O can't you see it, O cant you see it,
> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
> . . . When the sun goes down. (Toomer 1)

The *romantic* women of Cane will never be forgotten. Their fleeting beauty will forever be remembered.

Wright too was concerned with the clash between a rural sensibility and that of the metropolis. However, his response was not to search for a voice that laments the fall of the peasant in a series of sonnets. Wright was to protest and point to how this process of crushing individuals should be resisted with newly planted precepts, ideas and structures. Therefore, he created and developed

his own brand of journalism which was a curious blend of left wing politics, an eye for detail and local color and lastly, a penchant for negotiating a peaceful alliance with the apolitical atmosphere of The Harlem Renaissance which was near its end when he arrived in New York. In the closing paragraph of "Blueprint of Negro Writing" Wright extends a peaceful hand to those who came before him:

> Writers faced with such tasks can have no possible time for malice or jealousy. The conditions for the growth of each writer depend too much on the good work of other writers. Every first rate novel, poem, or play lifts the level of consciousness higher. (49)

On the other hand, his writing would still differ from his peers and those who were in Harlem while he was in Chicago since as the critic Robert Bone points out, the importance of a political matrix for Wright was an essential part of his artistic soul. In "Aspects of the Racial Past," he says, "For Richard Wright, Marxism became a way of ordering his experience; it became, in literary terms, his unifying mythos. It provided him with a means of interpreting the urban scene which the Harlem School had lacked."

When Wright came to New York in 1936 to take his position with the Harlem branch of the newspaper of The American Communist Party, there was a special relationship between the party and the Black population of the immediate neighborhood. Mark Naison offers the following assessment in the seventh chapter of his monumental work, Communists in Harlem during the Depression:

> In Harlem, Americanization, which made the Party's program and rhetoric indistinguishable from that of many black liberals, brought Communists an easy acceptance in community affairs that had been denied them in the past. 'The launching of the Popular Front,' Claude McKay wrote, 'simultaneously with the New Deal WPA, gave the Communists . . . vast influence among colored professional groups' Although Party membership in Harlem grew only marginally beyond 1936 levels, Communists became a recognized force in Harlem politics, exerting a power far beyond their numbers. (CIM 172)

With this in mind, Wright's work and life takes on a

provocative shading, not so much because he became a firebrand of left wing politics, a powerful public speaker or a politico with an aptitude for organizing the men and women around him. Wright's strength was exactly where one would expect, in his writing. Wright was a journalist and assessments of his work fall into two categories. Daniel Aaron, in "Richard Wright and The Communist Party," looked at Wright's ability to resist the literary practices of Communist Party functionaries. Without examining the articles themselves that Wright had composed for the Daily Worker Aaron concludes that Wright consciously challenged certain boilerplate conventions of left wing writing. Another scholar who has examined Wright's connection with communism and its possible influences on his art was Mary Ellen Brooks. In her 1972 essay for Literature and Ideology, Brooks contended that Wright was an "opportunist linking himself to the Communist Party for self-advancement and unable to liberate himself from the bourgeois idea of an artistic conscience above class." After looking at all two-hundred and twenty-three articles one can conclude that Daniel Aaron, perhaps because he had neither the time nor interest to pursue the articles in a careful manner, would have immediately recognized that there was a level of complexity in all of Wright's work that defies being labeled

exclusively boilerplate and individualistic.

Many of Richard Wright's articles for the Daily Worker, especially the ones that are only 75-100 words in length, are nothing more than a routine announcement about a meeting; there was nothing for Wright to do but provide boilerplate. Out of the two hundred and twenty six articles, at least seventy are minor announcements, sometimes, fewer than one-hundred words in length. Here is a typical announcement:

"Porters Meet Sunday to Mark Victory Pact"

The New York Division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters will celebrate the signing of its agreement with the Pullman Company, Sunday, Sept. 12, at 3 p.m., it was announced today.

The meeting will be held at 36 W. 135th St. in the Brotherhood auditorium.

The agreement signed on the Brotherhood's 12th anniversary was the first ever negotiated between the porters and the management.

> It gives the workers on sleeping cars a pay raise of $12 per month, an increase which means to the Pullman Porters an additional annual income estimated at $1,500,000.
>
> A Phillip Randolph, international President of the Brotherhood has returned to New York to be the principal speaker at the victory meeting. (TDW 9/10/1937)

Nothing could be more mundane than this. This does not even raise the issue of boilerplate. This is just simple journalism at its pedestrian best; longevity, time and effort on the job would have no substantial effect on the quality of the writing. Small articles of this nature, even at the end of his tenure, vary little. On December 4, 1937, another standard "announcement" was made:

> "Assemblymen From Harlem To Map Plans"
>
> To consolidate and extend the gains made by labor during the last election, four Harlem Assembly Men, two who were re-elected and two Assembly-elect, will

> participate in a Harlem Legislative Conference to map plans for action when the State Legislative, convenes in Albany, it was announced today. (TDW 12/4/1937)

This is more evidence to support Aaron's position. However, there is a preponderance of articles that fail to affirm either critic's position. First, Wright composed a series of articles that analyzed the theater, and literature. The very first article ever written by Wright for the Daily Worker was "Negro Writers Launch Literary Quarterly." The subtitle does more than impart the conviction that this author is a thinking, contemplative man, aware of the lasting effects of The Harlem Renaissance:

> The thousands of Negro workers, students and intellectuals whose lives have been touched by recent social and economic changes constitute the new audience which young Negro writers are aiming to mould and direct. In contra-distinction to the Harlem School of expression which was complemented by the World War and post-war

> conditions, and in part exploited by publishers for the jaded appetite of New York Bohemiana, the new movement among Negro writers is receiving its stimulus from below rather than above. (TDW 6/8/1937)

This is not a writer adhering to a simple party line. This is a writer and critic who is aware of the traditions and influences affecting the art of his era. So Wright was completely cognizant of what aesthetic practices and values that he was either following or rebelling against within the Black community.

In addition, Aaron and Brooks, both neglect to observe that the content of Wright's articles ironically places him in that same *romantic* school that he sets out so implacably to scrutinize and invalidate. There was, in the 1920's and 1930's, both in Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and the United Sates, the question of how to enroll the artist in a vision of a new world. Taking its lead from Marxist-Leninist theory, the American Communist Party expected its artists to serve the purposes and goals of the party. Wright had been drafted for those purposes. In many of his pieces for the Daily Worker he was one of these appointed artists whose purpose was to invoke a progressive aesthetic.

Perhaps one will detect a note of naivete in these articles, but if one looks at the optimistic vision offered by socialism and what it must have held for the Black community enduring the circumstances previously described, conceivably this capacity will be seen in a different light.

Instead of shunning this type of writing as simplistic propaganda, a certain portion of Wright's work for the Daily Worker can be viewed as a peculiar incorporation of a twentieth century African American *romanticism* for a community of artists and thinkers who never possessed the luxury of ever experiencing anything hopeful or idolatrous in their lives. Just as the poets had to dream, so did the journalist. Wright at this point of his career was already a struggling poet, and a creative writer. When he came to Harlem, he was conscious of a landscape not much to his liking, and reconfigured it with his own impressionistic imagery.

Wright's Urban Landscape

The Harlem of the Harlem Renaissance by the mid 1930's was already in a state of social and economic decline. Some historians argue that in terms of social and economic conditions, even when Harlem was being developed in the 1920's at the beginning of The Harlem Renaissance, its physical infrastructure was in various stages of deterioration. One reason for this had to do with the historic development of its real estate which dates back to the turn of the century. Originally envisioned as the home of middle and upper class New Yorkers, this community with its stately parks, broad avenues approaching the elegance of the Champs Elysees, was overdeveloped. Gilbert Osofsky's The Making of A Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930, makes this point rather dramatically with his scrupulous analysis of trends in the real estate market at the turn of the century:

> Harlem life altered radically in the first decade of the twentieth century. The construction of new subway routes into the neighborhood in the late 1890's set off a second wave of speculation in Harlem land and property.

> Speculators who intended to make astronomic profits when the subway was completed bought the marshes, garbage dumps and lots left unimproved or undeveloped in the 1870's and 1880's. . . .The real estate boom created a wave of new building activity in Harlem dominated primarily by speculators, although some individuals made long-term investments.
>
> The inevitable bust came in 1904-1905. Speculators sadly realized afterward that too many houses were constructed at one time. West Harlem was glutted with apartments and 'excessive building' led to many vacancies. No one knew how long it would take to construct the subway and many houses built four and five years in advance of its completion remained partly un-occupied. (TMG 87)

Harlem suffered more so during the Great Depression since its economic foundation had been unstable for years,

going back to the early 1900's. Harlem was a ghetto, and the social and commercial conditions were only made worse by the onset of the economic crisis of the 1930's. Wright looked at this massive urban landscape and was unwilling to accept its decline, its defeat, its lack of vitality. Motivated by the politics of the American Communist Party and using his own imagination and initiative, he transfigured the physical landscape of Harlem into a geopolitical painting that is thoroughly original and captivating. Once Wright arrived and was made editor of the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker, in 1936, the titles of the articles themselves showed a new flair. Resistance was encouraged when the economic situation was daunting; concocting a new world was advocated when the odds were insurmountable.

For instance, here is an article that does not possess the flat tone of the newspaper announcement, nor is it comprised of wide sweeping statements concerning political issues of the day. The article is about human suffering:

> "Negro, with 3-Week-Old Baby, Begs Food on Streets"
>
> This isn't fiction: these are not scenes from the novel of Charles Dickens. The sidewalks of Harlem are real and hard; and the black people on those sidewalks are truly starving.

> Trekking into the headquarters of the Workers' Alliance at 326 Lenox Ave. is an endless stream of black people looking for help. They come here because someone has told them that the Alliance will help them. Usually their pride keeps them back until the last moment; then they make this their desperate 'court' of final appeal.
>
> Here is a Negro woman, Mrs. Earle Bostick, the mother of five child. One is nine years old, the other is six years old and the other is three years old and another is 2 years old, and the last one is in her arms, just three weeks old.
>
> Mrs. Bostick's eyes are ringed and heavy with sleep. She stands leaning against a wall, holding her baby against her hip. (DW 8-4-1937)

The article provides a series of details regarding this poor woman's plight. Then it proceeds to show how the social services offered under the present administration were strained to the limit and how current budget cuts would only worsen her situation. However, the piece ends with a call to action: "If you are the type to weep, you can have a good cry over this and then feel good, 'purged,' you know. But tears can't stop starvation!" The reader is left discomforted. This is effective writing.

Another article that displayed a discernible pitch of advocacy on the part of women would be a piece composed for the September 3rd, 1937 edition. This article accomplishes

more than a routine cycle of analysis: it takes a specific example, generalizes its effects to the rest of the community and makes the final connection between that ensuing misery and the profit of the capitalist. It is called:

"Harlem Women Hit Boost in Milk Price"

'Buy as little milk as possible,

just enough for the children and the

Sick!'

This is the answer of the women
Of Harlem to the Milk Trust.
Rather than have the Milk Trust
steal milk from their children
through exorbitant prices, they
have decided not to drink milk and
to buy just enough of this basic
Food to keep health going.

Indignant because the price of milk
has been increased the second time?
within a few weeks, Negro housewives
throughout Harlem are organizing to
move against Harlem's high cost of
living. So desperate and deep has
been the concern over the soaring
toll of infant mortality, malnutrition,
rickets and tuberculosis that a
Harlem-wide conference of housewives
is being planned for October.

Many women under the leadership of
Helen Holmes, director of women's
work in the Harlem Division of the
Communist Party, have banded together
and issued 10,000 leaflets calling
upon housewives to boycott as much
as possible the Milk Trust
(Sheffield and Borden). (DW 9-3-1937)

This article highlights the importance of organizational redress of grievances and the positive essentiality of knowing how to funnel that anger and energy toward a specific target. This theme will be discussed in chapter four when Wright, later in his career applies to his fiction lessons directly "lifted" from his days as a journalist at the Daily Worker. According to Wright, anger, and the ensuing energy that accompanied it, were potential assets of the Black community which sometimes were not harnessed to its advantage. Wright comprehended this because of what he witnessed on a day-to-day basis in Harlem of the 1930's. He was fully aware of the preeminent value of employing those resources in a constructive manner. He also knew the destructive potentiality of misdirected anger as pointed out in the previous chapter.

Another series of articles which offer a type of inspiration are didactic in nature with their obvious and clumsy attempts to integrate politics and journalism. The structure is obvious, Socratic in nature, and the dramatic presentation catches the reader's attention. This article also exhibits an undisguised indebtedness to the "party line" at the time. In one article, Wright was able to concoct all the necessary ideological and overlapping connections that would have placated the needs of the Party.

The article follows:

"Mrs. Holmes and Daughter Drink

From the Fountains of Communism"

Negro Women, Inspired by Angelo Herndon's

Heroism Learns Truth About Party,

Join in Fight for Socialism

Time: The present, when rents and food are high, when starvation hangs over a quarter of a million Negroes living in Harlem.

Place: The front room of a Negro home on W. 153rd St.

Daughter: Mother, whose picture is that you've hung on your wall since I've been away to school?

Mother: That's Angelo Herndon, darling.

Daughter: Who's he?

Mother: A Communist.

Daughter: Oh, he's what the Sisters at the Convent called hell-raisers.

Mother: He's a communist hero, darling.

Daughter: What did he do?

Mother: Well, that's a long story.

Daughter: Well, tell me about it, Mother!

Mother: Angelo Herndon went to jail in Georgia because he led a demonstration of Negro and white to demand bread to eat. He stood up in a Southern court room and told the landlords of the South that they could not kill the working class.

> It was in this way a black Communist mother told her daughter who had been educated in a Florida Catholic convent about Communism and exacted from her a pledge to join the Communist Party.
>
> Down South 20-year old Artie May Holmes had heard of the Communist Party as being a band of bearded and violent agents of destruction. It had never occurred to her while she had been pursuing her course of nursing at the Catholic School that the Communists--a people she had been taught by her Sisters and priests to hate--were taking care of her mother, offering her friendship and guidance in one of the most difficult periods of her life. (DW 9-7-1937)

This article was chosen since it illustrates a few salient points that this dissertation has hoped to make. First, this piece actually contains elements of a story that was to be published in 1938, "Fire and Cloud," in the collection Uncle Tom's Children. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four. The romantic notion previously defined and presented is emblematic here. Second, there is a suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader since he must acknowledge the contrivance being utilized here for the benefit of integrating overt propaganda. The creation of a folk hero, a man of the people, was a necessary step in supplying role models who embraced Communist party ideology. The real life figure, Angelo Herndon, sounds more like a cardboard creation of some second rate Hollywood

screenwriter. Because of the stiffness of such a presentation, it is rather difficult to conceive that this approach could be effective. Wright does better in other articles where there is no facade, and the piece does not employ some laborious subterfuge to shield its intent.

One of the more well-developed articles appears on August 16, 1937. It is a compelling and robust piece of journalism because it has a thesis, and sets out in a rather dogmatic way to prove it. Being almost one-thousand words in length it is also one of the longest articles. The title is "What Happens at a Communist Party Branch Meeting in the Harlem Section?" It utilizes classical rhetorical approaches from the beginning to its conclusion:

> How does the Communist party Work? What do Communists do when alone and among themselves? Let's visit a meeting and see.
>
> Leaving the blare and glare of Lenox Ave., you walk up one flight of stairs and enter an oblong room whose walls are covered with murals depicting the historical struggle of the Negro in America. This is the Nat Turner Branch of the Harlem Division of the Communist Party. It was so named in honor of a black slave who died struggling for freedom.
>
> Before you have time to sit down your eyes are drawn to a huge black placard. "IN MEMORY OF OUR BELOVED BROTHER ALONZO WATSON, WHO DIED FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY IN SPAIN

> So you know, even before the meeting starts and you hear them talk that there are people here who will give their lives for what they believe.
>
> The Nat Turner Branch has a membership of about twenty; of that 20, 16 were present. The composition according to sex and class were as follows: 9 women and 7 men. Of the seven men, two were white. The Negro men and women were of the working class in manner, accent and deportment.
>
> There is absolutely no difference between the Negro and white in the Communist Party. They participate on an equal footing in the carrying out of their tasks. (DW 8-16-1937)

The rest of the article which has three subheadings is extensive and highly detailed. Wright portrayed in a rather objective fashion what are the advantages for American Blacks joining and supporting the Communist Party. One of the major appeals that the American Communist party always possessed, at the time, was it was the only American political structure that advocated racial integration. In an age of legal segregation there was something dreamlike about that advocacy alone.

In article after article, Wright uses phrases and terms, always describing how "black and white" work together, learn together, and struggle to build a world in the future free of oppression and segregation. Mark Naison

puts it succinctly when he writes, "Among Harlem's intellectuals, the image of black and white workers uniting in projects had acquired considerable force as a dramatic symbol, reflecting the spread of left-wing political views far beyond the Party's ranks" (CIH 152). A plethora of journalistic tracts present a vision of what an idealized America could be like. In a sense, the Communist Party, for all of its flaws, offered a model, a utopia, an American Dream, that would come only after arduous work, suffering and struggle. Wright concluded the article with the following two paragraphs:

> . . . And it is through such meetings as these that for the first time in American history the Negro is receiving his highest possible pitch of social consciousness. When you listen to them talk you know that the future is fraught with conflict but you feel that here are people capable of dealing with that conflict.
>
> Denied university education, they are receiving an education from the vanguard of the working class. The Communist Party, farmers, intellectuals, and middle class people who drifting about in a shoreless sea, wondering what straw they can grasp, should look there, for this is a new pole of strength about which the life of the whole world can regroup itself. These working people may not have polished accents, graceful gestures, etc., but they have what it takes to build a new world--the ability to ACT and a singleness of VISION. (DW 8-16-1937)

In articles such as this, as opposed to those labeled as summaries and announcements in this dissertation, Wright can exercise his vocabulary, sentence structure and comes close to exploring various modes of rhetoric. Wright is far more "literary" than his colleagues in his two hundred and twenty-three articles for the paper in the sense that he routinely chafes against the classic and limiting language of a left wing journal. True, there is a Communist Party rhetoric and jargon of the time, but Wright was relegated to a unique position, able to sometimes combat journalism built on boilerplate thinking; he repudiated mass produced writing requested on a moment's notice.

First, Black writers were in short supply and the powers of the Communist Party went out of their way to accommodate them, permitting them to even, as in Langston Hughes' case, be a fellow traveler, make major contributions to the party but never be compelled to join and swear loyalty. It can be said, based on this research that Black writers were given additional freedom that white writers who had been on the paper for perhaps years were never accorded. Langston Hughes is the best example of special privileges bestowed upon him:

> Hughes represented the first important convert among Harlem's

> creative intelligentsia. He was not a Party member when he accepted his post. . . Always drawn aesthetically toward expression of folk themes, Hughes became "proletarian poet" under the press of Depression conditions, assuming a stance of an advocate for rebellion by the oppressed. Communist leaders, conscious of the prestige Hughes brought to the movement, allowed him to function as a symbolic leader and to devote himself to his writing without political interference. The decision was a shrewd one. Hughes, though drawn to the left by conviction, would have chafed under the rigid discipline demanded of most party members and would have rejected direct dictation as to the content of his work. (CIH 42)

Wright never occupied the same prestigious position as Langston Hughes (while on the staff of the paper); however, Wright was clothed in a prophylactic layer of editorial

freedom. Naison's interview with Ralph Ellison in search of what distinct parameters of freedom and prohibitions were placed on writers at the Daily Worker supports this dissertation's position that Wright routinely was capable of being his own writer:

> The young Ralph Ellison, a left-winger but not a Communist, elaborated on Wright's views in an article in *New Masses*, but official Party spokesperson neither endorsed them nor condemned them, contenting themselves with facile comments about Wright's 'militancy' that systematically ignored ways in which he challenged, or transcended, conventional leftist literary modes. (CIH 210)

One of the most illustrative examples of Wright's freedom manifested itself as he created and reformed the landscape of Harlem. This notion of taking the geography of Harlem and placing a geopolitical matrix over it was inherited by him in 1937 when the party decided that Harlem needed its own office, its own polit-bureau, for the production and distribution of the Daily Worker. The American Communist Party had toyed with machinations such as dividing Harlem

into geopolitical districts since the early 1930's.

The organ of the American Communist Party had been produced since the 1920's, but when it came to propagandizing the Black community, it had been decided that a separate and distinct brand of journalism was required. Therefore, the Party created the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and the staff of this unit of the American Communist party published the Negro Liberator. Its sole purpose and function was to publish news, events and develop avenues for persuading a community that had been highly resistant to the American Communist Party for varying reasons. Anti-lynching, eviction protests and ensuring that certain bureaucratic functions of the WPA program were applied even handedly to the black community - these were the issues that the party felt were of immediate consequences. Claude McKay, our romantic poet reluctantly confessed in 1937, "It must be admitted that more than any other group, Communists should be credited with the effective organization of the unemployed and relief workers" (CIH 205). Despite this platform of programs geared and tailored for the black community, leaders of the Communist Party were not satisfied with the membership rolls or the voting patterns that had been in evidence during the elections of 1932 and 1934. Therefore, it decided that the

Negro Liberator be abandoned, its staff dissembled, and the Daily Worker would have its own office situated in Harlem.

Wright came to a newspaper that was in its infancy in regard to the Harlem Edition of the Daily Worker. Consequently, this fact coupled with his own creative background and the need to improvise, as opposed to maintain a journalistic status quo, was why Wright redefined Harlem. The Communist Party had segmented Harlem into tidy political areas and conceived it in terms of raw statistics, voting patterns, family incomes, and various other sets of social data that reduced people to figures, human beings to mathematical equations. Harlem was a "division." It was comprised of "three sections." This compartmentalization of a community had been established as an official policy at a convention held in 1936. If this sounds militaristic, the American Communist Party of the 1930's retained a combative stance and martial nuances as one of its organizing principles. Envisioning Harlem with a completely different design, Wright saw it as a living stage upon which exorbitant and fantastic dramas, dreams, and nightmares were being enacted on a daily basis. What Wright witnessed on a daily basis in his journalism, Ralph Ellison was able to so incisively capture in his "dispossession" scene which occurs on the streets of Harlem in Invisible Man:

There was a rush against me and I fell, hearing a single explosion backward into a whirl of milling legs, overshoes, the trampled snow cold on my hands. Another shot sounded above like a bursting bag. Managing to stand, I saw atop the steps the fist with the gun being forced into the air above the crowd's bobbing heads and the next instant they were dragging him down into the snow; punching him left and right, uttering a low intense swelling sound of desperate effort; a grunt that exploded into a thousand softly spat, hate-sizzling curses. I saw a woman striking with the pointed heel of her shoe, her face a blank mask with hollow black eyes as she aimed and struck, aimed and struck, bringing spurts of blood, running along beside the man who was dragged to his feet now as they punched him gauntlet-wise between them. Suddenly I saw a pair of

> handcuffs arc gleaming into the air and sail across the street. A boy broke out of the crowd, the marshal's snappy hat on his head. The marshal was spun this way and that, then a swift tattoo of blows started him down the street. I was beside myself with excitement. The crowd surged after him, milling like a huge man trying to turn into a cubbyhole--some of them laughing, some cursing, some intently silent. (IM 212)

Harlem was a complex stage; theatrical performances were presented on a daily basis. It could not be reduced to geopolitical lines drawn on a map.

From his office at Lenox Avenue and 131st street Wright, with a propensity toward the romantic, created "East Harlem," "Upper Harlem," and "Lower Harlem." At times, not being satisfied with the notion of Upper Harlem which possesses no hint of hue, color or character (at the time Washington Heights was middle, to upper-middle class and practically all white), he recast it in certain articles as "Washington Heights." If one were to look at a map today, they would have to readily acknowledge that the real "Washington Heights" is far outside the boundaries of

Harlem. Wright's literary license obviously transcended lines of latitude and longitude.

Once Wright reconstituted this new map in literary imagination, he was now free during his tenure to create a literary place, not a geopolitical map. These neighborhoods under Wright's creative pen gave birth to varying and picturesque geographies. These places were slowly assigned personalities. It took time but Wright had over two hundred opportunities. "East Harlem," at times, when appropriate and advantageous for Wright's purposes, radiated a Spanish visage. Amplifying his theme about activist women and the role that they were to play in party politics and simultaneously demonstrating their anti- fascist fervor, Wright wrote a substantial article that included a photograph of one of the Loyalist heroes of the Spanish Civil War, Dolores Ibarurri (La Pasionaria). Wright's eight hundred words document the story of Spanish women who are members of the Communist Party and whose husbands were fighting with the Republican forces. The theme is obvious; instead of "Harlem to the Rhine," as with the Black troops of the 369th Infantry Regiment in World War I, it was now from "Harlem to the Ebro" (an important river and defensive line for Loyalist forces during the Spanish Civil War):

Harlem Spanish Women

Come Out of the Kitchen

La Pasionaria Unit Leads Section in Party Building Drive

--Press Campaign Quota Nearly Fulfilled

Each Wednesday at 1 P.M. some 70 women in Spanish Harlem lay aside their aprons, turn off the gas in their cook stoves, tell their children to be good (or sometimes they take them with them), and go to a small dingy meeting Hall, at 84 E. 111th St.

They are not going to a woman's sewing circle, or to a temperance meeting or to a Bible class; these dark-haired, bright-eyed women are about much more serious business. They are members of the Communist Party, and the ideal in their hearts is La Pasionaria, the heroine of the Loyalist Spanish masses..

...These women are poor and could not make substantial contributions to the Party's financial drive; so they took their Daily Worker dime-books into the streets, into stores, cafes, bars and business establishments and raised $110 in times.

...There is in them all a firm and passionate belief in the heroic role played by the Communist Party of Spain. They know that the Party they are helping to build is international; they know that by building the Party in America they are also helping their husbands in the trenches in Spain.

> ...When they speak of husbands
> who are "somewhere in Spain" they
> do so with slight sign and avert
> their eyes. But their sacrifice
> is a willing and passionate one.
> Are they not following La Pasionaria?...
> (DW 9-20-1937)

Wright's language is descriptive, and he explores setting and characterization and by using dialogue, develops some of the women, making them fully dimensional figures. He follows them throughout their work day, their participation with their families, attending a dance on a Sunday and how they are filled with angst as they sit in their kitchens dwelling on the fate of their loved ones serving with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

There were other strategies. If the article was built on material concerning the Spanish Civil War, Wright used these articles as opportunities to demand public support from "Spanish Harlem," which only a few days ago was known as "East Harlem." On October 13, 1937, the headline for Wright's article concerned one of the highest officials in the American Communist Party, Earl Browder. The newspaper headline read, "Scheduled Talk by Browder in Spanish Harlem." However, unconscious or not caring about the contradictions and realizing the political importance of transforming a location, at times, Wright who had labeled "East Harlem," "Spanish Harlem," now called it "Italian

Harlem," if there were articles about Mussolini's incursions into Ethiopia. He unabashedly desired to solicit a response from that segment of Italian Americans who lived in "Italian Harlem" even though a month ago the same neighborhood had been labeled "Spanish Harlem."

Maximizing his license as a literary artist, at one point he completely renames this area for the purposes of certain articles and appropriates the label of one of the most famous neighborhoods in lower Manhattan, and commenced to call "East Harlem," which in another article was "Spanish Harlem," "Little Italy." Wright's mendacity seemed to have no limits particularly when he commenced to paint "Washington Heights" as the newest addition to a politically-collective family, a bit isolated from Harlem in Upper manhattan but clamoring for a union with the rest of Harlem. Finally, Lower Harlem, the Harlem of America's elaborate fantasies, where the "joint is jumping," as Fats Waller sang, has its own inherent appeal. Events that occur there, demonstrations, rallies, all reverberated with the rich nuance that this is really, "Harlem," the Harlem of one's imagination, the Harlem of say, Ellison's Invisible Man.

What do we learn about Wright from this "fictional" metamorphosis of a landscape? Wright understood that if the

American Communist Party truly desired to expand its power, its allure, it was incumbent upon it that it modify and adopt new methods for reaching out to the community. Dry sermons built on Marxist rhetoric had their limitations with any American audience of the 1930's. One can only imagine how alienating some of the prose and oratory must have sounded to first generation Black urbanites who could still recall their rural past in the South. The American Communist Party, when contemplating how to convert the populace of Harlem readily through language, rhetorical pitch, and nationalistic zeal, seemed to forget that:

> The typical Negro migrant to the metropolis originally came from some rural area in the South. Most grew up on farms or in small southern towns. In 1913 a study was made of thirty-five Negroes in Harlem. Thirty-four came from the rural South, and only one grew up in a town whose populations exceeded 10,000. Of the twenty-one born on farms, only three were children of parents who owned their land outright. The others were

> sons and daughters of sharecroppers and farm labors. The majority of Negroes in this group were indirect migrants--they had lived in some large town or city for a time before coming to New York. All but four were presently employed as domestics, servants or laborers. Similar finds were made in other surveys of northern cities. (TMG 29)

It was with this audience that left wing writers and thinkers were attempting to integrate into the party. A "peasant class," for the most part for whom literacy was not even a guarantee, was asked to read, understand, embrace and act upon the ideologies found in classic works by Lenin, Marx or Hegel. In addition to being hurled into this world of an ambitious political intelligentsia with Herculean aspirations, these southern Black migrants were being asked to surrender the one thread of their existence which had helped them survive slavery, Reconstruction and the advent of Jim Crow law: religion, God, and Christianity. Anaesthetized and blinded to any human needs exclusive of those outside of the party, Communist party officials glibly looked over the fact that many black Southerners:

> ...came with an experience of church and church organizations, the typical organizations in the black community, where the meeting was opened with a prayer, the reading of the minutes of the last meeting, the agenda is read and adopted, then you have your doxology and closing prayer. Well, he comes in to the Communist Party and God is challenged right away. When he goes to a new member's class, he's instructed that "God has nothing to do with our business here." (CIH 282)

Perhaps it was because Wright was from the South, the rural south, that he comprehended in a compassionate manner the need to expend time and effort on contacting this community in a more authentic manner. Of course, the paradox is clear; Wright emanated from the exact social, economic, and political circumstances that the American Communist Party was discovering to be so problematic in terms of conversions. Reading any of the early chapters of Black Boy, one is readily reminded of the provincial quality of Wright's own upbringing, his home life and most of all,

his family's intense religious fervor:

> Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshiping her God, which was her exaction for my keep. The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking upon water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking; a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet; sermons of statues possessing

> heads of gold, shoulders of silver,
> legs of brass, and feet of clay
> cosmic tale that began before time
> and ended with clouds of the sky
> rolling away at the Second Coming
> of Christ; chronicles that concluded
> with the Armageddon; dramas thronged
> with all the billions of human
> beings who had ever lived or died as
> God judged the quick and
> the dead . . . (BB 89)

Wright understood the world of the Southern preacher, minister, his flock, and what role religion served for a population living under the miserable conditions meted out by survival under the Jim Crow policies of Mississippi, Tennessee or Arkansas. Therefore, by being the editor of the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker, Wright was composing for an ideal audience, his own people, from a psychological panorama that he was completely familiar with. Poverty, hunger that left painful reminders in one's stomach, Wright knew this existence. When one looks at the titles of many of the articles, he will be convinced that this was precisely what Wright accomplished.

Highlights of Wright's 223 Articles for the Daily

Worker:

Key to content and style of Wright's articles:

* Progressive role of women
** One of the thirty-one Scottsboro Case articles
*** Communist Party and Union Activism
\+ Harlem's Connection to the Spanish Civil War
++ Geopolitics of Harlem
+++ Pan African consanguinity
RW Wright's investigative journalism

1. "Negro Writers Launch Literary Quarterly"
   June 8, 1937 *RW*

2. "Rally for Ethiopia is Backed by C.P."
   June 10, 1937+++

3. "Party Leaders Honor Negro Woman Leader"
   June 22, 1937*

4. "Protest Job Discrimination Against Negro"
   June 30, 1937

5. "Scottsboro Meetings Set in Harlem"
   July 2, 1937**

6. "Harlem Rallies to Aid Nine Scottsboro Boys"
   July 10, 1937**

7. "Harlem Maps Fight Against WPA Slashes
   July 13, 1937

8. "Negro Union Painters Seek Higher Wages"
   July 14, 1937***

9. "Harlem Baby Denied Medical Care Dies"
   July 14, 1937

10. "Butcher Slugs Negro Youth Asking Change"
July 14, 1937

11. "Butcher Who Attacked Negro Boy is Fired"
July 14, 1937 *RW*

12. "WPA March to Protest Scottsboro Verdict"
July 17, 1937**

13. "Negro Women Will Picket Italian Consul"
July 20, 1937*

14. "Store Clerks Demand End of Jim Crow"
July 20, 1937

15. "Women Picket Italy's Consulate Tomorrow"
July 22, 1937*

16. "Fla. Lynching Draws Harlem Protest Action"
July 22, 1937

17. "100 Negro, White Women Picket Italian Consulate"
July 24, 1937*

18. "Pickets Ask Negro Hiring in Movie House"
July 25, 1937

19. "Harlem Party to Protest Japan's Action"
July 27, 1937***

20. "Harlem Spurs Scottsboro Boys Fight"
July 30, 1937**

21. "Negro, With 3-Week-Old Baby, Begs Food On Streets"
August 4, 1937 *RW*

22. "Harlem Viewed Peace Caravan Last Evening"
August 5, 1937

23. "Harlem Rallies Behind March for WPA Jobs"
August 8, 1937

24. "Harlem Cop Compelled to Apologize for Abuse"
August 8, 1937

25. "Scottsboro Fight Pushed at Harlem Rally"
August 11, 1937**

26. "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People"
August 12, 1937 *RW*

27. "What Happens at a Communist Party Branch Meeting in the Harlem Section?"
August 16, 1937 *RW*

28. "Negro Group Attacks RR Jim Crow Policy"
August 17, 1937

29. "'Opportunity for Soviet Youth Unlimited,' Says Negro Musician"
August 24, 1937 *RW*

30. "Born A Slave, She Recruits 5 Members for Communist Party"
August 30, 1937 *RW*

31. "Retail Clerks to Continue Picketing"
September 2, 1937

32. "Harlem Plans Big Party Building Drive"
September 2, 1937***

33. "Harlem to Denounce Terror in West Indies"
September 4, 1937+++

34. "Mrs. Holmes and Daughters Drink From Fountain of Communism"
September 7, 1937 *RW*

35. "Harlem Women Picket Milk Co. Tomorrow"
September 8, 1937*

36. "Harlem Rent Strike Ends; Tenants Win"
September 8, 1937

37. "Amter to Open East Harlem Drive in Talk"
September 9, 1937++

37. "Harlem to Launch Fund Drive Tonight"
September 9. 1937

38. "Lower Harlem Rally Spurs Party Drive"
September 11, 1937++

39. "Upper Harlem Rally To Hear Party History"
September 11, 1937++

41. "Horseplay at Lafayette Fun for Children and Grown-Ups Alike"
September 11, 1937 *RW*

42. "East Harlem Party Building Drive Mapped"
September 14, 1937++

43. "Amter Speaks at Big Rally in 'Little Italy'"
September 16, 1937++

44. "East Harlem C.P. Recruits 40 members"
September 20, 1937++

45. "Harlem Spanish Women Come Out of the Kitchen"
September 20, 1937*

46. "10,000 Negro Vets in N.Y. Silent, But They're Talking At Home"
September 23, 1937

47. "Harlem Rally For China"
September 24, 1937

48. "Scottsboro Drive Pushed in Harlem"
September 24, 1937**

49. "Negro Pastor Assails Tokio Aggression"
September 25, 1937

50. "Big Harlem Rally For China Tonight"
September 27, 1937

51. "American Negroes in Key Posts of Spain's Loyalist Forces"+
September 29, 1937

52. "Bates Tells of Spain's Fight for Strong Republican Army"
October 5, 1937+

53. "Scottsboro Mother Sees Son In Jail"
October 6, 1937**

54. "Negro Youth on March, Says Leader"
October 7, 1937 *RW*

55. "Lower Harlem to Hear Amter Talk Tonight"
October 7, 1937++

56. "Opening of Harlem Project Homes Shows How Slums Can Be Wiped Out in New York"
October 8, 1937 *RW*

57. "Mother, Three Children Are Evicted in Harlem"
October 9, 1937

58. "Heights Leads in Campaign for Press"
October 11, 1937++

59. "Scheduled Talk by Browder in Spanish Harlem"
October 13, 1937++

60. "Harlem Plans Scottsboro Defense Rally"
October 13, 1937**

61. "Negro Tradition in the Theater"
October 15, 1937 *RW*

62. "Harlem, Bronx Sign Competition Pact"
October 19, 1937++

63. "Harlem Negro Leaders Back Mayor for Liberal Views"
October 20, 1937

64. "Browder Talks in East Harlem"
October 21, 1937++

65. "100 Women To Score Gijon Massacre"
October 26, 1937*

66. "Fifty Fascists Attach Women's Picket Line"
October 30, 1937*

67. "Picket Lines Win Withdrawal of All Goods Made in Japan"
November 1, 1937

68. "Harlem Concert To Mark Soviet Union Festival"
November 6, 1937

69. "Plan To aid Negroes in West Indies"
November 6, 1937+++

70. "Scottsboro Mother to lead Protest"
November 8, 1937**

71. "Tenants Push Fight on High Harlem Rents"
November 8, 1937

72. "Sharecropper Friends to Hold Savoy Dance"
November 9, 1937

73. "Negroes Form Committee To Aid Spain"
November 12, 1937+

74. "Negroes Win Back Jobs on WPA Theater"
November 15, 1937

75. "Patterson Speaks on USSR November 18 at Harlem Forum"
November 16, 1937

76. "Baby Carriage Parade to Protest Milk Gouge"
November 20, 1937

77. "Memorial for Milton Herndon Next Sunday"
November 22, 1937+

78. "Few Harlem Tables Weighed by Turkey"
November 26, 1937 *RW*

79. "Walter Garland Tells What Spain's Fight Against Fascism Means to the Negro People"+
November 29, 1937

80. "Pickets Force Stores to Ban Japan Goods"
November 30, 1937

81. "'He Died By Them'--Hero's Widow Tells of Rescue of December 6, 1937 *RW*

82. "Harlem, East Side Honor Hero Who Died in Rescue of Negroes" ++ *RW*
December 8, 1937

83. "Scottsboro Group Warns on T.S. Harten"
December 8, 1937**

84. "Probe of Negro Conditions Opens December 13"
December 9, 1937

85. "Huge Negro Death Rate Shown in Niagara Frontier Survey"
December 13, 1937

86. "Gouging Landlord Discrimination Against Negroes Bared at Hearing" *RW*
December 15, 1937

87. "Two Cops Slay Negro Boy--'Ran When Questioned'"
December 16, 1937

88. "Plan Memorial For Heroic Truck Driver"
December 18, 1937 *RW*

89. "From Spain's Loyalist Trenches Larry Foy Asks About Harlem's Fight Against Fascism in the U.S."
December 23, 1937+

90. "James W. Ford Celebrates 44th Birthday--Leads Progressives in Harlem Community"
December 23, 1937 *RW*

91. "Negro Who Escaped Lynch Mom in South, Ordered to Return by Harlem Relief Officials"
December 27, 1937

92. "Santa Claus Has a Hard Time Finding Way to Harlem Slums"
December 27, 1937 *RW*

93. "'Every Child is a Genius'--Art Young's Famous Line Finds Realization in Harlem's New Community Art Center
December 28, 1937 *RW*

In sum, Wright was negotiator between two worlds, the rural South whose peasant inhabitants surveyed a world dying around them, and the urban industrialized North that attempted to affiliate itself with its displaced brethren. He attempted to create a composite collective consciousness

intertwining memories of a rural existence based on the turn of the seasons with a new urban consciousness enhanced by the social and cultural rewards of living in Harlem, "the capital of the Black World." Wright was sometimes confounded by this awkward compendium, being a stranger in a strange land, the itinerant sharecropper expelled by machinery and changing economic and social conditions. He felt the displaced sharecropper's pain and sorrow and desired to document this remarkable moment in history, a period of transition.

Feeling that words alone were not adequate enough for rendering this unique moment in Black history, Wright appropriately entered the world of photojournalism approximately two years after his most productive period for the Daily Worker. Coupling his journalistic ability with the photography work of Edwin Roskam, who used his own photographs taken during The Depression, Wright selected other photographers who had documented the effects of The Great Depression on American agriculture for the Farm Security Administration. The end result of this collaboration was 12 Million Black Voices. Even sixty years later one is struck by the starkness of the images and the brilliant and lyrical prose that accompanies the photographs. Wright, always the student writer, used this

experience to learn more about the craft of writing:

> Although this was Wright's first nonfiction book, the stages of composition, which are easy to reconstruct from the several versions of the manuscript, nevertheless, reveal the author's characteristic methods. He began with a conceptual framework, incomplete and without a logical sequence. Then he would either explain these concepts so that their contrast and similarities would emerge, or he would work on formulating the language whose poetic qualities would suggest further associations and oppositions not contained in the concepts themselves. Later, while reorganizing the paragraphs within the chapters, he continually worked on his style, polishing the prose to make it flow so that the rhythm and sonority of the language

> would clothe and enhance the ideas, elevating them from the purely intellectual level to that of the imaginative and figurative. (UQRW 233)

Employing this journalistic mode as an experiment was not new. He had been doing this consistently during the course of the two-hundred and twenty-three articles with the Daily Worker commencing in 1937. We now move to a detailed analysis of the content and style of many of the articles not previously mentioned which will illustrate what Wright learned during this period of literary apprenticeship.

Chapter 3 -Analysis of style and content

For Richard Wright, his tenure at the Daily Worker was more than just a period of literary apprenticeship. There is no question that he was becoming familiar with a style of presenting the news and that composing on a daily basis for the mouthpiece of the American Communist Party meant that he had to adhere to a very particular and precise "party line." For some writers, this experience would have logically resulted in the perfection of a truly hackneyed style, a cliched banality that reduces all newsworthy events and human dramas to predictable scenarios, types and conclusions. For instance, in the late 1930's the drama critic of the Daily Worker routinely refused to review "non-progressive drama," on or Off Broadway. One quickly notices that Louise Mitchell's (occasional drama critic of the paper) reviews of plays in the late 1930's always pivot on a simple question: does this drama foster progressive ideas, socialism and an acknowledgment that the "revolution" is imminent? Wright, in certain articles, can be accused of the same thing. Titles of articles such as, "Mother and Daughters Drink From The Fountain of Communism," and "Santa Claus Has Hard Time Finding Way to Harlem Slums," are evidence of this superficial adoption of Party tone and jargon and there are other articles of this nature.

However, these tantalizing headlines were created with the purpose behind any other copy editor's "header," to gain the reader's interest. If anything, once the headline is negotiated for what it truly is, Wright exposed certain contradictions with American Communist Party policies that were detrimental to its own aspirations of persuading and cajoling the Black community. In many instances he did not permit himself to be used for the purposes of the Party. The American Communist Party, based on its own predictions of future enrollment, loss of membership, and voting patterns, had an uphill battle in its attempt to bond with a disgruntled Black Community.

Hence, here was a white, out-of-the-mainstream political organization, exerting an incredible amount of time and energy on trying to gain the trust, confidence and loyalty of a community because of its recent southern social experience, that viewed whites with a great deal of incertitude and doubt. There must have been something surreal and almost schizophrenic for the southern black, particularly those with provincial backgrounds; to leave such hostile environments whose sole purpose was dedicated to negating and nullifying one's existence, and because of a geographical removal via a train ride of ten to fifteen hours to another world in which there are whites, completely

different from their southern "redneck" counterparts, must have been completely alienating. Naison notes that some of the mistrust did not even revolve around highly touted political or ideological issues. The nature of these problems turned out to be human ones, and it was with problems like these, the causal agency of the heart or the vulnerabilities of being a man or a woman, that was when the Party was at its worst; as early as 1930 this particular type of friction was apparent:

> The Party's inability to hold Blacks it attracted from many sources, some of them peculiar to Afro-American life, others typical of Party problems among all working class constituencies . . . the Party's artificially imposed interracialism contributed to the high rate of turnover. Working class blacks . . . were so uncomfortable around whites they found Party Branch life a great strain . . . The Party's efforts to organize the total lives of its membership magnified the problem. Blacks who joined not only had

> to deal with interracial encounters
> in meetings and political activities,
> but in social events as well. (CIH 280)

In 1931, in order to free itself of any hint of racial bias, the party conducted a public trial in Harlem for an audience of fifteen hundred people. This is described in graphic detail in a Communist Party pamphlet, "Race hatred on trial." This document describes the community investigation and debate over the racial bias of August Yokinen, a member of the Party who was accused of making insulting remarks. For many Black residents, this was some semblance of proof that they were waiting for in regard to the Party's sweeping commitment. From 1931 on, the membership rolls of the American Communist Party grew due to the increasing support that it received from Harlem.

Wright rejected this sort of blind faith devotion. In a "public trial" such as the one described above, Wright would have felt as foreign as though he were witnessing another type of lynching. In Wright's view there could never be any justice under any set of circumstances when fifteen hundred people are gathered to ensure that only one type of verdict is reached. Perhaps this has to do with his earliest days of meetings with communists out in Chicago; he never felt quite comfortable with them. Honest enough to

admit that he knew he was aware of the psychological baggage that he still retained from his days in the Deep South which required him to exercise an initial caution with whites, well-read enough to be suspect of any ideology that placed a chaffing bridle on one's intellect, Wright made the following observations:

> When speaking from the platform, the Negro Communists, eschewing the traditional gestures of the Negro preacher--as though they did not possess the strength to develop their own style of Communist preaching--stood straight, threw back their heads, brought the edge of the right palm down hammer-like into the outstretched left palm in a series of jerky motions to pound their points home, a mannerism that characterized Lenin's method of speaking. When they walked, their stride quickened, all their peasant hesitancy of their speech vanished as their voices became clipped, terse.

> In debate they interrupted their opponents in a tone of voice that was an octave higher, and if their opponents raised their voices to be heard, the Communists raised theirs still higher until shouts rang out over the park. Hence, the only truth that prevailed was that which could be shouted and quickly understood. (AH 38)

True, when Wright arrived in New York he was more than honored to be made the editor of the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker. At the same time he was no novice, waiting wide eyed to be taught and trained. As one reads his articles for the Daily Worker, one sees he possessed the ability to walk a fine line between mouthing party politics and retaining his own authorial voice. There are two reasons for his maintaining an autonomy over his voice. They are captivating, intriguing and disturbing.

After reviewing the two hundred and twenty three articles composed between 1937 and 1938, there are some outstanding issues and observations that leave an impression of what dominated Wright's sense and consciousness of race relations in the United States. The horror and turmoil of

racial strife in America, during the 1930's was at its apex. In article after article, particularly the ones regarding race relations in the Deep South, terror and trepidation, dominated, sometimes exceeding human understanding. The holocaust of activities that Wright was cognizant of can be divided into the following categories: lynchings, shootings, burnings, and assaults (beatings and castrations), and tarring-and-featherings.

Surveying the incidents and facts that emanated almost exclusively from the South but included numerous brutal events from the Midwest, reveals what Wright was witnessing and chronicling, a sort of medieval barbarism that left one feeling impotent and outraged. It was 1937. True, Wright was writing from the safety of his office, The Harlem Bureau, in New York City, while the community he consciously fled was being assaulted with impunity. How did a man move through his daily activities when he knew that his black fellow brothers and sisters were suffering the worst indignities America inflicted on their fellow Americans in the twentieth century? His ideas regarding the notion of the North as a safe haven, practically a sanctuary, are continually amplified and developed in his autobiographical text, Black Boy. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Wright left the South physically, but in terms of his soul

and spirit, he knew another truth existed that made his departure not so much a desertion, and made his relocation more of a crusade, a mission. He discussed these feelings in the last page of Black Boy:

> I was not leaving the South to
> forget the South, but so that
> some day I might understand it,
> might come to know what its rigors
> had done to me, to its children.
> I fled so that the humbleness of
> my defensive living might thaw out
> and let me feel the pain--years
> later and far away--of what living
> in the South had meant.
> Yet, deep down, I knew that I could
> never really leave the South, for
> my feelings had already been formed
> by the South, for there had been
> slowly instilled into my personality
> and consciousness, black though I was,
> the culture of the South. So, in
> leaving, I was taking a part of the
> South to transplant in alien soil, to
> see if it could grow differently, if

> it could drink of new and cool rains,
> bend in strange winds, respond to the
> warmth of other suns, and, perhaps,
> to bloom . . . (BB 228)

With this level of consciousness in mind, what sort of balancing act did Wright devise? How did his connectedness to the South and his past, shape and influence his literary sensibility while working as a journalist?

Wright possessed a thorough knowledge of racism and its warping effects upon black and white relationships. He knew what inner recess of the American psychological landscape a Black person occupied. He understood from his early years in the South that the black was viewed as a multifaceted threat. Economically, Booker T. Washington, even with his benighted program for compromising with the Southern power elite, understood that American Blacks would ultimately be in competition with not only native born American blue collar workers but with the myriad numbers of immigrants who were flooding America's shores in unprecedented numbers. Washington rather vituperatively articulates his anti-immigrant stance in his classic autobiography, Up From Slavery, published in 1903.

> To those of the white race who look
> to the incoming of those of foreign

birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make this magnificent representation of the progress of the South . . . As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sickbed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future,

> in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that make the interests of both races one. (UFS 148)

Socially, despite all of the time, money and energy that were being expended in one of the greatest social marginalization programs ever envisioned, it was inevitable that Blacks were going to demand more rights and benefits especially as they recognized the clear connection between how their tax dollars were being spent and what they were receiving in return. Ultimately, the inordinate monstrous potential that the Black community retained, based on the orientation of the white power structure, was a psychological one. It was not physical. It was not economic. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, lyrically captures what lies at the core of America's racial consciousness and possessed the exquisite wisdom of a sage to translate it into words. In addition, he had the profound insight, after identifying what the problem is for white America, to reveal how they placate themselves, never having to confront the

central issue behind one of America's foremost social problems:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me. (IM 3)

Seven years before the publication of Invisible Man Richard Wright had a similar epiphany while composing his most successful book since Native Son, Black Boy. He recalled attempting to understand just what racism is. Assiduously

examining the content, latent and manifest of all his contact with Southern whites, he contemplated in a profound manner what motive or catalyst lay at the foundation of anyone possessing a potentiality for racism. In a cinematic manner he reminisces about part time jobs, school days and social interaction on the streets of Natchez or Memphis. Time spent at a job in an optical plant in Tennessee reverberates very strongly, and he had a revelatory moment in Chapter XII of Black Boy after a white man, "unmistakably a Yankee," had said to him "'Say, boy, I'm from the North':

> I held very still. Was this a trap? He had mentioned a tabooed subject and I wanted to wait until I knew what he meant. Among the topics that southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following: American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how Negro soldiers fared while there; Frenchwomen; Jack Johnson; the entire Northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U.S. Grant; General Sherman; Catholics; the Pope; Jews; the Republican party; slavery; social equality; Communism; Socialism;

> the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro. (BB 202)

"Communism, Socialism . . . or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro." These words resound with a certain irony when one now realizes that this is exactly what Wright was able to do with a great deal of the content of his reporting for the Daily Worker. What was repressed in Wright's formative days of spiritual and intellectual growth, "manly self assertion of the Negro," not only found an outlet but also was encouraged and cultivated, and regarded with the highest respect. For Wright there must have been an element of fantasy and unimagined delight as he produced article after article for the Daily Worker where Black people were shown in a positive light, operate independently, and forge economic and social programs. Wright's articles offered portraits of Black people who are strong, courageous, and intelligent. Wright was fabricating a world of ideas and people that could respond in a thunderous manner to what the racial powers of the South had attempted to stifle in him.

One of the most important questions of the day for the

intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance was always, what program of constructive action and policy should the black community follow and execute. The plethora of choices was mind boggling for anyone who found himself aware and mired in the movements of the day. There were religious answers via the charismatic and heavenly Father Divine who was able to attract ten thousand people to any one tent-revival meeting. There were the Black social organizations modeled on the Elks and the Masons that were very appealing to the rising Black bourgeoisie of Harlem. Progressive Unions within the labor movement offered the Blue Collar worker a chance to have some autonomy as to how he was going to be integrated into the labor movement. There were the Garveyites who from 1917 to 1925 (despite Garvey's conviction and deportation to Jamaica) continued their support through his Universal Negro Improvement Association into the 1930's.

Garvey's vision provides one with an eloquent opportunity for contrasting one so-called radical approach with Wright's perspective of how Black Americans should earn their right to enter American society. Garvey's rhetoric expounds, "Up, you mighty race! Africa for Africans!" The notion was a radical one, that an American Black could make use of his African heritage as ersatz as it might be,

manufacturing a new identity and discovering inspiration in the liberation movements that were occurring in the "motherland." Garvey's appeal was brilliant as far as a political relation's ploy. It was innovative. However, another look at some of Garvey's rhetoric reveals that there was a shallowness to most of his demands, particularly the grandiose and bombastic ones. The following speech which Garvey delivered in 1917 exposes the frailty and transparency of Garvey's plans to reconstruct the Black man in America:

> Where is the black man's government? Where is his King and his kingdom. Where is his president, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs? I I can not find them. I will help to make them. (Huggins 217)

Wright, while at the Daily Worker was able to move far beyond the rhetorical stage of grandiose speeches when it came to creating heroes, men of flesh and blood, Black men, who could be used to bolster the image of the Black community in a real and pragmatic way. In his articles about the political and social activities of Black Americans outside of America Wright envisioned men and women of

action, not just words about their exploits, neither rhetoric about their lofty endeavors, nor exaggerated self-delusional bombast. When joining the American Communist party, a fidelity and commitment were demanded of its members. The special devotion that was incumbent upon members is described graphically in the following passage:

> I found that many people had no idea what the Party was like or how it functioned. We explained at the first session: 'This is a Party of the working class, in the countryside, the Party of the poor and the working farmers. It also supports the problems of the lower middle class. We are the Party of the black people and other oppressed people.' We made it clear that the Party had nothing to give.
> Well, many of the black people in Harlem had come from the South were told by precinct leaders (Republicans and Democrats), if you want favors done, join our political club. We had to make it clear that we had nothing

> to do with that. Many of the people who came into the Party through the unemployed movement were women, and we had to say to them: 'The Party is not a sewing club.'
> We told them: 'This is not like any other organization. If you belong to the lodge, that's one thing, a church, that's another thing but this is a Party of the working class'. (CIH 281)

In a series of articles about Black men who were serving in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade fighting fascism in Spain, another group of articles about Black men and women who were community activists in Harlem, his series of portraits of the fight waged on the behalf of the Scottsboro Boys of the infamous case, and lastly his articles about the arts (theater and music reviews), Wright generated a vision of Black men and women he hoped would truly inspire the Black community. There was nothing fanciful or phantasmagoric about this. The American Communist Party presented the Black community with an opportunity for the first time to truly be empowered. Previous attempts at empowerment, social and economic (The Freedman's Bureau 1866)and political, (The Niagara Movement 1905) were either

infamous monuments to the failure of the Black community to assert itself in a genuine manner or bittersweet moments in which intramural infighting practically sabotaged the mission and left those involved feeling impotent and paralyzed.

For example, World War I started in 1917 (America's official entry) and Black leaders initially viewed this as a splendid chance for the African American community to prove itself in terms of deserving legitimate recognition for the part it could play if only allowed to enter the mainstream. To W.E.B. DuBois' dismay, and only after his forceful urging, did Woodrow Wilson agree to establish a segregated training center for Black officers. Service for Black soldiers consisted of menial and demeaning jobs in segregated units, transportation, loading and unloading, mess duties and general maintenance. If it had not been for the French Army, not one Black unit of the American Expeditionary Force under General "Blackjack" Pershing would have ever seen combat. Official U.S. Army policy and tradition forbade segregated Black units from serving in combat. This tradition had commenced with service in the Union Army during the Civil War. However, The 369th U.S. Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard, the same one mentioned by Huggins in the celebrated march up 5th

Avenue in 1919 that officially inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance, had been loaned with regret by the American Expeditionary Force to the French, and there they served with honor and distinction. Yet, due to the policies of segregation in the American Army, World War I was a bitter disappointment for African Americans, something to be forgotten about as quickly as possible. In a sense, Garvey's anger, as well as the vexation of any other Black romantic visionary in this post World War I era, was more in response to a feeling of disillusionment, not a sense of triumph in regard to contemporary Black progress.

One of the Harlem "Romantics," previously mentioned would be Claude McKay. There is a strange connection between the Harlem Romantics and the Garvey Movement. Both retain the need to ideate about empowerment in the face of overwhelming circumstances that denied one authority and control over one's existence. Both movements, even though one is distinctly political and the other artistic, suspend an everyday reality and remove the reader or viewer from a corporeality. Huggins, in The Harlem Renaissance aptly captures the ethereal daze that enveloped witnesses to a Garvey exhibition:

> It was a dream, of course. But Garvey's genius (and failure) was

that he always provided a tangible and visible reality. What standard American lodges--Elks, Masons, Odd Fellows, etc.--did with elaborate hierarchies and colorful pageantries to give substance to their 'mysteries,' the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) did to give the African dream its sense of reality. The members became a nation in exile. They carried titles such as the Duke of Nigeria and the Overlord of Uganda. And all the offices had appropriate uniforms and paraphernalia. Subscribers were decorated with bronze silver, a or gold cross--depending on the size of their contribution. There were uniforms for everyone, enough to satisfy any taste in a parade.
In a parade, Garvey--unformed in purple, green, and black with a hat of white feathered plumes--like any other potentate, would wave from his car to the crowds. Behind his touring car would

> ride other nobility, each with colorful sashes denoting rank. The African Legion, uniformed in dark blue with red stripes down the trousers, came next, to be followed by the rank and file of the Association. (Huggins 43)

In sharp contrast to these pretentious parades of characters bordering on a circus, Wright was composing articles about African American men and women who were fighting and dying in Spain. These were not cartoonish figures ghosting around some cardboard landscape. There was no hint of contrivance. And, if anyone understands the human need for fabricating myth because of the harsh circumstances of his existence, it is Richard Wright. Many of Wright's most notable characters frequently remove themselves from the horror of their lives and conveniently transform their situation through a reverie into everything that they cannot be. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," as Big Boy cowers in the kiln watching the lynch mob desperately search for him and Bobo, he launches into an elaborate design, daydreaming about how many white men he will kill before he is captured and slain:

> He jerked another blade and chewed.
> Yeah, ef pa had only let im have

tha shotgun! He could stan off a whole mob wid a shotgun. He looked at the ground as he turned a shotgun over in his hands. Then he leveled it up at an advancing white man. Boooom! The man curled up. Another came. He reloaded quickly, and let him have what the other had got. He too curled up. Then another came. He got the same medicine. Then the whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away getting as many as he could. They closed in; but, by Gawd, he had done his part, hadnt he? N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFOR LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. Tha wouldnt be so bad, would it? Blinding the newspaper away, he looked over the fields. Where wuz Bobo? Why didnt he hurry up n c mon? (UTC 50)

Of course, within a few moments of this fantasy, Big Boy is forced to watch in horror as the mob, as though they were attending a carnival, pour gasoline and tar over Bobo; he is then set afire. The burning is quickly transformed into a Kafkaesque circus as onlookers, women and children, later search for souvenirs. Pieces of Bobo's body are the treasures that are hacked off and disbursed among the crowd.

Similarly, in the opening section of Native Son, Bigger Thomas and his cohorts dream about empowerment in a world that seeks to deny and nullify their existence. The closest they ever come to achieving any semblance of this hegemony over a world inexorably of their grasp occurs, when, as Bigger Thomas states: 'Let's play " 'white,'" Bigger said, referring to a game of play acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of the "white folks." This "game" quickly develops into a series of role-playing exchanges but one of them pivots on being a general in charge of a make-believe army: "Send the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Regiments,' Bigger said frowning. And attack with tanks, gas, planes and infantry." Reality ultimately encumbers this reverie when one of Bigger's comrades with a sense of resignation admits that white people control society. Bigger Thomas' friends comment, "they got everything," and "they own the world."

In his journalism for the Daily Worker, Wright was a staunch Anti-Romantic of sorts, posing real problems and real answers. Of course, the imperative is always action. Wright realized that concentrating on three current issues of the late 1930's, work opportunities and leadership roles in the Soviet Union, and the chance to participate in a fighting unit of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, would activate the tonic that a marginalized community strongly wanted. And in a series of articles, numbering about fifty, he proves that.

It is because of this that Wright crafted his own counterattack against white racism with a series of articles that not only show black men as being assertive, but as being heroes. The Spanish Civil War was to offer a battlefield, literally and figuratively. With the official policy of the United States being that of a non interventionist, American citizens who felt a sense of urgency as fascist forces within Spain and outside of it attempted to make it a sister of already fascist Germany and Italy, left the country in a surreptitious manner. Negotiating the perilous Pyrenees, playing cat and mouse with French border patrols, three thousand American volunteers eventually made it to Spain in early 1937. Many of the members of the Lincoln Battalion were Black, a good

number from New York City.

The irony of course is there-a black man has to leave the United States, the country of his origin in order to achieve the qualities traditionally reserved and retained for heroes. In order for a Black to be free to pursue activities and agendas of his own creation he must literally flee American and embark across the Atlantic Ocean.

In the September 29, 1937 edition, Wright composed a long article, "American Negroes in Key Posts of Spain's Loyal Forces." The article concentrates on a report of an African American woman, Louise Thompson. She had recently spent three weeks with the Anti Franco forces in Spain and had gathered information which was sent as an official communique for the English Division of the International Workers Order. In addition, she also had raised thirty thousand dollars while touring France for five weeks. In her speech to New Yorkers she became the archetypal retainer of a reality that Wright sought to employ as a counterweight to other realities being conjured up by other political or religious figures in Harlem:

> 'But my greatest interest was in
> the American Negro volunteers
> fighting in the International
> Brigade and in the Moors fighting

> with the Fascist Franco. I wanted to see with my own eyes the difference between these two dark-skinned people fighting on opposite sides of the struggle,' said Miss Thompson.

Thompson possessed an interpretation of contemporary events that Wright wanted to hear, a perception already explored in this chapter that implied the desire on the part of the African American community that a new and authentic history should be made:

> 'These Negro soldiers are not in the work battalions, as was in the case of Negroes who fought in France during The World War. They occupy any military position for which thy are qualified.'

The article pivots on a structure that contrasts the "Old World," Europe, with the "New World," the United States. This completely reversed the long held traditional iconography of America representing the New World and Europe, the Old, the notion that America held infinite possibility while Europe stood for archaic stagnation. In terms of his biography, it also set a foundation for Wright's future "repatriation" to Europe after World War II.

Once there in 1946, he only briefly returned to the United States for he found the same special freedom that Black Volunteers discovered in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade while fighting in Spain. For Wright, Europe was always going to represent an enticing sort of removal:

> My first week in exile disclosed a smooth flow of Parisian public politeness that imbued me with a sense of social confidence. The sharp contrast between French and American attitudes demonstrated that it was barbarousness that incited so militant a racism in white Americans. (UQRW 303)

The contortion works. A reversal of the Diaspora that the Black community had experienced would work to the ultimate benefit of current and future generations. Wright quoted liberally from Thompson's speech for these purposes:

> 'You know, in a measure, we Negroes who have been in Spain are a great deal luckier than those back in America. Here we have been able to strike back in a way that hurts at those who for years have punished us from pillar to

> post. I mean this--actually strike back at the counterparts of those who have been grinding us down back home.'

The words "to strike back": we can only imagine what message this must have sent to the African-American community back in the United States. In a time of social feebleness and political powerlessness, this segment of African Americans was actively participating in a struggle that deemed them as full, multidimensional human beings. The strongly nuanced metaphor of launching a counterattack can only have emboldened this audience to think and see themselves in a new way. This was the goal. By looking at the lives and actions of these politically active black men and women, models of inspiration would be constructed for the African-American community back in the "New World." And if there was not enough heroic inspiration to be excavated from the bloody fields of Spain, there was also another nation of the "Old World" that offered Wright a similar opportunity, the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union: for the American Communist party, here was the model, the experimental pilot of socialism which was commendable in all ways. Here, since 1919 one could live a new life, work at people's projects and embrace an ideology that said all men deserve the same equitable

material existence, going far beyond the notion that all men are created equal. To be an African American living within the confines of racist limitations of the United States in the 1920's and the 1930's, this emboldened state sounded like paradise, heaven. Here is the reaction of one influential Black American at the time:

> For years he [Paul Robeson] had heard what people had told him about the country but could not believe it would be any different for him--with his black skin--than any other place. Obviously experiencing it himself changed that disbelief. He felt so intensely about what he saw and how he was received that when it was time to go home in January, he told reporters that he hoped every year to return to Russia once, and that he would spend less time in England and America.
>
> Leaving Moscow in January 1935, Paul reiterated his intention to play Toussaint L'Ouverture in *Black Majesty* to be directed by Eisenstein, who

> appreciated Robeson most not as a black man but as a man who 'like himself a raceless and classless member of that section of humanity who looked forward to a society based on equal opportunity for all.' But it was as a black man that Paul poured out his deepest emotions to the diminutive Eisenstein before he left. 'Maybe you'll understand, I feel like a human being for the first time since I grew up.' (80 Gilliam)

Two years later Wright was writing articles about the continued attraction of the Soviet Union in articles for the Daily Worker. Again, the purpose was the same, to demonstrate to Blacks who were ambivalent about joining the American Communist party for any reason large or small, one's inability to comprehend the overwhelming ideological battles or one's ineptitude when indulging in social intercourse with whites, that this political group had answers, concrete answers that manifested itself on a daily basis in the Soviet Union. Excerpts from Wright's article written on August 24, 1937 prove this:

'Opportunity for Soviet Youth

Unlimited' Says Negro Musician

With praise on his lips for the 'greatest country in the world, Nicholas Gerren, 25 year old Negro student of music, arrived in America the other day after two years of living and studying in the USSR.

'Opportunities for young people in the Soviet Union are unlimited' said Gerren, who is a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory of Music. Immediately after a student graduates, he is assured a job. There is no long period of hopeless waiting as you find here in America.'

He was born in Kansas City, Kansas, and graduated from the University of Kansas.

He was filled with a desire to study but dreaded going to segregated American colleges. Lacking money, he was able to get the Intercity Civic Association to sponsor a concert to defray his expenses to the USSR. 'I wanted to go to a school in a country which afforded equality of opportunity to all races and people,' Gerren said.

When he arrived in Moscow in 1935, he did not know a word of Russian and he had very little money. But any fears he might have had were instantly dispelled. Not only was he allowed to attend the internationally known conservatory, but the government gave him a foreign student stipend; not a loan but an outright sum to meet his needs, free dormitory space, free tuition, and all the privileges granted other students were his.

Gerren found no Jim Crow football

> teams, nothing barring him from any activity open to other students.
>
> Again and again Gerren in his talk returned to the contrasts between the conditions of the USSR and America.
>
> 'I cannot forget that a foreign country, the Soviet Union, gave me something which my own country did not. I cannot forget that the Moscow Conservatory of Music allowed me freedom which was withheld by my own state school, the University of Kansas.' (DW 8-24-1937)

Continuing with this theme that the Old World is needed to rejuvenate the New World in terms of racial politics, discrimination, and where American should turn for role models, when it comes to progressive notions about race, Wright found a more than appropriate vehicle in a letter that he received from the other side of the Atlantic, in this case Spain. Wright appropriated this letter, addressed to "To the Comrades in the C.P.C. Harlem Office," and transformed it into an article titled, "From Spain's Loyalists Trenches Larry Foy Asks About Harlem's Fight Against Fascism in the U.S.," dated December 23, 1937. The article starts in a highly stylized manner with two paragraphs in italics:

> *Looking at Harlem and America from the vantage point of a Loyalist trench in Spain, Larry Foy volunteer fighter against German and Italian fascism sent the following letter in*

which is a deep understanding of the need for unity among all anti-fascists.

Before embarking for Spain two months ago, Foy age 31, a French-Canadian had lived and worked in Harlem for three years. He was a member of the City Projects Council and was chairman of the grievance committee of his local.

To the Comrades in the C.P.C. Harlem Office:

Dear Comrades

Perhaps you would like to hear a little about the war in Spain from a comrade who sees it close up.

The first thing which strikes one is the fact that the Loyalist Armies function according to basic ideas, plans and methods different from any other, with the possible exception of the Soviets.

Here the military leaders must be men of mature political judgment able not only to plan maneuvers, but to gauge correctly the probable political effect of any given action be it according to accepted military standard or not.

. . .Anything which you comrades can do to help the Spanish people will be good support as they have proven themselves to be courageous and patient in this long struggle.

. . .You in America are not at war yet, but you are in a position to learn from our experience and prepare in advance for an inevitable crisis and lay the groundwork for the organization and efficiency which had to be developed here under pressure, and at a heavy cost in men

> and blood.
>
> Things are moving fast today and history won't wait for us to build our defenses.
>
> If any of you care to write me about the work in Harlem, I would be grateful and would be happy to answer any questions permitted under these war conditions. (DW 12-23-1937)

This letter concludes without pomp or circumstance and in a very subdued manner, appropriate to a soldier serving in a Spanish Republican trench. Without fanfare, he answers questions about what should be done back in the New World, in particular, Harlem.

In addition to this letter from Larry Foy, Wright composed another article on November 29, 1937 based on an interview with Walter Garland which further detailed the social and political significance of the Spanish Civil War. The title was explicitly clear; "Walter Garland Tells What Spain's Fight Against Fascism Means to the Negro People:

> After braving for a year the inferno of fascist fire, Lieut. Walter Garland, just recently returned from Spain, told just what the heroic fight for Spanish democracy means to the Negro in America.
>
> In an exclusive interview with the Daily Worker yesterday Garland revealed the courage and understanding of today's American youth who went to Spain, and helped to create the 'Miracle of Madrid.'

Twice wounded in action, the 23-year-old Negro from Brooklyn rose in the short space of a year from the rank of private to that of a lieutenant in charge of the American Training Base in Loyalist Spain.

Until a year ago, Walter Garland lived a life of 'quiet desperation' in Brooklyn, . . .

Distressingly he had watched fascist Mussolini butcher the unarmed Ethiopians. He reasoned that it would only be a matter of time before those brutalities descended upon the Negro in America unless the spread of fascism was halted. And Garland did the only thing that a man who saw what he saw could do: HE WENT TO MEET THE ENEMY!

. . .Garland estimated that 100 American and West Indian Negroes are now fighting in the ranks of the Spanish Loyalists. He stated that the heroic records of many of these men were due to the fact that no discrimination existed toward them.

'They gave all of us a chance to put our abilities to use,' Garland said. For instance, a young Negro from Brooklyn, Burth Jackson, was promoted to a lieutenancy and is now in charge of the Loyalists Topography School. There is Oscar Hunter, who is a political commissar, Abe Lewis, another American Negro, is a quartermaster at a training base.

On the home scene what interests Garland most is the development of the People's Front Against War and Fascism in America--compromising the Negro people and progressives of all other races.

> 'The National Negro Congress is certainly doing fine work,' he said. 'The hope of the Negro lies through its activities. There's one thing that every Negro ought to do. He ought to get into the National Negro Congress and fight reaction in all of its forms. If they do, they maybe we won't have to go through with what the Spanish people are going through now.' (DW 11-29-1937)

Wright's coverage of Black men fighting with the International Brigade in Spain offered him the ability to lay this solid groundwork for conceptualizing Black men as heroes. Wright's promotion of the Herndon brothers is a case in point. Milton and Angelo Herndon were active in left wing Harlem politics, and Milton had gone off to Spain to fight with the International Brigade. In October of 1937 he was killed on the Saragossa Front. From October through November, Wright gave ample coverage to the sacrifices of these two brothers, one who remained in Harlem and the other who went oversees to fight fascism. The three articles that lead up to the memorial service set a framework for the Garland's interview and dovetailed rather adroitly in establishing an entire frame of reference for most of Wright's working for the Daily Worker.

From September 20, 1937 to November 29, 1937, Wright painted a portrait of the connection between the fight against fascism in Spain and the fight against racism in the

United States nine times. Here is an excerpt from the November 22, 1937 edition, "Memorial for Milton Herndon Next Sunday":

> A memorial meeting for Milton Herndon, brother of the heroic Angelo, will be held at the St. James Presbyterian Church, 141st St. and St. Nicholas Ave., Sunday, Nov. 28 at 3:30 P.M., it was announced by the Milton Herndon Memorial Committee.
>
> Praised by his comrades as one of the 'staunchest enemies of fascism,' young Milton Herndon was killed in action on the Saragossa front in Spain during October. He was widely known among Harlem Workers for the militant action on picket lines, in the Scottsboro struggle, in cultural work and in the struggle for the freedom of his brother, Angelo.
>
> William L. Patterson, Negro Communist Leader, in issuing a statement for the Milton Herndon Memorial Committee, declared: 'We are urging all Harlem to attend this memorial meeting and pay tribute to one of the bravest sons of the Negro people.'
>
> ...'Milton, like Angelo, has shown an example of how to fight for the freedom and equality of the Negro people, at home and abroad. We are determined, by the sacrifice made by Milton and all others who have given their lives for democracy, never to stop until fascism is crushed throughout the world. To this end we pledge our lives.' (DW 11-22-1937

This article makes some important connections. First, it paints a portrait of a genuine Negro hero who has died, as

Claude McKay mentioned in his poem, "fighting back." Secondly, for Wright, in a very personal manner, Herndon's actions go far beyond the notion of "manly self-assertion." Finally, the mention of Herndon's participation in the Scottsboro Case, reminded readers of Wright's articles concerning one of the most important matters in the history of the American Communist Party and the Daily Worker.

Out of the two hundred and twenty-six articles that Wright composed, approximately 20 percent, revolve around this case which harkened back to a conspiratorial plot to frame eleven young Black men who were riding a freight train on April 23, 1931. The only true crime ever committed or confessed to was the act of "hoboing," illegally riding on a freight train which during The Great Depression was a daily occurrence. When pulled off the train at Paint Rock, Arkansas, all eleven young men were accused of raping two young white women. They were tried and sentenced to death all within a period of four days. This case and their death sentences drew worldwide attention, and the litigation which lasted for almost twenty-five years retained a life and energy of its own. The Scottsboro Boys ultimately had their sentences commuted and in some cases, forty years later, the charges were dropped; for the politically conscious African American community, this case was a flash point, an incident

that highlighted and exposed everything that was sordid and corrupt about America in regard to its treatment of its African American citizenry. The vitiated justice system of Alabama ultimately began to represent the entire corrupt judicial state of affairs in the Southern states. The American Communist Party threw its complete weight behind the defense of the Scottsboro Boys and made headlines (nationally and internationally) on a regular basis.

Wright did not cover the case from its inception, but six years after the trial, (this was the first; there were two more trials with litigation and appeals going on for a decade) demonstrations, fund drives, appearances by parents and relatives, were a main feature of Harlem life. He had constant contact with the story, its victims, and its notorious and seamy details. From June 30, 1937 to December 8, 1937, Wright wrote thirty-five articles about the continuing saga of the Scottsboro Case.

Wright's coverage revolved around the Communist Party's determination to maintain public attention on the second and third trials of the Scottsboro defendants. For Wright this must have seemed absurd, three trials for men who were completely innocent from the moment the doctor examined the girls for rape and discovered not one shred of physical evidence, to the public recantation of the two victims that

they had never been raped, molested, harassed or attacked. Notwithstanding, the five remaining defendants were tried for a fourth time and inevitably found guilty. Many of the events associated with the coverage consisted of public demonstrations, rallies and petition drives. Headlines such as "Harlem to Protest Scottsboro Verdict," "Harlem Plans Scottsboro Defense Rally" and "Harlem Spurs Scottsboro Boys Fight," capture the energy and vitality that went into this campaign. At the same time, there was an awareness that is later discerned in the articles themselves that the Scottsboro Case had run its course as far as being able to generate the attention that the American Communist Party thought it deserved. Here is an example of the standard article, which retains a certain structure that inevitably integrates several issues:

"Harlem Rallies to Aid Nine Scottsboro Boys"

> With the Scottsboro trials scheduled to begin in Decatur, Alabama, Monday, Harlem streets have sparkled this week with numerous open-air meetings calling for 'protection and immediate freedom' for the nine Scottsboro boys.
>
> Some of the meetings have been held under the auspices of the United Scottsboro Committee, an affiliate of of the National Scottsboro Committee, 112 East 19th St. Others have been sponsored by the Harlem Communist Party and participated by various community organizations and leaders.

> The week's intensive activities around the Scottsboro case began with the two open air meetings at the corner of 126th St. and Lenox Ave. and 113th St. and Fifth Ave., in observance of National Scottsboro Week,' July 1-6.
>
> Last night the Nat Turner Branch of the Communist Part staged an open air meeting at the corner of 131st St. and Lenox Ave., at which Hammie Snipes, Negro labor organizer, Sol Harper, and several Negro and white leaders of the Party spoke.
>
> On Wednesday evening three large branches of the Communist party combined in holding an open air meeting at the corner of 125th St. and Lenox Ave. which was attended by more than a thousand Negroes and whites. Cooperating were the James W. Ford, the Nat Turner and James Ashford branches of the Communist Party.
>
> Resolutions and telegrams calling for the 'full protection and immediate freedom of the Scottsboro boys,' were sent from the meetings to Governor Bibb Graves at Montgomery, Alabama.
>
> Following last Tuesday's arraignment of the boys on the six-year old frame-up charge of assaulting Victoria Price, the trials will begin in Decatur, Morgan County, Alabama, Monday morning. (DW 7-10-1937)

This article, like scores of others, is an archetype since it embraces certain ideas and characteristics that the editors and writers of the newspaper of the American Communist Party wanted propagated. First, the news itself regarding the Scottsboro case was one of the Party's

greatest triumphs. It gave the Party publicity. No political scientist of that era could deny that this one case did more for the public relations of the American Communist Party than any other cause that was ever adopted or embraced by it. The case was six years old by the time Wright came to it, and it was slowly fading out of the limelight. Composing and editing, in a six-month period, thirty-four articles, exploring the Scottsboro case ad nauseam, clearly exhibited the Party's voracious desire to maintain this issue at the "top of the news."

In addition, this article like others in the series, uses adjectives to show that this movement retains momentum and vigor. "The streets sparkled" with activity. There is a theoretical justification as to why this project should be maintained, and there is a utilitarian function to the "street demonstration" since telegrams will be sent to the Governor of the state in question, Alabama. The notion that this public demonstration represented not a singular effort by an isolated organization is also embellished. Other groups are mentioned, local and national, practically leaving one with the impression that there is a groundswell of support for this cause.

Exploring the articles further themselves sheds some light on the stories that the historian may not be privy to.

For instance, on August 21, 1937, the headline reads: "Scottsboro Boys on Stage is Opposed: Reverend Harten Against Boys Appearance on Harlem Theater Stage." This article goes on to reveal that a certain Reverend Thomas Harten, who made himself guardian to four of the Scottsboro boys who had been freed by 1936, did not want his "charges" exploited in a staged appearance at the Apollo. A plan had been in the offing to have public appearances by the freed Scottsboro Boys which accordingly would have stimulated and revived interest in the case; this consequently would have generated and maintained interest and in addition, would have raised funds for the long term legal costs of the case. As one analyzes this article and the subsequent articles about the same topic, an initial interpretation of the Reverend's intentions which were thought be noble or pure, turns out to be inaccurate.

It is further detected that there was a serious chasm between the manner in which Reverend Thomas Harten was shepherding the Scottsboro Boys and the American Communist Party's construction of their order. Historically, it was the International Labor Defense Committee (the legal branch of the American Communist Party) that first offered to defend these youths. No other institutions, religious, social or political, intervened in the manner that the

Communist Party did. After successfully working to have the original death sentences lifted, the Scottsboro Case and the International Labor Defense Committee became synonymous. However, as the case achieved a vehement resiliency of its own and occupied a media spotlight that attracted national and international coverage, many other social and political organizations desired to be associated with this cause celebre. Hence, the interest of Reverend Thomas S. Harten of the Holy Trinity Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York.

As stated before, Reverend Harten gave the impression that he had the recently freed Scottsboro Boys' best interest at heart. He did not want them to appear on the stage of the Apollo Theater (a cultural and entertainment Mecca at the time) since their appearance could easily have been transformed into a degrading experience. Arrested when they were teenagers, imprisoned for the last six years and now in their early twenties, the potential for a carnival masquerading as a political event was great.

The Party's position, as portrayed by Wright, is a rather cagey one in the August 21, 1937 article. The issue of the public appearance was not central. Whether they made their public debut on the stage of the Apollo was not the Party's concern. The Harlem Branch of the Communist Party was concerned about what the recently released defendants

would say about the role of the Party in relation to their defense. A letter had been released, signed by all five men, that stated Reverend Harten was responsible for organizing the fight for their freedom and not the American Communist Party. This was completely unfounded and false, and anyone even vaguely familiar with the case could testify to that. Yet, Wright, the journalist, did not comment on the validity or invalidity of this letter or the controversial charges.

On August 27, another article was published, "Statement on Scottsboro Is Made By Group." Despite the Reverend's reservations, the boys had made a public appearance at the Apollo Theater, a successful one that had generated a great deal of money. However, this article makes little or no mention of the triumph. Wright presented the Party's position, inveighing against the Scottsboro Boys being manipulated in such a crass and crude manner. In addition, the American Communist Party wanted to place as much distance between its own organization and the reverend's church in Brooklyn. Even though this (the public appearance at the Apollo) would have given them positive publicity, they categorically severed all ties with this Apollo exhibition and any organization that backed it:

The National Scottsboro Defense

> Committee issued a statement today emphatically disclaiming any responsibility for the appearance of the four freed Scottsboro boys upon the stage of the Apollo Theater in Harlem.
>
> Advertisements announcing the theatrical appearance of the Scottsboro Boys contained a tribute to the 'devoted untiring labors of the International Labor Defense, the Scottsboro Committee, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
>
> The Scottsboro Committee asserted that it appreciated the spirit of the statement but regretted that it carried implications that the Committee directly or indirectly supports or approves the theatrical ventures of the Scottsboro Boys.
>
> The Scottsboro Defense Committee and its constituent organizations have joined with Samuel Leibowitz in urging that those theatrical appearances may do more harm than good to the fight in which we are still engaged' a statement issued by the Committee declared.
>
> 'On this point the boys have listened to contrary and mistaken advice from other sources. Although badly advised, they still continue their interest in the fate of the other boys still in prison, one under death sentence, the others under terms virtually of life imprisonment. (DW 8-27-1937)

Distancing itself from the Reverend Harten's activities, his name was not mentioned once in this article even though

Wright and everyone involved was well aware that Harten was responsible for the rally itself and the attempted convenient linking of the name of the Party's organizations to his own banner. Wright also knew that it was Harten who was poisoning the minds of the young men and was exploiting them for his own personal reasons. By making no mention of him, it was a strategic and cunning preparation for some momentous news that the party already had in its possession as a direct consequence of Wright's ability to see through the unscrupulous chicanery of a certain Brooklyn pastor.

Wright delivered on his unwritten promise in his December 8, 1937 article for the Daily Worker. The headline reads, "Scottsboro Group Warns on T.S. Harten." It proceeds to unveil the unethical behavior of the Brooklyn minister who it turned out absconded with the funds, stating, "The committee declared that Rev. Harten had not been authorized to collect funds for the Scottsboro defense work, and it stated that money collected by Harten had not been turned over to the Committee."

There are other instances of Wright moving against the grain of the time, being politically impolite even at the expense of the American Communist Party and himself. One of his most blatant failures to adhere to the "party line" and one of his most demonstrable exhibitions of journalistic

independence would have to be his attack on the academic and left wing scholarly archivist, John A. Lomax, when composing a twelve-hundred word article about the famous folk singer, Huddie Ledbetter. In a well-researched article which includes excerpts from Ledbetter's songs and music, Wright exposed the pecuniary and exploitative designs of Lomax who was then working for the Library of Congress. Lomax has been lauded for being an archivist of American culture, Black and white. His work explored the early phases of cultural and linguistic anthropology. Yet, Wright exposed another side of this researcher that not too many people are privy to. Besides promulgating the idea that Lomax was not the most scrupulous individual in his dealings with folk artists, Wright used the opportunity to break free of his usual duties of writing announcements and standard "C.P." article and created a comprehensive portrait of the famous folk hero; he employed language skills and vocabulary not often used in his other material. The title of the article, "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and his People," was published on August 12, 1937:

> When 50-year-old Huddie Ledbetter plants himself in a chair, spreads his feet and starts strumming his 12-string guitar and singing that rich, barrel-chested baritone, it seems that the

> entire folk culture of the American Negro has found its embodiment in him.
>
> Blues, spirituals, animal songs, ballads and work songs pour forth in such profusion that it seems he knows every song his race has ever sung.
>
> . . .This hard, stocky black man sang his way through the Louisiana swamplands, the sun-baked cotton fields, and out of two state prisons where he was sent for protecting himself against the aggression of Southern whites.

Here Wright has taken on a completely innovative writing technique that is personal and subjective. The political commentary is minimized and this portrait of Ledbetter is rather human. Wright composed a narrative that is befitting this wandering minstrel of American folk songs:

> This folk singer tells tales of dodging white mobs, of wandering at night to save his life, and of how he would snatch a few hours of companionship with his friends when the white folks were not looking. He tells of cutting sugar cane in the rain; of picking a bale of cotton in two days; and of seeing black men drop dead from the heat of Southern suns in the cotton fields.

At this point Wright commences a harsh indictment of the archival custodian of the Smithsonian Institute, John A. Lomax:

> John A. Lomax, collector of American

folk songs for the Library of Congress, heard of Ledbetter and went to see him in prison.

And here begins one of the most amazing swindles in American history. Lomax found in Ledbetter a mine of lore, songs, tunes and adages of the South.

He persuaded Ledbetter to make a phonograph record. When finished, it contained two songs; one a love song, *Irene*, a haunting and tender melody . . .

Uses Ledbetter

Lomax then beguiled the singer with sugary promises telling him that if he helped him to gather folk songs from other Negro prisoners in various prisons through the South, he would make him rich.

Lomax used the influence of his official position with the Library of Congress to get into the prisons and get songs. But he knew that a white man would have great difficulty in getting Negro prisoners to confide their folk culture in him; so he used Ledbetter as his guide and entree.

Begins Attacks

In addition, Lomax, in order to make engagements and more profit gave out a vicious tirade of publicity to the nation's leading newspapers about the Negro folk singer. Ledbetter was represented in The New York Herald Tribune, Time magazine, March of Time, and over the radio as a half sex-mad, gun-toting, black buck from Texas.

In due time Lomax toured the Northern and New England states with Ledbetter, charging $100 per night for each

> appearance and in addition sometimes took up collections which amounted to over $50.
>
> When Ledbetter insisted upon a straight and legal contract, Lomax told him that he was saving his money for him, and that, 'If I gave you your money, you'd throw it away in Harlem.'
>
> When the tour ended, Ledbetter received but $16 for his appearance in the March of Time; nothing for his extensive travels and work save a sum of $255 paid to him in skimpy installments: $55 in each and the remaining $200 in checks which were so dated that he could not draw but $50.00 of it each month. (DW 8-12-1937)

This is not the John A. Lomax that has been practically lionized for his prodigious efforts to preserve Black folk art, the oral tradition of surviving slaves and whose intervention upon the behalf of Black musical artists was legendary and made him a sort of mythical folk hero himself. Wright holds nothing back in this indictment of this other John A. Lomax, not known to many, who was unscrupulous, underhanded and reprehensible. Wright concludes the piece with a lengthy excerpt from a new song that Ledbetter had composed especially for the legal appeals of the Scottsboro Case, called appropriately, "The Scottsboro Boys Got Here." Wright's closing paragraph was in italics:

> *Huddie Ledbetter will sing this Scottsboro song for the first time on the moonlight sail to be held tomorrow night by the Federal*

> *Writers Project. The steamboat 'Mayflower' on which the ride will be given will leave from Pier 1, North River, West of Battery Park at 8:30.* (DW 8-12-1937

Just as many of Wright's characters in his short stories and novels were to resist, rebel and revolt, here was a manifestation of that theme in his days as a journalist. He resisted the "Party Line." He took chances. He maintained his integrity as a reporter and a journalist.

Chapter 4-Ramifications and Revelations

The lack of scholarship and study of Wright's work for the Daily Worker falls under the general purview of many other writers of proletarian fiction and non fiction. Barbara Foley, in her excellent and comprehensive study, Radical Representations, summarizes how an entire generation of writers was relegated to a critical obscurity and how ensuing generations and critics and academics aided in the burying of these texts:

> In particular, I have been arguing that the relationship between the CP and writers in its orbit needs to be completely rethought if scholarship is to make the next crucial strides. In criticizing the dominant anti-Stalinist paradigm, I do not wish to put in its place a hagiography of virtuous and maligned literary Communists--although I do believe that this paradigm prevents full appreciation of these writers achievements. As I shall point out, the literary left--both critics and writers--were restricted and limited

> in a number of ways. But these constraints did not come from the quarter to which they are usually attributed. More ground-clearing is needed if we are fully to reassess U.S. Depression-era left-wing literature. (43)

This is what I set out to accomplish in this dissertation, a "ground clearing" exploration of Wright's work for the Daily Worker. The barriers that between the scholar and the study of certain texts can sometimes be of an insurmountable nature: works can not be found, long lost and destroyed in a 19th century coal furnace. Papers and manuscripts are maintained by some non-literary executor of an author's estate who possesses no interest thereby restricting access. Or as in the case of the study of the letters of Joseph Conrad, one scholar selfishly denies another scholar portals deeming the latter's work contestable. Yet there is no such tangible explanation for the lack of scholarship with Wright's work for this famous left wing newspaper of the 1930's. There were and are no physical barriers like the ones mentioned above. No gatekeeper has prevented a professor from looking at manuscripts and facsimiles. What we have here are problems of a psychological and intellectual nature.

Foley describes the intellectual component of the barrier in a first rate manner in Radical Representations:

> Until quite recently, it has been almost uncontested in U.S. critical circles that left-wing partisanship--to many writers and critics of the 1930's a sine qua non of meaningful representation--is a guarantor of moral dishonesty and aesthetic failure. Standards of literary judgment and historical scholarship have been abysmally low. All that has been routinely necessary to clinch a judgment is the ritual incantation of some highly loaded binary opposition--for example, "creative judgment" verus party "line." In the atmosphere of the chilled intellectual discourses created by this pervasive anti-Stalinism, it has become difficult to inquire into the relation between the organized left and the literary proletarians, much less into the value of the texts these writers generated. (Foley 29)

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that after carefully reviewing Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s sweeping book in the Amistad Literary Series, Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) one must reach the following conclusion; it is a culmination of years of research and a compendium of scholarly articles that purport to present a penultimate assessment of Wright's work. The essays consist of original responses to Wright's initial publications going back to the 1930's with Zora Neale Hurston holding forth upon Uncle Tom's Children (1938), Malcolm Cowley reviewing Native Son for The New Republic (1940), and an accolade-filled critique by Lionel Trilling for The Nation (1945) of Black Boy. Besides providing students and scholars of Wright with this retrospective and historic review, there are current commentaries; the "twenty-two essays that follow suggest the wealth of controversy and sustained interest by his many works." The writers are the experts in their fields, taking into account every possible literary perspective, from the Robert Stepto's comparison of "Black Boy to the slave narrative of Frederick Douglass," to a "Hegelian reading of Black Boy, and Keneth Kinnamon's "fascinating look at the development of Richard Wright's idea for Native Son." Not to be overlooked would be Houston Baker's sterling criticism and

the work of John Reilly who views Wright from the perspective of a social and personal exile.

Skipping from the table of contents to the index in the final pages of the book, one is impressed with the range of names, references, titles, bibliographical information and the plethora of sources available for further research. Yet, neither in the table of contents nor the index is there any mention of the Daily Worker and Wright's literary labor for that left wing publication of the late 1930's.

Out of those "twenty-two essays" not one scholar or critic was interested in or felt compelled to explore Wright's two-hundred and twenty-three articles. This seems startling and uncanny. Furthermore, Gates and Appiah's book did not exclude those interested in Wright's non-fiction since there is a selection, "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-Fiction: Stepping out on the Stage of the World." Does this glaring omission have to do with a scholarly but antiquated presumption that because it was nonfiction (Wright's journalism), it possessed no inherent literary worth? Fortunately, other scholars who have multiple interests in literature and the blossoming discipline of cultural studies have unearthed new and provocative answers as to why.

In James Murphy's The Proletarian Movement: The

Controversy over Leftism in Literature he argues and explains, as Foley asserts, that because of certain atavistic reactions to sweeping condemnations of Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin, readers as well as critics were strongly discouraged from embarking on any sort of serious study that would seek to include left wing writers into the canon of 1930's and 1940's American literature. Murphy writes, "The distortion and misrepresentation that have resulted can only be described as an indictment of much of the American scholarship in this area." After the McCarthy era of the 1950's, three generations of graduate students were discouraged from commencing the study or reading of texts that were deemed left wing, Socialist, Stalinist or Proletariat. After intensive research Murphy proves that the Daily Worker is rarely studied or consulted when scholars make commentaries on the literature of the 1930's (Foley 35).

Notwithstanding, it is still difficult to understand how a work as encompassing as *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives* Past and Present would embrace a reflexive response that emits a miasma created and cultivated by The New Critics of the post World War II era. Then, because of the legacy cultivated by Philip Rahv and Alfred Kazin (Foley 20), irrational expectations and demands placed on a

creative writer when his preceding nonfictional creative efforts were being examined. However, this text was not compiled and edited by The New Critics.

Perhaps that initial appreciation, a sort of knee-jerk reaction, is justified since a cursory review of Wright's writing for the Daily Worker from 1936-1937 would bear witness to the truth that a good deal of it was a mixture of straightforward, objective writing, occasionally marred by subjective language, tedious and predictable. And the Marxist bias of a generic nature was palpable; for the creative writer a faithful allegiance to a party line, although considered a literary offense on the part of a creative writer was mandatory. Daniel Aaron writes;

> The Communist writer under party discipline was expected to take on the literary assignments that would be most immediately beneficial to the revolutionary cause. The primary needs of the party were not poems, or novels or critical essays; first and foremost, the party needed journalists for its press. And so inadvertently, it became a devourer of talent (as militant parties or

> churches often become), transforming would-be poets and historians and novelists into producers of journalist ephemera. (Aaron 393)

Consequently, at times the source of the bias is Wright's clumsy adherence to the propagandistic rhetoric of the newspaper. This is not to say that he was reluctantly amalgamating official "party lines" on certain issues. After all, the integration of writing and politics was a question that he had entertained before he joined the Communist Party. Once Wright made a commitment to left wing politics, he never really abandoned the emotional and intellectual bond although he would be severing his ties with the Communist Party within five years of his journalistic days for the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker. Between his monumental essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and his fidelity to a cause that will be described in detail, one should cast a new eye on his political allegiance and recognize the integrity that it possessed. There is a certain logic for a African American writer immersing himself in the world of left wing politics, particularly in the 1930's.

Wright's alliance with the American Communist Party was a complex tale, and it is true that in 1942, he wrote an

article about that allegiance which was published in the Atlantic Monthly. It was loudly touted by those who wanted to employ it as a weapon against anyone who was involved in left wing politics during the 1930's and 1940's, particularly people who were heartened by causes founded on progressive thought. "I Tried To Be A Communist," written in 1942, was his explanation for quitting the Party, and it haunted him every time some reactionary figure or institution embraced it; right wing personalities brandished it as the concrete evidence that was routinely used to publicize just how malignant the forces within the Party were and how the American Communist Party actively attempted to infiltrate the American psyche. Wright's mea culpa was so heralded by certain conservatives that in their desperate confusion to bring him back into "the fold," they altered the date of his departure from the American Communist Party by six years. Robert Felgar points this out with a sense of polite chagrin in Richard Wright:

> ...the *Atlantic Monthly* accepted for publication the part that was about Wright's stormy membership in, and eventual repudiation of, the Communist Party, and that was entitled *I Tried to Be a Communist* (1944). The publication

> of that article signaled Wright's break with the Communists, though the piece puts May day 1936 as his moment of departure. However, that date seems an odd one to denote Wright's official exit because he continued to edit the *Daily Worker* for two years after that! (Felgar 37)

Within five years of the publication of this article, the McCarthy Era was underway. Naturally, left wing authors, screen writers, producers and actors were the most visible targets. Writers, inordinately Black writers, were to feel the wrath of the witch-hunt since they were most visible; a white communist was one thing; a black communist was an American nightmare. Orthodox America was fearful of the disinherited discovering left wing politics as Steinbeck had so ably demonstrated with Tom Joad and Jim Casey in The Grapes of Wrath. Wright understood that this fear was trebled when a potential Black convert was open to the message of Karl Marx. In "Fire and Cloud," the last story in the collection, Uncle Tom's Children, he described that excessive and irrational overreaction of American whites to Blacks rejecting the American dream or nightmare and adopting a new vision that included revolution:

> 'You ain never done a Goddamn thing have you?' White men were standing close around him now. 'All you ever do is play around with Reds, dont you?' All you ever do is get crowds of niggers together to threaten white folks, dont you? When we get through with you tonight youll know how to stay in a niggers place! C Mon! Get that Goddam vest off!' (UTC 190)

Wright, like the Reverend in the story "Fire and Cloud," maintained his faith. Even after leaving the American Communist Party, it would be difficult or almost impossible to label Wright as an "ex-red." During the 1940's and the 1950's Wright steadfastly adhered to his official position which stated that he "could not denounce former comrades to the Un-American Activities Committee." To his credit, he never "named" anyone, and the pressure placed upon him was incredible.

For instance, this refusal kept him under constant surveillance by the Central Intelligence Agency while he was abroad and by the Federal Bureau of Investigation whenever he returned to the United States (Fabre 522). The policies of surveillance were odious. One of the more insidious

forms of harassment occurred on a routine basis when the American embassy in England or France would retain Wright's passport for weeks, preventing him from traveling, forcing him to cancel speaking engagements and business appointments. In a letter to Paul Reynolds, his editor at Harper and Row, Wright wrote:

> I have had some bitter experiences with the British and Canada is part of the British Commonwealth. Why should I aid a people who hold toward me an attitude of disdain? I asked the British the right to live in England to educate my children there, and they were nasty, evasive and downright racist about it. (Fabre 526)

One thing is clear. While Wright labored for the Daily Worker, he was serving out an apprenticeship in terms of practicing the craft of writing and the gathering of future ideas, themes and voices. Since his boyhood days, he had dreamed of composing fiction but always with a special purpose, always possessing a clear function, to struggle, liberate, and educate. Had not he had an epiphany about what writing should accomplish after reading an article by H.L. Mencken in the Commercial Appeal? It was because of

this article that Wright felt compelled to surreptitiously take books out of the Memphis library by illegally borrowing a fellow co-worker's card:

> There remained only one man whose attitude did not fit into an anti-Negro category, for I had heard the white men refer to him as a "Pope lover." He was an Irish Catholic and was hated by the white Southerners. I knew that he read books, because I had got him volumes from the library several times. Since he, too, was an object of hatred, I felt that he might refuse me but would not betray me. I hesitated, weighing and balancing the imponderable realities. (BB 215)

This famous scene from Black Boy has been anthologized in countless freshman college readers since the 1970's; it is sometimes called "The Library Card." Some faculty focus on the strong need and capacity of Wright to mask himself in a manner harkening back to the days of minstrels and act in a self-deprecatory manner. Particular attention is paid to the fact that he conjures up the scheme to compose a note in

which he writes, "*Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy*--I used the word 'nigger' to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note--*have some books by H. L. Mencken?* I forged the white man's name" (BB 216). In addition, this small excerpt when anthologized, is used to demonstrate to contemporary students in literature and freshman composition classes Wright's will to read, the passionate desire to attain knowledge. Unless they are familiar with the remaining text, an instructor routinely fails to deliberate about other potential conjectures not mentioned in this rather melodramatic excerpt. Wright had a more important revelation after leaving the library, and this one can be related to his future motivation to labor as a journalist:

> That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like this? And how did one write like this? I pictured the man as a

> raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. (BB 218)

Interestingly, Wright's answer to his own question in the closing lines about the power and energy incumbent upon one to create prose and fiction, and whether he had the fortitude and courage to do it, back in 1925, was a resounding "no." In addition, he admitted that he was "frightened" of the prospect.

Why? Had he not the courage to accept arduous

challenges and explore new literary or intellectual territory? Not hardly, when one reflects on Wright's record of physical and psychological brutality suffered at the hands of whites in the Deep South. The pernicious social brutality outside of the home, when coupled with the merciless familial cruelty of his mother in the name of the South, in fact, reads like the chronicle of a Holocaust survivor.

No, Wright was fearful and appropriately reluctant because of his skills, his limited "Jim Crow School" reading and writing experience, and his provincial upbringing. He felt that his high school experience was so inadequate that although he possessed a diploma, he enrolled for evening high school courses when he moved to Chicago. That was in 1931 (Fabre 81). Between those days of attending night school and mingling with the Chicago post office workers who read and wrote for small left wing publications, Wright's last period of any formalized training before officially becoming a published writer would have been working for a newspaper, the Daily Worker. Turning out articles on a daily basis was a pivotal point in Wright's literary loomings.

His stint at the Daily Worker was his Harvard and his Yale. We can see a writer in the making in these two-

hundred and twenty three articles; they afford us nothing less than a new appreciation of the artist's temperament and the technical tendencies that mark his mature work--the fiction that made him famous and indispensable. Through the lens of these articles, his mature work seems at one and the same time more grounded in mundane and galvanizing experience and more visionary, even if only by negation, and more harrowed by nightmare. The first-hand nightmares he reports in Black Boy are augmented and universalized by the regimen of second-and third-hand contact his apprenticeship afforded him.

While summing up the two-hundred and twenty-three articles there are some important points to be made about this exposure to the journalistic craft. First, on many days, Wright wrote more than one article. For instance, July 10, 1937, Wright composed two articles, "WPA Layoffs Wipe Out Jobs of Negroes" and "Harlem Rallies to Aid Nine Scottsboro Boys." On July 27, 1937, he composed another two articles, "Harlem Party to Protect Japan's Action" and "Torchlight March Called August 7 by Harlem Group." Lastly, on August 12, 1937, he composed not two, but three articles and a review of the titles shows that one should not only be impressed with the quantity but with the variety of the topics covered. The first one is "Communist Head Speaks at

Sidewalk University." This two-hundred fifty-word article detailed how a certain group of communist professors at Columbia University were offering free classes with lectures and discussion. The lectures were free and the topics ranged from "Women Today" to "The Plight of the Sharecropper."

The second article was shorter, one-hundred-fifty words and was titled, "Harlem Office Opened by I.L.D." The text of this article covered the opening of a new office of the legal branch of the American Communist Party. Lastly, he wrote a six-hundred word article titled "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People." Are these articles ground breaking in terms of experimentation with language and imagery? No! however, it is the regimen that is important. Hence, if one looks at Wright's time with the Daily Worker as a sort of writing workshop, a period of exploration and experimentation, it was certainly a productive time in his literary career. Wright wrote two-hundred and twenty-three articles in six months. Based on the fact that the average article was four-hundred and fifty words, that is a total of 100,000 words.

Wright's 100,000 words were compiled on a daily basis and covered a variety of topics and issues. And each topic

required different approaches, different techniques, and modulations of tone and in some cases deliberate shifts in perspective. The Scottsboro articles were composed in an uniform and monolithic manner. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, they lost their conventional stance in terms of content by the conclusion of the series. There are many examples of unremarkable journalism in which Wright's style was methodical and rather flat. The announcements of rallies, demonstrations, and meetings regarding the American Communist Party issues were habitual; Wright composed them as though he were boringly placing ads on a community bulletin board. Even when there was a sense of triumph as with the Reverend Harten's series, the prose did not mirror any sort of exuberance, any new sort of vitality.

The articles regarding community activism offered more freedom perhaps because Wright was not so duty bound by convention and previous Party policies that extended back to the early 1930's. When Wright wrote about how the Harlem community was confronting the Great Depression and New Deal policies, there was a fluidity to his journalism. There is a sense of reportage in which the writer attempted to go beyond traditional newspaper writing and create an amalgam of reporting and investigation. Wright attended the rallies, demonstrations and meetings. These were static

situations. Nothing is frozen as with the Scottsboro case, something he inherited due to Communist Party history, pure and simple.

Wright was chronicling life which is vastly different from chronicling history. The articles about people fighting evictions, boycotting unfair department store prices and attending workshops on how to master the new social policies of public housing, possessed energy and verve. He was not merely making announcements. The vitality jumps off the pages with Wright reporting on resistance, human stamina and struggle. One of the best examples was a series of articles about a heroic truck driver who saved the lives of two children during a fiery blaze in Harlem.

In some sense, its circumstances conform to precisely what Wright would have desired to see, an incident whose genesis seems like a staged drama involving blacks and whites, and whose outcome, that Wright helps to orchestrate, brings to fruition political and literary necessities. A white man had saved the life of two black children, sacrificing himself, without hesitation or regard for his own safety. Wright had the autonomy and authority to transform this incident into a minor cause celebre. He wrote the first article on December 6, 1937. This article

records the basic facts of the incident, but Wright adds his own creative and subjective commentary.

As one screens the series of articles, one discerns that by December 7, 1937, the story has become politicized with Wright reporting about how the white hero should be honored by the city. In addition, James Ford, one of the most powerful members of the American Communist Party, wrote a personal editorial about the same incident and its importance to the Harlem community and commented on Wright's article from the previous day. By this time, ceremonies honoring this truck driver had been planned and coordinated.

On December 18, 1937, Wright wrote the final article about the actual tribute that was held for the working class hero and this demonstrated how Wright's article was the catalyst for a rising mobilization of efforts and energy on behalf of this homespun "hero," William Campbell. Here are pertinent excerpts from the articles. Not a single opportunity is missed to transform this piece of nonfiction reportage and decenter its events so they are more pliable for Wright's purposes.

'He Died by Them'-
Hero's Widow Tells
Of Rescue of Negroes

William Campbell, White Truck Driver, Perished in Flames, Saving Lives of Harlem Children

He did not pause to think of the color of their skins; he saw a building burning and heard cries of distress. He stopped his coal truck, grabbed a hand fire-extinguisher from the cab and rushed into the building. He succeeded in dragging to safety two Negro babies, Mary Jane Gills, age two, and John Gills, age one. He went into the building again to see who else was in danger; he groped his way through the smoke from one blazing room to another. He lost his way and when the fire department put out the blaze, his charred body was found sprawled amid the debris on a sub-basement floor.

That was the end of William Campbell, 204 E. 36th St., age 34, a white worker, a truck driver, a union member, a husband, and the father of two small children.

Plight of His Own Family

Sunday evening in the front room of his mother's home at 339 E.45 St., Mrs. Agnes Campbell and her two children sit about William Campbell's coffin and try to understand. For them the future is a blank wall. William Campbell, like all workers, Negro and white, left no money for food or rent behind. Loretta, age four, and William, Jr., age three, ask their mother every hour: "What happened to papa?"

"Well," Mrs. Agnes Campbell told her friends, "he drove a coal truck for

ten years in Harlem and he liked the Negro people. He died by them."

That's the story of William Campbell's heroism, a heroism which has resulted in a tragic plight for his family.

Can't Talk of Fire

And the other Negro families who live on the block are a little afraid to talk of William Campbell at all. The hordes of Harlem cops and detectives, unable and unwilling to believe that a white worker would give his life to rescue Negroes from a fire, have questioned them to no end about Campbell's presence in the neighborhood.

...James Stevens, William Campbell's friend, who lives at 204 E. 36th St., upstairs above the Campbell family, has no difficulty in understanding what happened to this friend.

"He drove a coal truck in Harlem for years. He was always talking about how the Negro people lived" said Stevens. "He was a man forgetful of himself. If he saw someone in danger, he went to them. He drew no color line."

Another Victim

The fire department was called by Curtis Ellison, a chauffeur employed by Dr. H. Binga Diamond, 245 W. 139th St.

Harlem's infamous housing conditions, "the shame of New York" has claimed yet another victim, this time a worker who lived in a tenement district on New York's East Side.

> Campbell's experiences as a truck driver in Harlem had been carried back to his worker friends on the East Side for a long number of years. And some of the things by which they are remembering him now are his sayings about Harlem: "The Negroes are human beings. They are good people. We ought to treat them equally." (DW 12-6-1937)

This was the basic foundation for the series of three articles; it is intriguing to monitor this cornerstone article, when buttressed with ensuing, social activities and political actions it becomes a spring board for some of Wright's innermost yearnings. Wright composed his next article the following day:

> ## Harlem, East Side Honor Hero Who Died in Rescue of Negroes
>
> ### Two Homes Mourn for Truck Driver Who Saved 2 Infants
>
> Two homes--one Negro and the other white; one in Harlem and the other on the East Side--were darkened with anxiety, want, and grief last night as two families took stock of their losses in the fire that gutted a fire-trap tenement in Harlem at 146 W.121st St., Saturday afternoon.
>
> In the bare front room of Mrs. Mary Campbell's home, 339 E.45th St., the light of a single candle illuminated a porcelain crucifix over the coffin of her son, William Campbell,

the truck driver who gave his life while rescuing two Negro babies.

Harlem Family Penniless

This morning at 10 A.M. William Campbell's funeral will be held at St. Agnes Catholic Church, 141 E. 43rd. St.

Meanwhile, in Harlem Mrs. Lillian Gills, at 148 W. 121st St, the Negro mother of the two rescued children sits in a two-room apartment, the air of which is foul with gas leakings and the floors of which are damp with sewage seepings.

...All they own in the world is what they have upon their backs. This temporary shelter was offered them by kind neighbors and soon because they have no money and because the place is unfit for human habitation they must move.

Lose Everything

The husband, Eugene Gills, is a part time plumber and makes $12 a week.

"We lost absolutely everything we had in the fire," Mrs. Gills said. "On what my husband makes we've got to eat, get a new place to stay, new clothes, new everything. And how can we do it?"

"My heart is with the wife of that man who was killed saving my children. But I've been too hard pressed for food and shelter all day today and yesterday that I've not had much time really to think of them. That's the way life is."

Plan Benefit

> The hearts of Harlem's workers were touched by Campbell's heroism. Last night the Women's Commission of the Harlem Division of the Communist Party arranged delegations to visit the home of Campbell's mother and offer their sympathy and help. Also plans are on foot to organize a benefit affair for the mother and the children. The commission hopes to involve Harlem churches, clubs and other organizations in a drive to memorialize Campbell's heroic deed.
>
> ...On New York's East Side William Campbell's attitude and opinion of the Negro people was re-echoed by many who paid tribute to his heroic deed. Campbell's mother told of how her son would bring his fellow Negro workers into her home and give them food and coffee.
>
> Campbell was a member of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 353, A.F. of L. Because of arrears of dues, however, he is not entitled to death benefits. (DW 12-7-1937)

On another wintry day of that December, James Ford, one of the most powerful African American leaders of the American Communist Party, composed a front page editorial in which he mentioned Richard Wright's article from the pervious day, praising his writing skills:

> Harlem Will Honor
> Truckdriver Fire Hero
>
> **James W. Ford, Communist Leader, Calls on People to Rush Aid to Family of Man Who Died Rescuing 2 Negro Children.**

The supreme sacrifice of a white truck driver who gave his life to save two Negro children from a blazing Harlem apartment will not go unrewarded. People of Harlem will see to it that the widow and two children of William Campbell receive a hero's reward.

Calling upon the community to contribute liberally to a fund for Mrs. Campbell, James W. Ford, former Communist candidate for Vice President and chairman of the Harlem Division of the Communist Party said:

> "Yesterday I read in the Daily Worker an amazing story of self sacrifice and nobility of character. It was a story of a man who, without flinching, unhesitatingly, gave up his life to save the lives of two Negro children in Harlem. It was stark tragedy passed from one poor family to another . . . (DW 12-7-1937)

The dye was cast. The stage was now set for Wright's third article in the series which was rather dramatic with Wright providing the setting, (a funeral mass in a church), the main character (the Harlem community) and as always, the theme of human beings struggling with a rising awareness of a world that could not embrace their dreams and aspirations; if anything, this universe was more likely to nullify optimism and a positive sense of anticipation. The anxiety of the Harlem community was palpable. Wright threaded the community's subjugation to the oppressive forces of a capitalistic system and its lack of empowerment through this series of articles. As one reviews this particular article, it was obvious that Wright could be charged with employing every inflammatory Marxist strategy at his disposal. But

for those who know his later works of fiction, they will discern that the Campbell story was an dream-archetype. It was a trope that reveals more how Wright wished to envision the world, than the way the world really was.

One only has to consider the disastrous conclusions of "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Long Black Song," "Down By The Riverside," and "Bright and Morning Star." At the end of each story, Black life has been assaulted and violated. The Black Community is decimated by the white mob as it conducts its maniacal search for Big Boy, burning down his parents' home in retribution. Sara, the strong female lead character of "Long Black Song" is witness to a different sort of holocaust as she watches from her privileged panoramic view, her house and husband, Silas, incinerated. "Down By The Riverside" concludes with Mann's mad almost existential dash towards death and freedom as he attempts to outrun the National Guard soldiers who have been commanded to execute him. Lastly, Johnny Boy's mother, Aunt Sue, is forced to watch his torturers break his legs, ears and finally shoot him while she refrains from taking any action; she too commences a suicidal lunge with her shotgun. Death, destruction, fire, and unrelenting cruelty with a world laid waste were the legacy of the South, and Wright was conscious of the need to conceptualize another, world, another

universe, some place far off and seemingly idealized. In Black Boy, had not he concluded the original edition with the following poignant and poetic plea:

> With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars. (BB 228)

This universe via the pages of the Daily Worker exhibited a world in which things worked out for the best with a certain sort of good (Marxism and its inevitable triumph of the working class) overpowering evil (capitalism with its inherent plague of racism). It directly contrasts the world of the South that he knew. The following article is an example of genuine and real human beings procuring "some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered

beneath the stars."

Harlem Pays Tribute to Truckdriver Who Rescued Negro Children in Fire

Group Attends Mass in Catholic Church for Campbell

Partially obscured by a veil of this winter's first heavy snow, the pearl-grey coffin of William Campbell was taken yesterday morning from St. Agnes Catholic Church, 141 E. 43rd St. and escorted by family, friends, and a delegation of Negro workers from Harlem was driven to a burial ground in Long Island.

This was the end of William Campbell, heroic white truck driver who laid down his life last Saturday to save two Negro babies from burning to death in a Harlem fire.

A few minutes before the funeral procession started, a Catholic priest stood amid a mass of flickering candles, and, departing from the Latin ritual, declared to the Negro and white mourners: ..."This man's death was so exceptional that I feel called upon to say something to you in English. 'Greater love than this hath no man--that he lays down his life for his friend.'

The humble Irish-Catholic home of William Campbell's mother, Mrs. Mary Campbell, 339 E. 45th St., was crowded last night as friends, Negro and white, stood by the wife and children through the final hour of their wake. (DW 12-8-1937)

This article, as mentioned before, supersedes the rote reporting that was demanded and expected by the staff of the

Daily Worker. Wright was a reporter, but as it can be discerned, being a journalist for a political organization like the American Communist party was exceptional. Writing for this newspaper furnished him with ample opportunities to psychologically construct a new world, one in direct opposition to the one he fled. Laboring for the Daily Worker supplied Wright with the tantalizing authority to construct realities that met his own needs and desires. Because of his article and his focus on this "heroic truck driver" he had the resources and material at his disposal to transfigure Campbell into this "working class hero." Because the newspaper would print his articles that mentioned the need or better yet, slyly suggested that there be a rally and a memorial service, then there was a rally and a memorial service. What a command of reality to have! The autonomy that Wright was denied on a daily basis in the Deep South as an individual and the constraints placed on his fictional outcomes of his short stories and novels evaporated in his journalism. Everything that Wright could not have in the South in his daily life or in his published fiction, he was able to induce in these journalistic ventures. The article continues:

> At 10 P.M. last night a delegation of Harlem workers, headed by Audley Moore, chairman of the Women's Commission of the Communist Party, called upon the

> family and pledged aid and sympathy. The delegation was received with a veritable demonstration of joy.
>
> "It means a lot to me just to know that the people of Harlem understand," Mrs. Agnes Campbell said.
>
> Not only was the offer of solidarity wholeheartedly accepted, but Mrs. Agnes Campbell insisted that the delegation accompany them to the funeral mass and to the burial ground.
>
> Earlier in the evening the Upper Harlem Section to the Communist Party sent Mrs. Agnes Campbell and her two children the following telegram of condolence:
>
> "Please accept the condolences from the Upper Section of the Communist Party. We recognize this heroic feat, an act that will cement the brotherhood of all working men, a brotherhood which we hold dear and work towards.
>
> The Negro and white workers of Harlem pledge further aid to you and family."

The remainder of the article becomes a launching pad for a classic rendition of the struggle between the forces of capital and labor. Wright makes sure that he mentions that the "Upper Harlem Section of the Communist Party" planned the memorial and was not satisfied with the service as a fitting end to Campbell's life. By mentioning "Upper" the implication is clear that there is a "middle" and a "lower," ultimately leaving the reader with the impression that a massive movement was in the offing. The reader was

aware that action had to be taken. "Meanwhile the Harlem Branch of the Workers Alliance is investigating the Negro families who were driven from their homes by the fire last Saturday."

In addition, if necessary, the same group of Harlem activists at Wright's urging was going to place pressure on public agencies:

> The Harlem Tenants' Association announced yesterday that it would conduct a sweeping investigation into mounting violations of the Multiple Dwelling Law. It is known that the burned building at 146 W. 121st. St. had no fire-escapes of any sort. It was for this reason that the firemen had to take some 30-odd men, women and children from the roofs and windows with the aid of ladders.

Finally, as the article closes, Wright has "made" a discovery that was not mentioned in the previous articles that elevated its potential for accomplishing everything that Wright intended to see in a world that routinely dismayed him. Just as the story "Fire and Cloud" concludes with blacks and whites toiling together against a common foe, the racist southern lawman and his accomplices in the mayor's office, there is a "brotherly" closing present in these closing lines:

> It was also learned yesterday that Curtis Ellison, the Negro chauffeur of Dr. Binga H. Diamond, 245 W. 139th St., who worked alongside Campbell in

> rescuing people from the doomed building Saturday, has behind him a unique record of voluntary fire-fighting. He fought forest fires in Connecticut and left behind him a reputation for conspicuous bravery.
>
> Ellison was complimented by the fire marshals for the party he played in helping to save children in Saturday's fire. (DW 12-8-1937)

We have come full circle with the discovery of a Black hero who in some ways deserves as much attention as Campbell. Ellison also has to his credit a legitimacy since he was a professional firefighter who had fought fires in Connecticut. Here Wright's search for that "manly self assertion on the part of the Negro" is completed. He accomplished in non-fiction what ironically he was never able to do in his own personal life or in his fiction, create and conjure up worlds in which there existed, concocted as it may be, an affirmative and heartening reality. What he mused and pondered about in his daydreams, the way the boys daydreamed in that idyllic scene near 'Ol Man Harvey's Pond in "Big Boy Leaves Home," stopped being a fictional fantasy and was transformed into a reality. Being a journalist for the Daily Worker placed him in this omnipotent and magical position.

Chapter 5 - Summation and a Discovery

Wright's articles touch and integrate many traits and qualities of what makes American literature, "American." For example, his series of articles about the participation of Black Americans in the Spanish Civil War displayed certain literary elements because they embodied that romantic sensibility of the Harlem Renaissance. Black American heroes of the Spanish Civil War, some permanent expatriates, inherently possessed certain impressionistic themes that writers like McKay, Cullen and Hughes had engendered and enhanced in their poetry.

In addition to that correspondence, Wright's activism as an observer and participant in a controversial political conflict captures a moment in American literary history when writers refused to remain innocuous bystanders. The Spanish Civil War attracted a plethora of American writers. Wright's articles about African American fighters in Spain force one to make the obvious connection with Hemingway's romantic tragedy novel, For Whom The Bell Tolls. Hemingway analyzed the honing process of the "American Adam" (Lewis 1) to a fine point in what is his best novel. The conversion of Robert Jordan into an "American Adam" unfolds as he embarks on a journey to Spain, to ally himself with the Republican forces, the same forces that the Abraham Lincoln

Brigade was allied with. And the novel leaps out of its frame of a romantic/adventure novel when Jordan embraces a clear political stand, precisely what Wright was able to demonstrate with his real life figures the Herndon brothers. The last element of symmetry revolves around Hemingway's work as a news correspondent covering the Loyalist-Republican forces beginning in 1936. A year later Wright was in contact with the same conflict. Of course, his experience was not as direct as Hemingway's but perhaps his journalistic affiliation with "Black American Adams" was more barbed, was more caustic. Why? Wright's view of "Black American Adams" who had left America for Spain and fought was more fervid because he was cognizant that when they returned to the United States, unlike their white counterparts, they would still endure an existence on the periphery of society.

Conducting this intense scrutiny of Wright's writing for the Daily Worker acquaints us with a man who was completely aware of the brutalizing consequences of racism. Wright's profession dictated that he maintain a journalistic objectivity and simultaneously integrate basic principles of American Communist Party ideology. The mandates of the American Communist Party when it came to writing were always specific and restrictive in regard to one expressing his or

her feelings, a paltry bourgeois sentiment that did not advance the purposes of the Party. Wright suffered through these restraints and deprived of viable outlets for certain feelings and emotions, he turned to another medium that encouraged and cultivated a human reaction: fiction.

Many parallels can be made between his fiction and his newspaper articles. The origin of certain details of his successful stories and novels point towards his journalism when one recollects their plots, characters and settings. A reader will recognize that the source material springs from certain newspaper articles that he composed years before. The last two stories of Uncle Tom's Children, "Fire and Cloud," and "Bright and Morning Star," come to mind. Despite possessing Southern tableaux, both stories owe their background to Wright's knowledge of inexhaustible urban left wing labor and political organizers. Reverend Taylor, his son Jimmy, Hadley, Green, Aunt Sue and Johnny-Boy, characters from both stories, initially start to take shape in Wright's imagination due to his alliance to the world of journalism.

Wright's fascination with journalistic accounts as sources for fiction manifests itself in Native Son, the story of Bigger Thomas. In her work, Richard Wright Daemonic Genius, Margaret Walker, documents how crucial a

source the journalistic accounts of an infamous murder in Chicago were for Richard Wright. She writes:

> During the first week of June 1938, I received in rapid succession two airmail special delivery letters from Wright. I immediately answered the first, but before Wright would receive my answer he wrote again in great excitement. He had been following newspaper reports of Robert Nixon, a young black man who had confessed to killing five women and raping others.
>
> *I am enclosing fifty cents in this letter; please try to get me all the clippings of [the case] . . . The reason I want all the information I can on that case is that, surprisingly, the novel I'm writing deals with the same stuff.*
> I went at once to the offices of the five daily Chicago newspapers (*The Daily Examiner* and *The Chicago*

> *American*, both owned by Hearst; *The Chicago Tribune;* Knox's paper, *The Chicago Daily News;* and Marshall Field's tabloid, *the PM*)to get all the back issues. I then began an activity that lasted a year, sending Wright every clipping published in the Chicago newspapers on the Nixon case. Frankly, there were times when the clippings were so lurid I recoiled from the headlines, and the details in the stories were worse. They called Robert Nixon a big black baboon. When I went into news offices or bought papers on the stands, I heard jeers and ugly insults about all black people. (RWDG 122)

One would not have to look far to find the parallels between these reports and the end result, Native Son. In the last part of the novel, "Fate," the word "ape" is used frequently in reference to Bigger Thomas. A newspaper account states, "'He looks exactly like an ape!' exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the black slayer being loaded onto a stretcher after he fainted." Interestingly, Bigger Thomas'

capture and trial for the murder of Mary Dalton are told and retold from the viewpoint of various newspapers. Immediately before his capture Bigger had stolen one newspaper and soon discovered he had the compulsive need to have them at all times. He constantly reads accounts of himself, some of them accurate, some of them gross distortions. Here is one he reads before his capture:

> At the top of the picture ran a a tall line of black type: *24-HOUR SEARCH FAILS TO UNEARTH RAPIST.* In another column he saw: *RAID 1,000 NEGRO HOMES. INCIPIENT RIOT QUELLED AT 47TH AND HALSTED.* There was another map of the South Side. This time the shaded area had deepened from both the north and south...*TODAY and last night eight thousand armed men combed cellars, old buildings and more than one thousand Negro homes in the Black Belt in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas, 20-year old Negro rapist and killer of Mary Dalton, whose bones were found last Sunday*

> *night in a furnace...A curious sidelight was revealed today when it became known that the apartment building in which the Negro killer lived is owned and managed by a sub-firm of the Dalton Real Estate company.* (NS 240)

While in prison, waiting on death row, Bigger Thomas' obsession with newspapers continues, and he reads about himself again:

> But the brutish Negro seemed indifferent to his fate, as though inquests, trials, and even the looming certainty of the electric chair held no terror for him. He acted like an earlier link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man's civilization. (NS 260)

In Native Son newspaper articles appear frequent enough that this perspective on Bigger's crime and existence, that of the journalist committed to objective and unbiased accounts, is developed and concretized. Journalistic accounts of Bigger's life, his background and the crime of raping and

murdering Mary Dalton, are such a part of the novel that Margaret Walker cannot help but recall his insatiable mania and preoccupation with newspapers; she reminisces and writes in Richard Wright Daemonic Genius:

> Wright explained a little about the new book and told about the clippings. He said he had enough to spread all over his nine-by-twelve bedroom floor and that he was using them in the same way Dreiser had in *An American Tragedy*. He would spread them all out and read them over and over again and then take off from there in his own imagination. The major portion of *Native Son* is built on information and action from those clippings. (RWDG 124)

Wright had a special obsession for American newspapers and how they presented the news, particularly their ability to twist and distort or teach. While lusting for the Chicago papers and unearthing as much material as possible for Native Son, he also employed his experience and material from his own articles for the Daily Worker. One can say then that Native Son is a compilation of newspaper articles,

some whose content was external to Wright's experience, written by others and those that he actually composed for his newspaper.

Three years before the publication of Native Son Wright composed an article on October 8, 1937 for the Daily Worker. Its title was "Opening of Harlem Project Homes Shows How Slums Can be Wiped out in New York." Above his by line of "Richard Wright Daily Worker Harlem Bureau there is a subtitle, "Families Are Happy to Escape Tenements, Many More Needed." Most readers of African American fiction are familiar with the opening pages of Native Son. The description of the rat and Bigger's battle to the death with it while his family screams in terrified anguish has been etched in many a reader's consciousness. Buddy, Vera and Bigger's mother take refuge on furniture while Bigger goes after the rat with a frying pan and a shoe. A generation of Americans was struck with the following description:

> An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked . . . Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands . . . Another black boy rolled

> from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her nightgown . . . 'Turn your heads so I can dress,' she said. The two boys `averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The woman rushed out of her nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins. A brown-skinned girl in a cotton gown got up and stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Sleepily, she sat on a chair and fumbled for her stockings. The two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed; and the mother and sister did the same while the boys dressed. Abruptly, they all paused, holding their clothes in their hands, their attention caught by a light tapping in the thinly plastered walls of the room. (Wright 3)

We know that Wright lived his early years in the rural South and a small period of time in Memphis which he chronicled in

Chapter XI of Black Boy. His experience living at Mrs. Moss' boarding house, if anything, was a pleasant experience:

> I lay on the bed and reveled in the delightful sensation of living out a long-sought dream. I had always flinched inwardly from the lonely terror that I had thought I would feel in a strange city, and now I had found a home with friendly people. I relaxed completely and dozed off to sleep, for I had not slept much for many nights. (Wright 184)

Therefore, the question is obvious. Where then might this urban tableau presented in the opening pages of Native Son derive from? What were his sources for the highly delineated and poignant description of urban poverty, including the sociological and economic ramifications of Mr. Dalton owning the same tenement that Bigger and his family lived in? The October 8, 1937 article from the Daily Worker may hold some of the answers. In this article Wright described in graphic detail how a Black urban family existed during The Great Depression. The article is approximately one thousand words long and demonstrated Wright's

investigative zeal that unearthed some very ugly truths

> At long last the Harlem River Houses are open for 574 families . . .
>
> All day long moving vans are backing up to the sidewalks and unloading furniture. It will not be long before all of the accepted quota of 574 families selected out of 12,000 applicants will have quit their foul-smelling fire traps and will be enjoying for the first time in their lives decent living quarters free of the menace of disease, crime and exorbitant rents.

Typical Family

> How do these Negro families feel about quitting the slums? What do they think of these new beautiful apartments? And what are the chances of more housing units like these being built?
>
> Let's talk to the Brannums, a typical and lucky Negro family selected for residence here. There are Mr. and Mrs. Brannum and there are two girls, Barbara, and Joan, four and three years old respectively.

Lacked Sunlight

> ...She had to burn the electric light all day long for no sunlight ever got into the dark rooms of her old flat. And so many people lived in the building she was afraid to let her children go outside and play. And every month a landlord who lived somewhere downtown came knocking at the door, wanting money or threatening to leave a dispossess notice.

Describes Former Home

The last place we lived we had less room than we have now and we paid $30 per month for rent or almost 50 percent of our income. The children's room had one window which opened into a foul-smelling airshaft. The building was old and full of insects of every kind. The icebox was built into the wall. It was impossible to keep ice for a single day. The children's milk always soured. And the roaches! Honest to God, when you opened that icebox door, those black things just stared at you and dared you to come in! They acted like they had Constitutional privileges, as though they had signed leases and had a legal right to be there . . . '

Harlem is New York's shame spot when it comes to housing. The present residences were built years ago for another race and another class of different economic status. The Negro, forced by proscription to live in certain sections of the city, had to take what he could get when he fled the south seeking better conditions.

Many Violations

Residential segregation has caused Negroes to live as many as 620 to the acre in houses 85 percent of which were built over 35 years ago. On many streets garbage is piled on the sidewalks: as many as 15 to 20 persons use one toilet, thereby creating conditions for the spread of disease.

In certain areas of Harlem over 20

> percent of the residences have been branded 'unlivable.' No electric facilities. No hot water. No steam heat. Violations of the Multiple Dwelling Laws are widespread. (DW 10-7-1937)

With this Daily Worker article as a frame of reference, Mr.Dalton's interview with Bigger when he appears for his chauffeur position can be viewed in a new light:

> Mr. Dalton paused, frowned and looked up at the ceiling.
>
> 'What kind of building is that over there?'
>
> 'You mean where I live, suh?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Oh, it's just an old building.'
>
> 'Where do you pay rent?'
>
> 'Down on Thirty-first Street.'
>
> 'To The South Side Real Estate Company?'
>
> 'Yessuh.'
>
> Bigger wondered what all these questions could mean; he had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, but he was not sure.
>
> 'How much rent do you pay?'
>
> 'Eight dollars a week.'
>
> 'For how many rooms?'

'We just got one, suh.'

'I see . . . Now Bigger, . . . ' (NS 50)

The parallels are incredible. In Wright's article, the woman he interviewed, Mrs. Brannum, was paying thirty dollars a month and if one multiplies the Thomas' eight dollar a week rent, times four, they too are paying the same rent for Mr. Dalton's slum tenement.

Further evidence of the connections between Wright's journalism and his later fiction is based on an article, one of the last he was to ever write for the Daily Worker, dated December 27, 1937. This article, after close scrutiny, seems to possess many similarities to one of Wright's most famous short stories, "Big Boy Leaves Home." The article, "Negro, Who Escaped Lynch Mob, Ordered to Return By Harlem Relief Officials," bears an uncanny resemblance to Big Boy's fate in the story yet there is a twist. If one is familiar with the publishing history of "Big Boy Leaves Home," he will comprehend the ramifications since Wright's classic story was written before the date of this article, December 27, 1937, yet the actual publication date of Uncle Tom's Children was April 1938; therefore, one is ambivalent about which is imitating which, the story influencing the article or the article helping to generate details and setting for the story. Perhaps, this question will go unanswered since

we have seen how blurred the lines can become between journalism and one's later or contemporaneous fiction. The article commenced in large print after the headline mentioned above:

> He fled the South to save his life, and now the officials of the New York City ERB want to send him back to a certain death on the flimsy pretext that "New York cannot shoulder the burdens of other states."
>
> That, in short, is the story of John Jones, 39, Negro worker and farmer, who today sits in fear in a Harlem tenement flat at 35 Mount Morris Park, with a wife and nine children.

> Because he dared defy the mob rule of Southern landlords, because he could not square the South's treatment of him with the demands of his conscience, John Jones had to flee the South in the dead of the night.
>
> "They wanted to kill me because I was not afraid," said Jones.
>
> **Story Like Fiction**
>
> His story reads like fiction. A little more than a year ago he lived in Oak City, North Carolina. He owned a little home, a cow, pigs, chickens and a garden. His children were in school. His neighbors respected him. He was a "solid citizen."

The subtitle "Story Like Fiction" is almost a Freudian slip on Wright's part. This article mirrors the basic plot

and frame of Big Boy's predicament in "Big Boy Leaves Home." The parallels are uncanny and become more enticing as the article develops.

> One Sunday afternoon, together with his brother and a few more friends, he was standing in front of a grocery store, talking. A white man approached and asked:
>
> "I want one of yuh niggers to buy me some whiskey."

Here we have the dominant and familiar setting of so many of Wright's vignettes. The South, a group of Black men minding their own business, freely expressing themselves and being who they are, until the outsider, a white, disrupts the harmony and peace of, in this case, a tranquil Sunday afternoon. The opening paragraphs of "Big Boy Leaves Home" are very similar. Big Boy, Buck, Lester, and Bobo, have cut school and are swimming in a white man's pond, carelessly and innocently trespassing. They swim, frolic, play-fight and dream Edenic boyhood fantasies commensurate with their manchild-states-of-consciousness. They even contemplate possibly leaving the South one day as they hear "old Number Nine's" whistle as the train heads North.

John Jones' troubles of 1937 parallel Big Boy's fictional predicament:

> The white man demanded a second time that someone "get me some liquor and

> I'll pay you!"
>
> Jones urged the man to "go ahead and don't try to get us into trouble."
>
> One word led to another and a fist fight ensued. Jones beat the man and went home.

The same sense of a peaceful and pastoral setting being violated is created in "Big Boy Leaves Home." Big Boy, for all his physical and brow-beating prowess that he exerts on his pals, is completely wrong when he utters, "Shuck, ol man Harvey ain studyin bout us niggers." The harmony of the afternoon is destroyed after the naked swimmers are discovered by the soldier's wife, Bertha. Within seconds of Bertha's seeing the swimming boys, she screams, and Big boy and his comrades are murderously pursued by Bertha's husband, Jim. He shoots Lester and Buck without question, without investigating what has occurred or what has not occurred. Rape is the predetermined assumption. At one point during the physical and violent confrontation, Big Boy desperately states that they would leave if they could only have their clothes back. While Bobo and Big Boy ferociously battle with Jim, Big Boy finally wrestles the rifle from the white soldier; he asks him to move away and for permission to leave. As with the article, "one word led to another," and Big Boy ultimately, with regret and shock, shoots Jim

dead.

Later, the forces of the racist town are marshaled, and a lynch mob is formed. The mob comes to his parents' house, and burns it. Big Boy takes his refuge in the hills waiting for a planned escape via the truck driver, Will. Bobo is to accompany him but unfortunately runs into the clutches of the mob which tars, mutilates, and burns him at the stake. Wright's account of Jones continues:

> At ten o'clock that night he was awakened by a pounding on his door. His wife answered; he heard the voices of a mob and escaped through his window.
>
> For weeks, Jones dodged mobs that combed the countryside looking for him. To go home was to be caught. He spent many a night hidden in a ravine overlooking his home, watching the mob waiting outside for him. He could hear their shouts: "If you see 'im, kill 'im on sight!"
>
> He went from one of his friend's homes to the other and finally begged enough money to catch a train for New York. His wife and his nine children followed him.
>
> He is now receiving relief from the Non-Settlement Bureau, which wants him to return to face the Southern mobs. But a few days ago the Workers Alliance stepped in and said, "No."

At this point, Jones is quoted saying what Wright had discovered since leaving Memphis, Tennessee thirteen years

ago, and was to say in his fiction and nonfiction in a more articulate fashion. It is a desperate plea that only a Southern Black of that generation would understand:

> "People in New York don't know what it means to live in the South" Jones said. "All I want is a chance to work and support my family."
>
> With the Workers Alliance at his back, Jones feels a little safe now. Whether he can escape the Southern landlords depends upon how strongly the workers of Harlem can bring pressure against the ERB official to make them grant him refuge. (DW 12-27-1937)

Wright understood what it meant to be "in New York." He possessed a complete understanding of all the buried nuances behind these words. New York was a sanctuary and refuge from all of the overt abuse he had becomes accustomed to while living in Mississippi and Tennessee during his formative years. New York and the Daily Worker were his deliverance from the real hell of John Jones and the fictional one of Big Boy.

A Literary Discovery

For many years there have appeared two epigrams on the front piece of Uncle Tom's Children, one from an obvious nature and the other, far more cryptic. No matter what edition, the latter is always presented within quotation marks but bearing no attributable source. Wright placed the two

epigrams opposite the title page; they function as a tease, some thing tantalizing. According to his own notes, one is a quote from the popular antebellum hymn that became the battle cry for the Confederacy, "Dixie:"

> *Is it true what they say about Dixie?*
> *Does the sun really shine all the time?*
> *Do sweet magnolias blossom at everybody's door,*
> *Do folks keep eating 'possum, till they can't eat no more?*
> *Is it true what they say about Swanee?*
> *Is a dream by that stream so sublime?*
> *Do they laugh, do they love, like they say in ev'ry song?*
> *If it's true that's where I belong.*
>
> Popular Song

Wright mockingly juxtaposes what this song must have signified for a Black person living in the South immediately before or after the Civil War. It derisively asks a series of questions that portray the Old South in the most glowing and idealized terms. For a Black American, these perorations about Southern life which conclude with then, "that's where I belong," make one wince and cower with pain. Naturally Wright had already answered this question with his feet by joining the Great Migration of American blacks who had fled the South from 1910-1920. Here the epigram hints at the lack of congruence between the world of black and white. One world (*Dixie*) is posed in strictly idyllic terms and images while the other, the world of the American Black, who has with his labor and blood made this world possible,

goes unacknowledged.

The other epigram possesses a completely different function:

> *The post Civil War household word among Negroes--"He's an Uncle Tom!" --which denoted reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place be-for white folk, has been supplanted by a new word from another generation which says:--"Uncle Tom is dead!"*

Scholars previous to this dissertation have misread this to mean that there is a direct connection between the title Uncle Tom's Children and Harriet Beecher Stowe's literary classic of the 19th century, Uncle Tom's Cabin. The rationale is clear. Wright read the Stowe novel and wanted to create a sense of literary lineage. How could he resist such a moment of convenience? One major critical voice, Robert Felgar, was so certain and confident of the literary and psychological overlay, that he titled the section of his work that analyzes Uncle Tom's Children, written in 1980, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Progeny."

As recently as 1993, with a great deal of fanfare and publicity, Harper's released what it alleged to be the most authoritative text of Uncle Tom's Children. With the renowned critic Arnold Rampersand writing the notes, Richard Yarborough authoring the introduction, and Alfred Kazin insisting that this was the definitive edition of the book,

saying, "Wright's major texts are now available as he wanted them to be read," not one expert was able to find the author of the second epigram. If they had, they would have immediately realized the ramifications. Here again the epigram whose authorship has remained unidentified for almost fifty years:

> *The post Civil War household word*
> *among Negroes--'He's an Uncle Tom!'--*
> *which denoted reluctant toleration?*
> *for the cringing type who knew his place*
> *before white folks, has been supplanted*
> *by a new word from another generation*
> *which says--'Uncle Tom is dead'* (UTC)

This is Richard Wright the teacher, the didactic writer whose style often cerebrates his unbridled need to teach and instruct his reading audience about the background of his stories and novels. It is also, more importantly, Richard Wright the journalist since this quotation and idea regarding "Uncle Tom," originally comes from a newspaper article that he composed on October 7, 1937, for the Daily Worker. The title of that article by Wright is "Negro Youth on March, Says Leader." The fourth paragraph of the column reads as follows:

> In many sections of the South
> the days of Uncle Tom are over.
> Among the younger generation of Negroes
> There is a saying that Uncle Tom is dead.
> Young Negroes are taking their
> destiny into their own hands. (DW 10-7-1937)

Were these Wright's original words? On closer inspection of the article it is revealed that he was quoting Edward Strong, a twenty-three-year-old Negro youth leader who was the executive of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, an organization which drew close to some 26,000 Negro youth in the South. Wright had gone to cover an event for the newspaper, one of his many duties on that day in the fall of 1937. Unbeknownst to the speaker, Edward Strong, and the reading audience of Wright's first publication, the quote would be transfigured into an epigram for a book that was to be published a year later. Without permission or authorization, an occasional characteristic of the nebulous world of journalism that Wright dwelled in, the journalist was practicing and learning the craft of writing. Here Wright exhibited unconsciously a journalist's walk along that very fine line between fact and fiction.

The temptation to make a historical incident more literary, more spectacular, more poetic, could not be resisted. Of course, Wright did not employ this quote for his own purposes in the article as it was published. Even if he had the same desire, he subordinated his will on October 7, 1937 to embellish, to poetically elaborate. However, a year later, things were different. Harper and Row were going to publish his first work, the work that

would make him a nation figure with a readership that included Eleanor Roosevelt, Uncle Tom's Children.

Searching for the perfect and historical counterweight to dilute those pungent words of *Dixie,* Wright took Edward Strong's speech. He was infused with the fervor of the demonstration and the speech; he liked and remembered Strong's ideas and observations but felt the impassioned speech was lacking something. With a few twists and turns he appropriated a political speech and reworked it, making it the epigram for his first published work. The resulting lack of attribution, with intent or not therefore lends the work a sense of anonymous license. Wright's title Uncle Tom's Children now took on definitive political connotations, as opposed to the literary ones that many critics have examined and felt comfortable with.

How routine an occurrence in the world of newspaper reporting is this, the appropriation of current events, historical occasions and employing them for one's own literary or political purposes? Recent firings (1996 and 1997) of two African American reporters from the Washington Post and the Boston Globe present us with parallels. The termination of these two reporters initially seemed unusual and attracted nation wide attention. Charges of racism were slung; their readers, fellow reporters and editors adhered

to strong and volatile positions.

Both reporters stated that their topics concerned the African American community, and this community, in a sense, is in the same dire straits as Wright's was back in the 1930's. Because these journalists were painfully aware of the deplorable and intolerable social conditions of "their" community, there was an extra heightened urgency to present this "news" to the world with more verve and dash than usual; for them, this was not "ordinary news," and it concerned the survival of the Black community, their community, their people. The articles concerned the proliferation of drugs and crime within the Black community today. The Boston Globe reporter and her colleague at the Washington Post admitted "inflating" quotes and presenting embellished circumstantial evidence. These two reporters stretched their journalistic license to the point that their series concerning social pathologies directly related to the drugs and their pervasive effects on the inner city ghetto community had been transformed into pieces of "fiction."

In retrospect, in 1937 Wright was composing with that same sense of imperativeness that compelled his journalistic protegees sixty years later. His writing paralleled and continued a tradition in which Black writers, to make their cases more keenly grievous, more potent and more literary,

exaggerated and blurred the lines between fact and fiction. The oppression that the Black community has endured for three hundred years has placed its writers, reporters and journalists in an unique and ambiguous position. The necessity and insistence to cry out to a world with no longer feels obligated to attend has blissfully but ambivalently burdened African American writers with a moral obligation to manipulate historical circumstances and incidents if the goal is honorable and righteous. Of course, this fine line must be walked and managed adroitly if one hopes not to be accused of deceit.

This unlicensed prerogative can be linked to some of the earliest writing in the African American archives. The question of narrative shrewdness in reference to some of the most famous slave narratives has now come into question in recent years. More and more scholars admit, for instance, that Frederick Douglass' classic, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, and the many different editions of that text, were engineered by Northern abolitionist editors who wanted his work to conform to their own political and social agendas of the 1850's. In addition, Douglass had been a writer and editor of his paper, the North Star, distilling his own voice as a journalist out of the complex constellation of various New

England voices of his day. In "The Rhetoric of Frederick Douglass's Journalism" Shelley Fisher Fiskin and Carla Peterson state emphatically that Douglass was "the foremost black journalist of the nineteenth century." Hence, with Wright's transfigured epigram, he was inadvertently making two literary connections. One was to his own African American ancestors for whom writing was inherently coupled with political and social demands and agendas. The other was a display of literary kinship which we can now safely say possessed elements of misreading and quick leaps of logic; these mishaps constructed convenient parallels between his work and that of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Wright never corrected any critic or scholar on this point. It was a very propitious misunderstanding.

In addition, and this is more essential, by Wright appropriating the words from a speech by Edward Strong from a piece of reportage for his epigram, Wright was lending truth, a certain legitimacy, to his fiction. His collection of short stories that brought him to the forefront of African American literature, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down By The Riverside," "Long Black Song," "Fire and Cloud," and "Bright and Morning Star," were now seamlessly splicing fiction with history and truth. Therefore, the real question is, why was he

embroiled with the issue of veracity and truth in the first place when it came to a piece of short fiction?

Why is there a recurring need to affirm, reassure, and reaffirm? Throughout American literature there exists this almost compulsive desire on the part of many authors to prove that what the audience is reading is true, factual and genuine, as if to placate and assuage a reader who might question the fantastic nature of the events being depicted. "Fantastic" is not an adequate description. In some cases the recreation of the reality was too much for the imagination or psyche of an American reader. For Nathaniel Hawthorne, there is his now famous "The Custom House Sketch," which is the introduction to The Scarlet Letter. Assuming that the reality of the lives of his Puritan ancestors exceeded his 1840 American audience's ability to suspend its disbelief, Hawthorne was obligated through the "Sketch" to achieve a legitimate voice which consequently persuaded the reader that events involving Hester Prynne, Reverend Master Dimmesdale, outside of Boston, were indeed true.

Melville attempts the same gambit in the sixteenth chapter of Moby Dick, entitled "The Affidavit." This is another example of this need to confirm and authenticate. Melville, more direct and less flamboyant than his romantic

American Renaissance counterpart, Hawthorne, sensed the same possible incredulity on the part of the reader and soothed the audience with the following excerpt from his narrative:

> So far as what there may be of a narrative in this book; and indeed as indirectly touching one or two very interesting and curious particulars in the habits of sperm whales, the foregoing chapter, in its earlier part, is as important a one as will be found in this volume; the leading matter of it requires to be still further and more familiarly enlarged upon, in order to be adequately understood, and moreover to take away any incredulity which a profound ignorance of the entire subject may induce one in some minds, as to the natural verity of the main points of this affair. (MD 184)

Similarly, the first American novelist of any stature and he may have even inaugurated the tradition, stated a manifesto of veracity in his 1826 preface to the edition of

The Last of The Mohicans. In these introductory notes, James Fenimore Cooper wrote:

> The reader who takes up these volumes, in expectation of finding imaginary and romantic picture of things which never had an existence, will probably lay them aside, disappointed. The work is exactly what it professes to be, in its title page--a narrative. (JFC)

Here Cooper outlined one of the rudimentary characteristics of American authorship. If one creates a truthful fiction, a contradictions of terms, that quality alone will inherently augment the aesthetic artistry of the "narrative." It is of utmost importance to render a factual "narrative." An extremely cumbersome and ungainly style (as evidenced in many of Cooper's tales) can be tolerated. An atmosphere of deceit, however, is unacceptable.

The last of the great nineteenth century authors who felt compelled to construct a similar argument regarding veracity would be Mark Twain who showed his contempt ("Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses") for The Deerslayer's author's lack of fictional accuracy despite his own claims to be truthful. Twain at the beginning of his text, moved through and performed the same self-conscious and clumsy

ritual, employing Huck's narrative voice as the stamp of affirmation:

> You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made my Mr. Mark Twain and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. (Twain 1)

With the publication of Black Boy in 1945 Wright affirmed his lineage; he embraced the tradition of his literary forbears. In that text he too was going to break the narrative flow for the purposes of authentication. His mode of authentication was a bit more complex than Hawthorne, Melville, Twain or Cooper. In a Shakespearean manner, Wright makes political and sociological asides. They function as explanations and appear in long parenthetical paragraphs. Yet they definitely possess another function. They give the author's voice a credulity and a tone of expertise, and for an American reading audience there is no better manifestation of confidence and trust.

It must be admitted sometimes that these extended

paragraphs are a form of irritation since they truly disrupt the narrative flow of the work. Once a reader has made the proper adjustments to a text and has subordinated his needs and desires to that of the author, it is as though an unwritten contract has been signed. Fiction will contain elements of fiction and a prose essay will possess elements of expository composition. But to blend these is a breach of that contract. Wright does this. It is disconcerting. It is at times incredibly vicious and in a curious manner, this can be linked to his experience as a journalist.

In Black Boy, his autobiographical work, he makes these asides with frequency. As mentioned before, this can be irritating, particularly when the interruption is a sentence or two. There are some sections of Black Boy, as in the beginning of Chapter Two where he inserts entire paragraphs, completely throwing off the concentration and focus of the reader. To illustrate this point, one should examine the following "disruptive" aside that comes after the third paragraph of the second chapter of the book:

> (After I had outlived the shocks
> of childhood, after the habit of
> reflection had been born in me, I
> used to mull over the strange absence
> of real kindness in Negroes, how

> unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.) (BB 32)

What impetus would compel a fiction writer to commit this sort of dereliction of duty? A creative writing instructor would be annoyed. The reader may be frustrated, but when Wright's days as a journalist for the radical newspaper the Daily Worker are recollected, a feasible explanation connecting political commentary and narrative lends support to my thesis. For Wright, it was a convention to compose an article for the paper that integrated accurate

journalistic reporting with some sort of political and subjective commentary. The tradition or habit continued into Wright's non-reportage writing with this being some of the best evidence. Behind all of this though, the real motive is one's struggle with telling a particular truth that the world would rather deny.

Now, as we conduct a quick retrospective, we know the following. Wright had felt beholden to comment on the pecuniary subterfuges of John Lomax despite the possible negative results for the American Communist Party. He was willing to reveal the petty intrigues of Reverend Harten in relationship to the Scottsboro Case, fully cognizant of the corrosive consequences. Wright was accustomed to telling the truth, even when the ugliness of that truth momentarily flattened the hopes and aspirations of the Black community that he had sworn to defend and aid, leaving them bereft; he knew that as oppressive as a truth may be, for a under assault anything was better than dwelling in the world of illusion and self-deceit. And if there was one group of people in America who could not afford to linger and brood over falsity, in Wright's eyes it was the African American community.

Therefore, because of this need to rid itself of illusions Wright composed these caustic appreciations of the

African American community. Another one follows on the same page. The ensuing paragraph is another painful condemnation of his own race; the language and the parentheses are extremely effective. It is as though he has placed some sort of objective distance between himself and African American people. Wright wrote in 1945:

> (Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man, I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled, and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.) BB 32)

Does this sort of brutal honesty border on the edge of self-hate?

Some critics and writers have taken issue with these

two excerpts. In his ground breaking collection of essays, Nobody *Knows My Name*, James Baldwin felt compelled to write a piece entitled "Alas, Poor Richard." In that essay he wrote "that Wright's unrelentingly bleak landscape was not merely that of the Deep South, or of Chicago, but that of the world, of the human heart" (Baldwin 185). Instead of surrendering himself to the tendency of psychoanalyzing Wright which was popular in the 1960's, Baldwin may have done better to view Wright as a neighbor and a journalist who was a newspaperman with a beat and that beat was Harlem. The same Harlem that Baldwin explored joyfully and with a degree of loathing as a teenager in Go Tell It On The Mountain was Wright's workplace. For Wright those streets were filled with experience, struggle, humanity and history. And his time at the Harlem desk of the Daily Worker cultivated within him the capacity to see that black world the way an objective photographer with a compassionate lens would.

In a manner Wright was a photographer with courage since he was engaged in the most dangerous of all artistic endeavors, criticizing a besieged Black community that inherently possessed a moral high ground and had earned the hard fought sympathy of a nation. Yet Wright understood that strong communities were not built on sympathy and

sentimentality or "moral high grounds." His journalistic training and objectivity placed him in the special and enviable position of being an outsider and insider simultaneously. That was the ultimate legacy that followed him from the desk whose nameplate read, "editor," *Harlem Edition of* the Daily Worker.

APPENDIX

Author's Note: The following Daily Worker articles are on microfilm at the Klapper Library at City College of the City University of New York. They were copied in 1997. The accuracy of titles was verified by the groundbreaking bibliographical work of Charles T. Davis and Michel Fabre. Their study was published in Richard Wright: a primary bibliography (1982). In the preface Mary Lang McFarland and Darby Tench make the following comments about Wright's journalistic output for the Daily Worker:

> Daily Worker articles, most written while Wright was a reporter for the newspaper in 1937, sometimes bear Wright's byline, sometimes his "Harlem Bureau" byline, and sometimes no byline. These last articles are presumed to be written by Wright because of their content and because they are part of Wright's collection of clippings. A few of these could not be verified, either in the Daily Worker repository at Yale University's Sterling Library or at the New York Public Library. Page and column numbers are given for the late New York Edition, unless "early edition" is specified. (xv)

This text is the foremost authority on Wright's publishing history and pays particular attention to the publication record of Wright's articles for the Daily Worker.

Chapter 2 -

1. Richard Wright. "Negro Writers Launch Quarterly." June 8, 1937. Wright's first article for the Daily Worker which announced the inaugural issue of a magazine for Black writers; however, article makes point of inviting white writers "with minority themes and depicting conditions of life common to the Negro people will be welcome."

2. Harlem Bureau. "Rally for Ethiopia Is Backed by C.P." June 10, 1937. First article linking Harlemites and particularly those of Italian ancestry (East Harlem) and the struggle against Italian fascism in Ethiopia.

3. Harlem Bureau. "Party Leaders Honor Negro Woman Leader." June 22, 1937. First article about the revolutionary and new role for African American women in the Communist Party.

4. Harlem Bureau. "Negro Women Will Picket Italian Consul." July 20, 1937. Second article heralding active role for "Negro" women who are members of the Harlem Women's Peace Committee.

5. Richard Wright. "Negro With 3-Week Old Baby, Begs Food on Streets." August 4, 1937. Portrait of homeless woman with four children who lived on the streets of Harlem; Wright poignantly wove interview with Mrs. Bostick and description of the streets of Harlem.

6. Richard Wright. "What Happens at a Communist Party Branch Meetings in the Harlem Section?" August 16, 1937. An investigative article that is based on attendance at a meeting of the Communist Party; this lengthy article (one thousand words) links three themes of the Party: the Scottsboro Case in Alabama, fighting fascism in Spain and gender issues.

7. Richard Wright. "Harlem Women Hit Boost in Milk Price." September 3, 1937. First in a series that exposed price fixing of Milk by Borden Company and focused on activism of African American women who led boycott of company.

8. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Women Picket Milk Co. Tomorrow." September 7, 1937. Follow up article on African American activist women who boycotted milk company due

to price fixing.

9. Harlem Bureau. "Porters Meet Sunday to Mark Victory Pact." September 10, 1937. Typical of at least two-thirds of the articles for the Daily Worker, this short "announcement" has a dual function; it informed the community of a gathering of individuals who made up a substantial segment of the work force (railroad porters and their union). It also amplified and allowed the Communist Party to take credit for this "labor victory."

10. Harlem Bureau. "Assemblymen From Harlem to Map Plans." December 4, 1937. One of approximately twenty articles where Wright placed his geopolitical matrix over Harlem, showing a need to reconfigure the physical landscape.

Chapter 3 -

1. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem to Protest Scottsboro Verdict." June 30, 1937. Wright's first article in a series of thirty four articles about the celebrated Scottsboro Case.

2. Harlem Bureau. "Scottsboro Meetings Set in Harlem." July 2, 1937. Second in a series of the Scottsboro Case.

3. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Rallies to Aid Nine Scottsboro Boys." July 10, 1937. Third in a series about the Scottsboro Case.

4. Harlem Bureau. "WPA March to Protest Scottsboro Verdict." July 17, 1937. Fourth in series about the Scottsboro Case.

5. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem ILD, CP Hold Protest on Scottsboro." July 22, 1937. Fifth in series about Scottsboro Case.

6. Richard Wright. "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People." August 12, 1937. Eighth in a series of Scottsboro Case articles and one of three articles, all published in one edition of the Daily Worker. Wright's longest article drew a sensitive portrait of Ledbetter, investigated shady ties with Alan Lomax, and connected the songwriter's commitment to the Scottsboro Case.

7. Richard Wright. "Scottsboro Boys on Stage is Opposed." August 21, 1937. Ninth in a series of thirty four articles, this one exposed possible manipulation of the Scottsboro Boys for political reasons.

8. Richard Wright. "'Opportunity for Soviet Youth Unlimited,' Says Negro Musician." August 24, 1937. Lengthy article (one thousand words) that heralded freedom and opportunity in the Soviet Union and solicited possible volunteers for overseas work.

9. Harlem Bureau. "Statement on Scottsboro is Made by Group." August 27, 1937. Tenth in a series of thirty four articles that revealed Party disagreements with other local political organizations regarding handling of publicity for the Scottsboro Case.

10. Richard Wright. "Mrs Holmes and Daughters Drink From The Fountain of Communism." September 7, 1937. One of Wright's longest articles, (over 2000 words), heavily biased and sentimental but showed pro-active interventionist policies of Communist Party, including the providing of food and shelter.

11. Richard Wright. "Harlem Spanish Women Come Out of the Kitchen." September 20, 1937. One of Wright's strongest articles since it integrated an investigative approach to the role of women in the Communist Party and revealed the dire working conditions of "domestic" workers in New York City.

12. Richard Wright. "American Negroes in Key Posts of Spain's Loyalist Forces." September 29, 1937. A journalistic vehicle for Wright that harnessed his ability to examine battlefield reports from other Daily Worker correspondents and his understanding of the social and political of the Spanish Civil War to inspire African Americans with a sense of pride and militancy.

13. Harlem Bureau. "Memorial for Milton Herndon Next Sunday." November 22, 1937. This article/obituary lionized a well known Harlemite of his day, Milton Herndon, who had died fighting in Spain. Wright felt he had lived the ideal life of a revolutionary: fighting racism here in the United States and fascism overseas in Spain.

14. Richard Wright. "Walter Garland tells What Spain's Fight Against Fascism Means to the Negro People." November 29, 1937. Typical of articles that made the direct connection between struggling for racial freedom here in the United States and the on going battle of the Spanish people in Spain.

15. Harlem Bureau. "Scottsboro Group Warns on T.S. Harten." December 8, 1937. Thirty-fourth in a series of articles about the celebrated Scottsboro Case, this one harkening back to evidence that Wright started to present in August 1937 concerning the possible political exploitation of the boys in the case by an unscrupulous T.S. Harten.

16. Harlem Bureau. "From Spain's Loyalist Trenches Larry Foy Asks About Harlem's Fight Against Fascism in the U.S." December 23, 1937. This article again reminded

Harlemites that men of their community were fighting in Spain for the freedom of others and a spirit of solidarity must be maintained with them by those who stayed behind.

17. Harlem Bureau. "Negro, Who Escaped Lynch Mob in South, Ordered to Return by Harlem Relief Officials." December 27, 1937. Wright composed an article whose plot closely paralleled the story line of "Big Boy Leaves Home."

Chapter 4 -

1. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem WPA Staffs Stage Death Watch." July 2, 1937. First article in a series that intimately chronicled the fall of the WPA in Harlem and the closing of educational projects for Black adults.

2. Harlem Bureau. "WPA Layoffs Wipe out Jobs of Negroes." July 10, 1937. First article by Wright that chronicled the ensuing political struggle between Washington D.C. and New York City regarding the demise of recent economic gains that specifically affected residents of Harlem.

3. Harlem Bureau. "WPA Slashes Are Bar To Harlem Homes." July 8, 1937. Second article documenting WPA cuts and their disastrous effects on a Federal Housing Project.

4. Harlem Bureau. "WPA Layoffs Wipe Out Job Of Negroes." July 10, 1937. Third article that sought to prove that African Americans would be inordinately hurt because of WPA dismissals.

5. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Maps Fight Against WPA Slashes." July 13, 1937. Fourth in series regarding Harlem's resistance to changing Washington D.C.'s policies and the W.P.A.

6. Harlem Bureau. "Bar Negroes Relief After Pink Slip Cuts." July 20, 1937. Fifth in series showed that Blacks laid off due to new WPA policies were not eligible for other forms of government relief, thereby placing them at the mercy of private charity or the Communist Party .

7. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Party to Protest Japan's Action." July 27, 1937. First article by Wright that realized future fascistic tendencies of Japan as a threat to international peace and America's interest.

8. Harlem Bureau. "Torchlight March Called August 7 by Harlem Group." July 27, 1937. Second article that posed the importance of the Harlem community possessing an international sense of politics, for example, Japan's invasion of China.

9. Harlem Bureau. "Communist Head Speaks at Sidewalk University." August 12, 1937. First of three articles composed on the same day. Wright heralded the notion of a community education that could be conducted "without walls" and during lunch hours, freeing people to learn but without any disruption of their workday routine.

10. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Office Opened by ILD." August 12, 1937. Second of three articles composed on the same day; this article informed the Harlem Community explicitly that the Communist party was committed to its welfare. The opening of a separate office of the International Labor Defense (committee) in Harlem was an outstanding gesture of that commitment.

11. Richard Wright. "'He Died by Them'--Hero's Widow Tells of Rescue of Negroes." December 6, 1937. First in a series of articles that showed Wright's ability to integrate Party agenda and maintain some degree of hegemony over an incident which possessed ideal fictional potential for Wright.

12. Richard Wright. "Harlem, East Side Honor Hero Who Died in Rescue of Negroes." December 7, 1937. Second in series of articles about idealized white hero who had saved "Negro" during a fire.

13. Harlem Bureau. "Harlem Pays Tribute to Truckdriver Who Rescued Negro Children in Fire." December 8, 1937. Wright recorded the final climax in this three part story which concluded with a portrait of people struggling against poverty and race, with strong hints at what awaits Bigger in Native Son.

14. Harlem Bureau. "Plan Memorial For Heroic Truck Driver." December 18, 1937. Fourth in a series of articles that followed the economic dilemma of the family of the white truck driver who had saved three "Negro" children. The solidarity of whites and blacks under a common theme of humanity was embroidered here.

Chapter Five

1. Richard Wright. "Negro Youth on March, Says Leader" October 7, 1937. Article in which Wright's coverage of a labor leader's speech (Edward Strong) revealed where he heard the expression "Uncle Tom is dead," which appears as the epigram in Uncle Tom's Children.

2. Richard Wright. "Opening of Harlem Project Homes Shows How Slums Can be Wiped Out in New York." October 9, 1937. Wright's investigation into the slum conditions that the new projects were designed to end, discussed rents which are uncannily similar to the rent paid by the Thomas family in Native Son.

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