

Joseph G. Ramsey. "The Makings of a Heroic Mistake: Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," Communism, and the Contradictions of Emergent Subjectivity." *Mediations* 30.1 (Fall 2016) 61-90. [www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/heroic-mistake](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/heroic-mistake)

## The Makings of a Heroic Mistake: Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," Communism, and the Contradictions of Emergent Subjectivity

Joseph G. Ramsey

Close readers of Richard Wright's fiction are hard-pressed to find a hero who embodies a positive mode of intellectual, moral, or political engagement.<sup>1</sup> This point is especially true when one bears in mind the often catastrophic impact that the actions of Wright's would-be heroes have on women, and black women in particular.<sup>2</sup> *Native Son* (1940), Wright's most influential and popular novel — widely hailed (and sometimes denounced) as the first black best-seller of the 20th century — features one of U.S. literature's most infamous anti-heroes, Bigger Thomas, a brutally inarticulate tough who, under pressure, kills without remorse: not only does Bigger unintentionally suffocate left-wing socialite Mary Dalton, but also, more deliberately, he murders his girlfriend, Bessie, in part to keep her hidden from the police (adding to a long list of lesser anti-social acts).<sup>3</sup> According to Wright himself, as articulated in his 1940 essay "How Bigger Was Born," Bigger represents the contradictory possibilities inherent in the "dislocated" and "disinherited" multiracial underclass of modern society, potentiality which, as he then saw it, could become a force "of either Communism or Fascism."<sup>4</sup>

*Lawd Today*, Wright's first novel, (written in 1936, published posthumously), similarly features a bigoted and patriarchal black worker, Jake Johnson, whose misdirected aggression and psychological vulnerability manifest themselves in both wife-beating and a declared affinity for fascism abroad. Arguably Wright's last major novel, *The Outsider* (1953), written in exile, presents us with Cross Damon, a super-alienated worker-intellectual who offers penetrating reflections on the state of the world, but also comes to embody the very traits of cynicism that he would rebel against. Driven to excess by sensual and philosophical passions alike, Damon conspires to fake his own death in order to cut himself off from his wife, his mother, his children, and social responsibility generally, setting loose a spiral of

deceit, betrayal, and murderous duplicity that ultimately consumes him (as well as several others). Damon too, like Bigger, becomes an unrepentant, serial murderer.<sup>5</sup> While the unpublished manuscripts and posthumous publications complicate the picture somewhat, if Richard Wright's major works offer readers a sense of "what is to be done," almost always it is *negatively*, relayed by dramatizing the limits and the consequences of inadequate, existing modes of social thought and action.<sup>6</sup> His fiction further explores how an alienating social environment can pervert even positive human aspirations into their opposite, compounding rather than abolishing oppression.

Wright's short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938, 1940), might appear to provide exception to the anti-heroic rule.<sup>7</sup> Written during the height of Wright's commitment to the (then rapidly growing) Depression-era Communist Party, and based upon extensive investigation into contemporary struggles of black Communists in the US South, *Uncle Tom's Children* presents a range of characters who bravely stand their ground against white racist terror, and who often pay the ultimate price for it: exile, torture, death. Chief among them is Sue, the main character of the collection's closing novella, "Bright and Morning Star," a story added to the collection in 1940, though originally published in *The New Masses* in May 1938.<sup>8</sup> Readers have long hailed Sue as that rare thing, a Wright hero (indeed, that even rarer thing, a heroine!), one who overcomes inner and outer conflicts to intervene bravely, nobly, and skillfully on the side of social justice, transforming herself in the process of saving the day. Sue may represent the last and best hope of individual heroism in the major published fiction of Richard Wright.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, until at least 2008 Wright scholars universally held that "Bright and Morning Star," had, if not a happy ending, then at least a heroic and redemptive one. According to this long-unchallenged reading of the novella, the main character "Aunt" Sue is able to meet the demands of crisis, saving the underground interracial communist collective her sons have helped to found from vicious state repression, through a heroic act of self-sacrifice. Certainly, her transformation is remarkable. The middle-aged, widowed mother of two young activists, Sue not only personally weathers racist violence and endures the certainty of her sons' torture and death, but she deploys folk wisdom in the service of radical resistance. She tricks the white authorities who aim to trick *her* into betraying her sons' cause, exploiting her oppressors' racist and sexist blindness to foil their anti-red plot. Her tactics are quite ingenious: posing as a mourning mother come to fetch the body of her soon-to-be-executed son, Johnny-Boy, Sue uses a white sheet to conceal a loaded gun, with which she kills the treasonous party-infiltrator (a white man ironically named Booker), before he can expose the fledgling organization.<sup>10</sup> In this dominant reading, Sue not only redeems her earlier error of trusting Booker with the names of the party members (against her better instincts) but allows the underground revolutionaries to live to see another day, at the cost of her own life. She makes her martyred sons'

cause her own, melding her inherited black Christian outlook with an emerging communist worldview, becoming perhaps the only major female character in Wright's published oeuvre to display serious psychological complexity and genuine political development, and the only main character in Wright's fiction to make such a direct and deliberate contribution to the Communist cause. Novelist-critic Sherley Anne Williams has underscored Aunt Sue's exceptional, and heroic, status within Wright's oeuvre, describing "Bright and Morning Star" as "one of the most deft and moving renderings of a black woman's experience in the canon of American literature."<sup>11</sup> The flat and undeveloped or even outright stereotypical depictions of other black women in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Williams argues, "are somewhat redeemed in the character of Aunt Sue."<sup>12</sup> More recently, Cheryl Higashida, in what may be the most lucid and richly contextualized reading of *Uncle Tom's Children* and "Bright and Morning Star" to date, concludes that, "It is precisely by transforming and uniting both ideologies [Communism and black nationalism] into a synthetic perspective that *Sue saves the Party from being destroyed by the state*."<sup>13</sup> Though critics continue to debate "Bright and Morning Star" from sharply contending perspectives, they tend to agree that Sue is to be read as a hero who saves the party.<sup>14</sup> This is true even of critics who take a more anti-communist view, reading Sue as a nationalist rebuke to Communism, or as heralding Wright's own later break from the Party.<sup>15</sup>

With Gregory Meyerson's 2008 essay, "Aunt Sue's Mistake," however, the heroic status of Sue's final act has been radically called into question. Where previous critics have found meaningful individual self-sacrifice that leads to collective salvation, Meyerson — attending to long-overlooked textual evidence — has revealed individualist false consciousness leading to catastrophic unintended consequences: namely, the destruction of the fledgling communist movement that Sue has been hailed for saving.<sup>16</sup> "The problem with this widely-held reading," Meyerson writes, "is that it is very carefully shown by the story itself — through its painstaking thematic patterning — to be a *misreading*. Sue's victory over the racists in "Bright and Morning Star" proves to be, tragically, Pyrrhic ... flying in the face of the book's main lessons. Ironically," he argues, "Sue's actions do not guarantee the survival of the party; *they all but guarantee its destruction*."<sup>17</sup>

The core of Meyerson's corrective reading comes down to one, crucial, long-overlooked, but now indisputable fact. In the course of pursuing her self-sacrificing, solitary, and "total act" of salvation, Sue neglects — in fact, deliberately avoids — doing the *other* thing that needs to be done. Acting alone, she kills the stool pigeon, Booker, yes — and in dramatic, seemingly heroic, fashion — but she fails to save the party, for she *fails to warn the other comrades* about the sheriff's plan to ambush their scheduled red meeting — a fate which, Sue realizes, means their capture, death, and destruction come morning.<sup>18</sup> By acting "erlone," instead of with others, Sue helps to bring about the annihilation of the party she appears to be "saving." We shouldn't

be surprised either, Meyerson argues; for Sue's solitary act of martyrdom flies in the face of the recurrent anti-individualist lessons that run through every story of Wright's celebrated collection.

Meyerson makes a very compelling case, both regarding *Uncle Tom's Children* as a whole, and "Bright and Morning Star" in particular, a case that has yet to receive the attention it deserves. As he shows in detail, throughout *Uncle Tom's Children*, individualistic action consistently fails in the face of systemic oppression. Not only do characters die despite and because of their (often astounding, back-breaking, brave) individual efforts, but their deaths "don't mean *nothing*," as Silas, another brave — and brutally patriarchal — martyr figure puts it in "Long Black Song."<sup>19</sup> The basic lesson is made explicit in "Fire and Cloud" (the story which closed the original 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*) when Reverend Taylor, following his brutal beating at the hands of state-sanctioned racists, counters his son's angry proposal to meet white violence with violence of their own: "Don be a fool, son! Don thow yo life erway! *We cant do nuthin erlone.*"<sup>20</sup> Rev. Taylor elaborates the point further, anticipating the militant mass march of black and white workers and peasants that ends the story: "We gotta git wid the people, son...Wes too much erlone this way! Wes los when we erlone! Wes gotta be wid our folks..."<sup>21</sup> To Meyerson's own useful review, I would add here that the very colloquial (mis)spelling of the word — alone as *erlone* — implies the way in which, for Wright, acting *alone* is almost necessarily to *err*. The absence of positive heroes in Wright's fiction here comes full circle as a critique of the very idea of individual heroism. In a sense, the only heroes to be upheld are collective(s): it is only to the extent that individuals admit or participate in such a collective project, that they too can become, in a sense, heroic. They can't do nothin' *erlone*.<sup>22</sup>

A crucial and corollary lesson of the collection *Uncle Tom's Children*, however — albeit a subtler one — is that collective action is not only necessary but *possible*, even in circumstances that may appear almost fatalistically desperate and determined — but *only if one finds the courage to speak up* to transform the inherited conditions of the situation, bringing out their latent collectivity. For instance, as Meyerson shows, in the famously "fatalistic" story, "Down by the Riverside," protagonist Brother Mann, though trapped by the interlocking dangers of rising flood waters and a racist police state, has several opportunities to speak up and potentially win allies to his cause, allies that could help him (and perhaps his wife, Lulu) to survive this crisis. He has at least two consciously recognized chances to break out of his isolation, to shift what will become his doomed coordinates of possibility; but Mann remains silent, thus participating in the sealing of his own "fate."<sup>23</sup> Collective agency exists as potentiality in *Uncle Tom's Children*, even for seemingly isolated individuals, but only if they dare to seize the moment and break the spell of isolation and fatalism. Only if they cease to think and act upon their situation as individuals, individualistically.<sup>24</sup>

### Exploring Aunt Sue's Mistake

In the wake of Meyerson's scandalously corrective reading, new and vital aspects of Wright's widely celebrated, widely misunderstood text begin to emerge. Building on Meyerson's revelation that Sue makes an "individualist" mistake, the present essay will explore in detail the question of how so and why she comes to make it. I will further consider the question of what Wright's depiction of this mistake-process suggests, for him and for us: both what it says about Wright's late Thirties conception of the relationship between individual psychology and collective, egalitarian politics, and what that may mean for re-conceiving radical political subjectivity today.<sup>25</sup> A close reading of Sue's subjective processes, we shall see, reveals a complex dialectic of emergent political consciousness: disclosing interrelations between individuality and collectivity, courage and fear, insight and blindness, symbolic empowerment and ideological mystification. In this new light, "Bright and Morning Star" becomes for us a story that does not only document Wright's deep commitment and faith in the communist cause, but also foregrounds the difficulty of sustaining communist practice, dramatizing the precariousness of the bonds between comrades and their allies, even, and perhaps especially, when everything depends on them. No longer a heroic story of individual sacrifice, "Bright and Morning Star" turns out to be a cautionary tale about the need for communists to develop more thoroughly collective methods of work as a means of sustaining comrades' faith in one another — and in the people — such faith being particularly necessary in moments of life-and-death crisis.

The story further stands as a reminder of how Wright's existential reflections — about the difficulty of sustaining meaningful human relationships in a deeply alienating modern world — are found not only in later works such as *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) or the *The Outsider*; they are rather a key aspect of his 1930s fiction as well. Our reading of "Bright and Morning Star" thus will complicate the common but all-too-simple (and Cold-War-inflected) periodization of Wright's work into "early Marxism" vs. "late existentialism," early "proletarian didacticism" vs. later "novels of ideas." Such schemas suggests a binary opposition between communist radicalism and deep individual psychological investigation that oversimplifies both Wright himself and the dialectical interactions between individuality and collectivity that he was at pains to reveal.

### Keeping Quiet To Protect Reva — The Subject Supposed to Believe

Meyerson's essay can be summed up as establishing five crucial points: 1) that Sue makes a mistake; 2) that the consequences of this mistake are catastrophic, dooming the local branch of the party; 3) that Sue on some level knows this, and yet proceeds as if she does not;<sup>26</sup> 4) that this mistake is all the more glaring when "Bright and Morning Star" is read in relationship to the consistently anti-individualist lessons of the *Uncle Tom's Children* collection; and 5) and that the critics — "all of them" — have also made

mistakes in overlooking Sue's mistake for so long. Accepting these key points, we now need to fully excavate the ground they uncover, attending to the question of how Sue comes to make her error, and what this erring means.

At this point the relationship between Sue and Reva takes on great significance. For it is Reva, the young white communist — appearing twice in Sue's home as a party messenger — who most concretely presents Sue with the opportunity to think and act collectively in her moment of crisis, providing Sue the chance to inform the other comrades about the morning's ambush, and thus with a chance to save them. How precisely Sue comes to neglect this crucial task is thus worth closer analysis, as is the question of what Wright means to imply — about emergent political subjectivity, about intra-party and interracial relations — through this depiction of failed communication. That the Sue-Reva scenes provide us with the Wright-rarity of an extended interracial woman-to-woman encounter adds an important additional aspect to consider.<sup>27</sup>

Virtually alone among Wright's fictional depictions of white women, Reva is presented very sympathetically.<sup>28</sup> She is a young white communist whom Sue sees as an ally and even a friend, an impoverished local tenant farmer who has been actively risking her life and her health for the cause, and who appears to have genuine personal affection for Sue and for Sue's son, Johnny-Boy. As Wright puts it, Sue "liked Reva; the brightest glow her heart had ever known was when she had learned that Reva loved Johnny-Boy."<sup>29</sup> In marked contrast to Sue's (ultimately validated) suspicion towards the new white party recruit, Booker, there is no suggestion in the text that she does not trust Reva (or Reva's father, Lem); she has known them a long time and accepts the sincerity of their red commitment to class-based inter-racial unity. And yet, later, at the crucial moment, Sue not only neglects to tell Reva (both about Johnny-Boy's capture, and Sue's own giving the comrades' names to Booker), but verbally misleads her — suppressing crucial information, effectively lying to her at least twice. Finally, Sue literally *puts Reva to bed*, over Reva's own protestations and even her suspicions that something else is wrong. (Reva: "Yuh worried about something...Ah wanna stay up wid yuh."<sup>30</sup>) Sue hushes her, treating a friend and ally, as a "chile" who cannot handle the truth, who must be put to bed, ushered out of sight.<sup>31</sup> The alienation is truly profound. We do not have here a case of a character who is simply trapped in a solitary struggle, but rather a case of a character who is playing a part in constructing her own solitude, and then acting within those constructed (and terribly inadequate) confines as if they were fated or beyond her control.<sup>32</sup>

Wright describes Reva's importance for Sue and for Sue's emergent radical consciousness during their first scene together. Reva has come to deliver news of the planned police ambush, and to ask Sue to send Johnny-Boy to warn the comrades, so they can avoid capture. Wright offers Sue's thoughts:

Reva believed in black folks and not for anything in the world would [Sue] falter before her. In Reva's trust and acceptance of her she had found her first feelings of humanity. Reva's love was her refuge from shame and degradation. If in the early days of her life the white mountain had driven her back from the earth, then in her last days Reva's love was drawing her towards it, like the beacon that swung through the night outside.<sup>33</sup>

What stands out about this passage — besides the analogy to the Memphis airport “beacon,” an ominous figure that slices across almost every scene in “Bright and Morning Star” — is not only the way Sue is concerned with preserving Reva's belief in black folks, but the way that Sue's feeling of her own emergent humanity is bound up with and dependent upon that belief.<sup>34</sup> It might be more precise to say: dependent on her own perception of Reva's belief, or even, her own belief in Reva's belief. We have here something like what Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, calls the “subject supposed to believe.”<sup>35</sup> That is, for Sue, Reva figures not only as a person, but as a symbol, or more precisely: a sustaining symbolizer. Reva's (presumed, posited, projected) belief in Sue (and in “black folks”), functions as a symbolic support for Sue's own emergent/transforming consciousness. “In Reva's trust and acceptance of her she had found her first feelings of humanity. Reva's love was her refuge from shame and degradation.”<sup>36</sup> Wright depicts Sue as having a deep need for Reva's belief/love; it functions, for her, as a kind of personalized proof that humanity can transcend racial barriers; Sue needs to feel believed *in*, in order to believe (in) *herself*.

An interesting reflexive element here is that Sue sees Reva as seeing *her* — Sue — as a representative of “black folks.” Sue believes that “Reva believes” not just in Sue or in Johnny-Boy, but in “black folks” more generally. This is not at all to say that Sue sees *herself* this way, as in some sense “representative” of “black folks.” Nonetheless, Sue's perception of Reva's faith in “black folks” generally exerts a powerful force on Sue, one that, as we shall see, can become a source of both liberation and of alienation. The paradox of objective intersubjective belief here is that Sue need not *actually* believe in her own representative-ness in order to *act as if* she believes in it. She may not believe in race (subjectively) and yet may still perform/recreate it (intersubjectively); for she believes in (and feels she depends on) the *other's* belief, and acts in such a way as to protect that belief. Sue perceives that she must bear the burden of representing “black folks” in general before Reva's eyes, for the compound reason that Sue's individual “faltering” could undermine not only her white comrade's belief in racial equality, but also Sue's own belief in her *own* growing humanity.<sup>37</sup>

We should add that this very need to protect Reva's belief can also be read as a symptom of a *lack* of belief of another sort: namely a lack of faith that a “white” person (however *red*) might in fact accept Sue for who she actually is, that Reva could handle the truth, that this young white woman could remain loving of her and committed to anti-racism without an idealized buffer of ever-dependable “black folks.” “Bright

and *Morning Star*” thus anticipates Wright’s recurrent later critique of the tendency of white liberals and communists to idealize black people or black oppression, a critique that is present clearly not only in *Native Son*, but in *The Outsider*, and in Wright’s autobiographical writings published under the title *American Hunger*.<sup>38</sup> But whereas in later depictions this critique tends to align with an anti-Communist — or even anti-communist — perspective, here Wright articulates it as an internal (self) criticism of the communist movement.<sup>39</sup>

It’s important to note, however, that Sue’s investment in (or dependence on) Reva’s belief is not simply depicted as some kind of “false consciousness” that can be easily opposed to and/or corrected by something like the clarity of “scientific truth.” The situation is more deeply contradictory: Wright suggests that without Reva — not only Reva as material actor (who makes tea, who bandages wounds, who brings news) but Reva as symbolic force (whose love represents for Sue the possibility of achieving full humanity) — Sue would not have been able to face the racist “white mountain.”<sup>40</sup> She needed another to believe in her own aspiring humanity in order to assert and sustain that humanity in the face of a world that otherwise fails to recognize it. Her emergent subjectivity depends upon Reva as symbolic anchor. This psychological-ideological process, Wright leads us to believe, though based on a kind of reification, has had the positive and enabling effect of helping Sue to transition in a communist direction, towards a more self-consciously, insistently human subjectivity, enabling her courageous political resistance to white supremacy. Alongside her growing love and respect for her own sons’ radical vision, Sue needed to believe that Reva (a “white person”) believed in her (and in “black folks”) to make this leap. Communist conversion required the belief of comrades, over and above their knowledge or strategic wisdom.

One is reminded at this point of Wright’s dialectical treatment of black consciousness in his influential 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” — a text he developed almost simultaneously with “Bright and Morning Star.” In that early manifesto, which like *Uncle Tom’s Children*, seeks to delineate sharply a modern literary and political practice from the “Uncle Toms” who have come before, Wright argues for taking seriously and working through the understandably, and perhaps even necessarily, nationalist dynamic of Negro experience, precisely in order ultimately to transcend this nationalist horizon — towards a proletarian, class conscious, internationalist standpoint. As Wright wrote:

Negro writers must accept the national implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it.... It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of a capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple



fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.<sup>41</sup>

Far from an inevitable historical process, however, this dialectical path through nationalism is fraught with danger: narrow nationalism on one-side, race-blind economism on the other. In *Native Son*, as well as in *Lawd Today*, we see Wright's less-than-optimistic account of how such nationalist sentiments, if not properly worked through, may leave the oppressed open to the lures of mystification, misogyny, self-destructive violence, and even affinity for fascism. Similarly, in "Bright and Morning Star," Wright shows us how an intersubjective structure that is a necessary mediation towards a higher political state of consciousness may persist, even after it has done its crucial work, in ways that do not help but rather hinder progress on to some ostensibly "higher" stage of consciousness. Transcending the nationalist (and religious) aspect of folk consciousness and achieving true interracial trust and solidarity remains a protracted affair, a struggle that continues within and around the ranks of the communist movement.

Thus Reva's symbolic power continues to determine Sue's subjectivity, becoming, in the second Reva scene, a deadly threat to the life of Reva, and many others, black and white alike. In these crucial moments, Sue addresses herself not to the actual Reva (or to the political project with which Reva has taken up), but to the Reva image Sue feels the need to protect. "No she would not tell Reva; Reva was all she had left ... Reva's trust would never be shaken."<sup>42</sup> In a kind of dialectical Marxian-psychoanalytic irony, Wright suggests that the very symbols that enable growth can become fetters on further development, or even worse, chains that threaten to pull the new communist subject — and the communist project — back into the alienation from which it has just begun to emerge.

It is in the second Reva scene that we see the damage done, the chains pull, the dialectical bridge buckle. To review the characters' immediate situation: since Reva's first visit, Sue has relayed the message about warning the comrades to Johnny-Boy, who has dutifully set out to do just that. After he leaves, Sue's home is invaded by the sheriff's posse; they question her about Johnny-Boy and about the party, beat her when she refuses to talk, and then again when she "talks back." Finally knocked unconscious, Sue awakens to find the newly recruited white "comrade" Booker in her house. Offering Sue sympathy and attending to her injuries, Booker reports that Johnny-Boy has been captured (before getting the chance to warn the other party members), and persuades Sue — against her better instincts — to tell this "comrade" the names of the party members, ostensibly so he can go warn them himself. Reva arrives for the second time at some point after Booker has left, hoping that Sue has relayed the message to Johnny-Boy as planned, and seeking confirmation of that fact. She promptly informs Sue that Booker is indeed, a "stool" (confirming Sue's fears).

At first it seems that Sue is planning to tell Reva the news — about Booker, about

Johnny-Boy's capture, and about the fact he hasn't been able to warn the comrades as planned. As Wright informs us, "She was wondering how to tell Reva about Johnny-Boy and Booker. Ahll wait a lil while longer, she thought."<sup>43</sup> While Reva dresses Sue's bleeding scalp, Sue thinks again how "She was feeling better now; in just a little while she would tell Reva."<sup>44</sup> One is reminded of the opening scene between Sue and Johnny-Boy, where Sue similarly waits until the work of nurturing and caring is done — allowing Johnny-Boy to eat, warm up, and dry off — before she drops upon him the hard news of "what is to be done." But unlike Sue in this earlier scene, Reva puts the question to her directly, before such soothing can occur:

"Did Johnny-Boy come?"

[Sue] hesitated.

"Yeah."

"He done gone t tell the others?" Reva's voice sounded so clear and confident that it mocked her. Lawd, I cant tell this chile...

"Yuh tol im, didn't yuh An Sue?"

"Y-y-yeah..."

"Gee! Thas good! Ah tol pa he dindt hafta worry ef Johnny-Boy got the news. Mabbe thingsll come out awright."

"Ah hope..."

She could not go on; she had gone as far as she could. For the first time that night she began to cry.<sup>45</sup>

Sue here misleads Reva, effectively lying by way of omission. Why can't Sue bring herself to tell Reva the truth? The immediate "reason" Wright provides has to do with how Reva's voice sounds, "so clear and confident that it mocked her." Reva's clarity and confidence prompt Sue to see Reva in a protective mode, as a "chile," not capable of hearing the brutal truth. Similarly, once Sue's crying begins to make Reva cry, "She forced herself to stop. Naw; Ah cant carry on this way in fronta Reva...Right now she had a *deep need for Reva to believe in her.*"<sup>46</sup> We see that Sue is motivated not so much by protecting Reva as by protecting Reva's belief in her own trustworthiness. Sue cannot bring herself to show her own vulnerability around this young woman who both "believed in black folks," and who has deep feelings for her (now captured) son. The very feelings that have helped to buoy her up now hold her back.

It would be one-sided to put the blame on Sue here (her individualism, her Christian martyrdom, her residual nationalism), for Wright also directs us to the material context of the characters' interaction, asking us to consider Reva's role (and even Johnny-Boy's) as well. Reva refers to Sue as "An" [Aunt], in a way hailing Sue to continue to assume a protective role that harkens back to the days of "mammy." Further, the contrast with the opening scene between Johnny-Boy and Sue is illuminating; it serves as a counter example, a successful scene of communication

that sets off the later, failed one. In the former scene, Sue deliberately and patiently puts off telling Johnny-Boy the bad news about the sheriff watching Lem's house — news which will require Johnny-Boy's prompt action — until he has a chance to “eat and get dry...Theres time yet.”<sup>47</sup> Sue allows him to rest until well past midnight, not with a desire to avoid telling him — Wright indicates that she knows she will and must, that everything depends on the comrades being warned — but wanting to take the time to tell him in the right way.<sup>48</sup>

In the later scene, conditions have changed: time is running short and Sue's ears are still ringing from her beating at the hands of the sheriff. Yet the failure of Sue and Reva to connect cannot be blamed exclusively on the enemy's violent repression or the urgency of the situation; a genuine opportunity is missed — and Reva contributes to the miscommunication as well. Arguably, Reva's “confident” rush to get good news from Sue makes it all the more unbearable for her to deliver the bad news truth. It's also worth noting, as we parse the devastating disconnect, that — in stark contrast to later portrayals of white communists, Jan Erlone, Boris Max, and fellow traveler Mary Dalton in *Native Son* — Wright depicts Reva in “Bright and Morning Star” as extremely *similar* to Sue at the level of material conditions. Besides the fact that both are women — with the hint of love between Sue's son Johnny-Boy and Reva adding a near-familial connection — we learn that, like Sue's son, Sugg, Reva's own brother is in jail, presumably for political reasons. “Ma cries ever day...” she confides to Sue.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Reva's poverty appears to be as acute as Sue's. Helping Reva with her coat, Sue is struck by the “scant flesh of the girl's shoulders. She don git enuff t eat.”<sup>50</sup> Though “white,” Reva and her family are dealing with the same kind of threats that affect Sue and hers — police terror and hunger. This makes the tragic disconnect between these two comrades all the more remarkable, tragic, and sobering. We have here not — as in *Native Son* — an account of the great (if still perhaps bridgeable) cultural or social distance separating Communist activists and those they would represent and organize, but rather an account of how barriers to trust, communication, and collectivity can emerge even between people (comrades!) whose conditions of life are quite similar.

### **The Desire to Deny the Enemy to His Own Face**

Ironically, alongside this failure to communicate with a comrade, Wright draws our attention to Sue's psychological desire to communicate to her enemy, suggesting how this urge to be “heard” by the agents of repression clouds her strategic judgment. This desire is totally understandable, of course — perhaps, like her desire to protect her comrades, it is even necessary for (and constitutive of) her radicalization. Yet in the moment of crisis, the urge to prove the enemy other wrong *to the enemy's own face*, like the felt need to protect a comrade from an unsettling truth, throws Sue, her comrades, and their would-be-collective project into danger, death, and doom.

Sue's individualism takes the form of a desire to sacrifice her body in order to

prove herself to the racist enemy that confronts her.<sup>51</sup> Again, it is in a sense a “selfless” desire, and yet one that loses sight of actual others — and of the necessities of the situation — in its flight from responsibility, a narcissistic substitution of fantasy for strategy. Just as Sue’s desire to “protect” Reva leads to her failing actually to protect her, Sue’s desire to deny the other, to show and to prove to the other that “yuh didn’t git what yuh wanted,” actually allows the sheriff and company to “git” what they want, the destruction of the local communist organization. Early on, while Sue is still alone and waiting for Johnny-Boy’s initial return, she reflects: “Lawd, Johnny-Boy...Ah just wan them white folks t try t make me tell who is in the part n who ain! Ah just wan em t try, n Ahll show em something they never thought a black woman could have!”<sup>52</sup> The lines reveal Sue’s political desire as *a desire to see the enemy other seeing her own strength in action*, a desire not only to disprove the Enemy’s notion of what a “black woman” is capable of — or to laugh at the deluded racists behind their backs — but to *have “them” watch her as she disproves it*. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this; arguably such desires for recognition are a necessary moment in a process of revolutionary self-assertion. The point, as it emerges through “Bright and Morning Star,” is that such rebel desire for recognition from the enemy, despite — or perhaps because of — its psychological appeal, threatens also to create a kind of tunnel vision, drawing one’s eyes away from what is to be done, leaving the subject reactive, stuck in the enemy’s universe. Mired in immediate reaction, locked into seeking the enemy’s gaze, it becomes difficult to create new coordinates of subjectivity that aim not to “be heard” by ruling powers, but to subvert and supplant them.<sup>53</sup>

Later, Sue gets the chance to act on her desire for recognition, after her house is broken into by the sheriff and his posse. Watching the racist, red-hunting thugs tear through her home, Sue recognizes that they don’t yet know where Johnny-Boy is. “She was consumed with a bitter pride...She gave him up because *she wanted them to know they could not get what they wanted* by bluffing and killing.”<sup>54</sup> Sue’s strength in the face of racist, anticommunist repression is impressive. But as she experiences the moment, it is not enough for her to deny them; she *wants them to know they are being denied*. This other-orientation leads Sue to confront the sheriff as he is about to leave:

Yuh didn’t git whut yuh wanted! she thought exultingly. N yuh ain gonna never git it! Hotly something ached in her *to make them feel the intensity of her pride and freedom*; her heart groped to turn the bitter hours of her life into words of a kind that would *make them feel* that she had taken all they had done to her in stride and could still take more. Her faith surged so strongly in her she was all but blinded.<sup>55</sup>

Sue’s faith-surgings provoke the departing sheriff; he re-enters the house to hit her so hard that she loses consciousness. Sue reflects later (ironically right as she is in the midst of going silent before her comrade, Reva), that “If she had not shouted

to the sheriff, she would have been strong enough to have resisted Booker; she would have been able to tell the comrades herself.”<sup>56</sup>

### “Bright and Morning Star,” or, the ambiguity of symbolic redemption

Sue’s radicalization in “Bright and Morning Star,” like Reverend Taylor’s in “Fire and Cloud,” is cast in deeply Christian terms, suggesting the potential for a kind of synthesis of religious and communist symbolism.<sup>57</sup> As Cheryl Higashida has shown, the novellas in *Uncle Tom’s Children* represent a fleshing out of concepts Wright outlined in his 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” where he wrote that “Negro writers who seek to mould or influence the consciousness of the Negro people must address their messages to them through the ideologies and attitudes fostered in this warping way of life” of Jim Crow segregation.<sup>58</sup> Thus, though Wright had a very critical view of the “warping” effects of established Christianity, both in his own life and in the lives of black people generally, he saw religion and religious symbolism not as a static or unchanging thing but as one that could alter (and be altered — “moulded”) in relationship to changing historical and social conditions, one that revolutionary writers needed to take seriously — as he himself did.<sup>59</sup> Thus, for Rev. Taylor in “Fire and Cloud,” the specter of social justice is likened to the visiting of hellfire upon the oppressors, and, later, following his decision to march alongside the “Reds,” the masses mobilizing to demand bread come to stand in the place of a redemptive “Gawd.” Likewise, for Sue in “Bright and Morning Star,” under the influence of her activist sons and her own life of labor and struggle, “[t]he wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party become another Resurrection.”<sup>60</sup>

In marked contrast with the rousing symbolic synthesis that closes “Fire and Cloud,” however, the symbolism in “Bright and Morning Star” plays an overtly contradictory role. Whereas Rev. Taylor in “Fire and Cloud” comes to see the existence of “Gawd” as at once confirmed and made flesh by the red-led, interracial, mass mobilization of the poor to demand bread — Christianity and communism aligning in a conclusion that is likened to “a baptism of clean joy” — for Sue in “Bright and Morning Star,” the redemptive discourse of Christianity at once enables the development of radical subjectivity, on one hand, and yet threatens to hold it back or to compromise it, on the other.<sup>61</sup> Her Christian martyr’s ambition — “to be like Him [Jesus] and suffer without a mumbling word” — is shown to be both an impetus and an impediment to collective action.<sup>62</sup> If “Fire and Cloud” depicts the progressive promise of a Christian-Communist synthesis, “Bright and Morning Star” suggests the promise, but also the challenges and dangers of such a fusion.

Startlingly, the very title of Wright’s story, “Bright and Morning Star,” foregrounds this ambiguous, double-edged status of redemptive Christian symbolism. The phrase, which recurs throughout the story, alludes to the Bible; Sue clearly sees it as a symbol for Jesus (though she sings it in such a way that the “he” in question could equally well

apply to her son Johnny-Boy, for whose safe return her heart longs).<sup>63</sup> However, the Biblical allusion is a contradictory one; it points readers to the possibility that what appears to be the coming of redemption may in fact be the arrival of its opposite. The first reference in the Bible to the “morning star” as an individual is in Isaiah 14:12, and refers not to Jesus, but to Satan: “How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!” (New International Version). Both the King James Version and New King James Version of the text translate “morning star” as “Lucifer, son of the morning.” Yet, in Revelation 22:16, Jesus identifies Himself as the morning star: “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The “bright and morning star” could be Christ, or anti-Christ.<sup>64</sup> Wright’s frequently ominous descriptions of the distant Memphis beacon-light that cuts across virtually every scene of the story further signal the double-edged symbolism, with the beacon light described as being “Like a gleaming sword above her head,” a “blade of light.”<sup>65</sup> The point here of course is not to engage scriptural debate about the proper interpretation — or proper translation — of the “bright and morning star(s).” The point is that the very title of Wright’s story — a title which reverberates in Sue’s hymn singing, in the distant Memphis airport “beacon,” and, crucially, at the precise moment of Sue’s fateful decision — refers us to a Biblical symbol that is widely taken to signify in two opposed and incompatible ways.<sup>66</sup> The status of the “bright and morning star,” the symbol of redemption, is unclear; what appears to be a beacon of hope may turn out to be the headlights of doom.

As we’ve shown, things stand similarly with Wright’s story itself. For the long-established reading of “Bright and Morning Star,” Sue appears akin to a savior. But in reality, despite her best and even in many ways heroic efforts, she presides over the destruction not the redemption of the comrades, making “Bright and Morning Star” a story about collective betrayal that takes the form of what looks like — and is mistaken for — individual martyrdom and salvation. If religious signs, and the emotions they unleash, align with the radical subjectivity of Taylor at the end of “Fire and Cloud,” in “Bright and Morning Star” Wright confronts us with the possibility that the former may be misread as the latter, redemption and resurrection fantasies substituting for rather than supporting and spurring on revolutionary practice, with catastrophic results.

What is at stake here, and what the title “Bright and Morning Star” points us towards, is not just the irony of readers and critics misinterpreting Sue’s act, (interesting as this may be), but the tragic irony of Sue herself misinterpreting her situation (and its symbolism) so as to come to the point of committing this mistaken act in the first place.<sup>67</sup> This isn’t just a case of Wright slipping one by two generations of critics (a noteworthy fact, nonetheless); a close analysis of Sue’s “internal” psychological processes, and of the material conditions that set the context for these processes,

takes the issue to another level, revealing “Bright and Morning Star” to be a story about the misleading or illusory appearance of redemption. “Bright and Morning Star” thus becomes a story about how betrayal can take the form of what looks like salvation, about how the brightness of a star (or a beacon) can confuse or even blind one to the situation at hand, about how easy it is to lapse into “individualism” in the name of saving (or taking revenge on) others, especially in moments of crisis. “Bright and Morning Star” is not just a story about a mistake Sue made, but about the *makings* of this mistake.

### **Grasping the Transindividual Structure of Individualism**

On one level, what I have written above can be seen as an extension of Meyerson’s approach; I agree with him that in a sense Sue falls prey to “individualism.” And yet, moving beyond an acknowledgment of “false consciousness,” my close reading of “Bright and Morning Star” has revealed an interesting paradox: Sue’s “individualism” tends to take the form of its ostensible opposite: a concern for (or even an obsession with) others, friends as well as enemies. Sue makes her crucial error not when she is concerned for herself (or even for her family), but when she is worried about upsetting another, her comrade (or worried about showing up the enemy). Her “individualist” going-it-alone is shown by Wright to be an effect of her attempt to be (or to appear to be) what (she thinks) her newfound ally expects from her (or, on the other hand, to defy what she thinks the enemy thinks of her). “Individualism” here is not a sign of selfishness or indifference for the collective, so much as — one the one hand — a lack of faith in the ability of another member of that collective to grasp and to accept the fullness of her own contradictory being, and — on the other hand — a too narrow focus on the enemy as the “audience” for her activism. Sue tries to “go it alone” for the sake of others, to protect their faith, or to make them feel their failure. Individualist “false consciousness” is a symptom of a broader — and collective — lapse.<sup>68</sup>

We can thus intuit here Wright’s suggestion of yet another — more collective — failure of faith, this one attributable to the local Communist party-movement itself, for not having involved Sue (this black, working mother and widow, this devout Christian) sooner and more fully in their organizing (in the weeks and months leading up to the crisis-night of the story). Sue’s early reflection on how “Johnny-Boy ain the one t trust nobody t do nothing. He gotta do it all hissef...” thus reverberates with irony, and not just because, as other critics have noted, Johnny-Boy has been all too trusting when it has come to allowing white men — such as the traitor Booker — into the fledgling party.<sup>69</sup> An additional irony, just as profound and tragic, emerges from the recognition that Johnny-Boy’s (individualistic) bearing of burdens by himself has — however unintentionally — allowed Sue to remain marginalized and under-politicized within the movement she is increasingly sympathetic to. Insofar as Sue’s heroic lapse is a (very understandable) sign of her lack of experience with communist political activity prior to this crucial crisis moment, we can hypothesize

that Johnny-Boy's own individualist mode of communist work has inadvertently contributed to Sue's individualistic error. Doing the political work for others — rather than challenging them to take it up themselves — is here shown to be yet another “heroic” mistake. A mistake that breeds other mistakes.

### **The Stakes of a Scandalous Rereading**

The present reading offers us more than a descriptive correction of “Bright and Morning Star.” Fully grasping the subjective process by which Sue ultimately betrays the cause she aims to defend enriches our understanding of Richard Wright's pro-communist 1930's fiction, foregrounding and reframing his interest in human consciousness — and in relationships between comrades and the masses of people — as a crucial site of struggle, one with deep implications for the communist movement he sought to build.<sup>70</sup> Long hailed as an exemplary achievement of pro-communist/proletarian literature, “Bright and Morning Star” comes to stand as not only a compelling narrative that reflects actual, ongoing radical struggles of the time (though it is this, too), but an example of Wright using fiction as a kind of dialectical psychoanalytic tool through which to contribute to the radical cause, not (only) by touting its achievements, but by illuminating the internal and existential contradictions that threaten to undermine that movement from within. The powerful draw of martyr-like “heroism” was among the dangers Wright sought to bring to light.<sup>71</sup>

More broadly, re-reading “Bright and Morning Star” in this way gives us occasion to consider the (contradictory) formal dynamics of political subjectivization itself, understood as the process by which a particular, singular individual in specific material circumstances comes to infuse his/her life with the practical consequences of a political commitment to a universal, collective, revolutionary, and egalitarian process.<sup>72</sup> In this vein, Meyerson's corrective reading of “Bright and Morning Star” has given us the chance not only to document (Wright's awareness of) the dangers of individualistic, martyr-like substitutions for collective action, but also to explore the basis for this subjective error, as it can be traced to the workings of human consciousness and to comradely relations, in their complex interaction with the social and political conditions faced by an emergent, besieged communist project.

“Bright and Morning Star” thus becomes not only a critical warning about the danger of lapsing into individualist modes of thought and thus betraying causes that one seeks to support, but a call to study, engage, and transform the latent conditions that make such betrayal possible — including, but not limited to, the gendered division of labor, the persistence of racialized attitudes within the communist movement (on both sides of the “race” line), and the subjective deformations and disconnections these give rise to. This possibility, far from being best understood as a foreign or false ideology that is imported into the communist movement from the “outside,” or as some residual “bourgeois” element, is perhaps better grasped as a danger that is always present, a possibility that is immanent to the political process of subjectivization



itself, not only because subjectivization is always a matter of working with those contents inherited from the past, but insofar as this subjectivization necessarily involves a tense dialectic of individuality and collectivity in the crisis-time of the present.

Similarly, our reading of Wright's novella suggests the continued relevance of his work — and perhaps of US proletarian fiction more generally — to contemporary theoretical discussion, developed by figures such as Alain Badiou and Jodi Dean, theorists who approach communism as a matter of subjectification and collective desire.<sup>73</sup> Arguing that, against the “democratic drive” that now dominates on the Left, “communist desire designates the subjectification of the gap necessary for politics, the division within the people,” Dean has insisted that “this subjectification is collective — our desire and our collective desire for us...Communist desire is a desire for collectivity... the desire for collective desiring.”<sup>74</sup> Against this framework of collective desire for collectivity, Dean criticizes Badiou for emphasizing acts of “individual decision and will.” “Such an emphasis,” she writes, “thereby assents to capitalist form, rendering communism as just another content, and object of individual desire rather than the desire for a collective subject. In Badiou's version,” she adds, “the individual's active participation in a new subject doesn't even require any radical change on the part of the individual — he or she can remain ‘the individual that he or she is.’ What gets lost is the common that gives communism its force.”<sup>75</sup> I gesture towards this debate here merely to suggest that Wright's text offers a means of mediating between Dean's emphasis on collective desire and Badiou's focus on individual incorporation in the communist Subject. Wright's story explores the relationship between individuality and collectivity in the precarious light of a communist horizon; it thus opens up space for discussion about the ways in which particular individuals may become incorporated (or fail to become incorporated) within a communist Subject. At the same time, “Bright and Morning Star” recounts Sue's subjective process in such a way as to foreground for readers the complex terrain of revolutionary desire, confronting us with how vexing the struggle to align personal desire with strategic action can be, of how individualist *form* may subsume communist *content*, even when some notion of a “communist horizon” is ostensibly in view, and a committed communist party at work.

Sue reminds us that to care about comrades and to dream of destroying enemies is necessarily to risk excesses of both caution and revenge. Similarly, to cultivate a will and a revolutionary faith that is up to the task of sacrifice is to court the fantasy of substitutive martyrdom; to be willing to die for a symbol of redemption is to risk dying for the symbol without materializing the redemption as revolutionary praxis. None of which eliminates the need to nonetheless heroically dare to act in the face of these dangers. Leaps of faith, like symbols, remain necessary — despite their dangers. For Wright, the stakes were high; the role of the revolutionary artist was nothing less

than to “fashion symbols by which his people will live and die....”<sup>76</sup> As my reading of “Bright and Morning Star” has hopefully made clear, however, Wright’s radical Thirties fiction was not only concerned with *fashioning* such finished symbols as heroes to be upheld — or better yet, fixed beacons or “bright and morning stars,” to be followed to the red horizon — but equally with depicting the contradictory potential that symbols and symbolism imply for human consciousness, and thus for political struggle.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking the Time-Line and Gender-Lines of Wright’s Class War**

Our reading of “Bright and Morning Star” sheds new light on Wright’s famous self-critical comments regarding the original reception of the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Responding to the popular reception of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright expressed frustration that the emotional experience of his stories was preventing readers from grasping their social and political implications. Famously, he quipped that he “had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about” (“How Bigger Was Born”). Critics who reference this famous line of self-critique generally take it to refer to *Uncle Tom’s Children* as a whole, making no distinction between the 1938 and 1940 versions. But this conflation of the two editions risks erasing “Bright and Morning Star” from view altogether. More specifically, it risks blinding us to how “Bright and Morning Star” does not merely represent a continuation of patterns established previously in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, but rather in some ways, signifies a significant departure, a reflexive amendment that alters the meaning and impact of the *Uncle Tom’s Children* as a (reframed) whole.

Notably, Wright’s critique of *Uncle Tom’s Children* in “How Bigger Was Born” was written and published before “Bright and Morning Star” appeared as part of *Uncle Tom’s Children* later that same year. In fact, Wright was working to get his publisher to add “Bright and Morning Star” (and the “autobiographical sketch” “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow”) to *Uncle Tom’s Children* at roughly the same moment that he was writing, delivering, developing and publishing the speech that would become a pamphlet, and soon after an appendix to *Native Son*.<sup>77</sup> At the very least then, it is misleading to read Wright’s famous self-critical comments on *Uncle Tom’s Children* as applying directly to the version that includes “Bright and Morning Star.” Indeed, it would seem more plausible to read “Bright and Morning Star” as a part of Wright’s own critical reflection on the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, complicating the triumphal and cathartic, indeed “baptismal” ending “Fire and Cloud”. Adding “Bright and Morning Star” to the end of *Uncle Tom’s Children* thus can be seen as a challenge to such cathartic modes of reading, a final warning about how “tears” and individual emotional release — however well intended — may obscure a clear view of the situation, blinding one to the actuality of what must be done. Even a “baptism of clean joy” cannot wash away those contradictions that still linger on beneath the

surface.<sup>78</sup> It is thus not only “banker’s daughters” whose emotions risk blinding them to the realities of social struggle; rather, Wright suggests, the oppressed themselves can fall victim to the blindness of cathartic release, the temptation of “total acts” guided by ambiguous “bright and morning stars.”<sup>79</sup>

For those accustomed to seeing Sue as that rare thing, a Richard Wright hero, not to mention, a sympathetic, richly drawn heroine, the re-interpretation of “Bright and Morning Star” opened up by Meyerson and developed further here may seem like a symbolic loss: Does this re-reading merely add more evidence to support Sherley Anne Williams contention that even at his exceptional best, “Wright’s loving characterization [of Aunt Sue] also reinforces the image of the black woman as a symbol of the reactionary aspects in Afro-American tradition implicit in the preceding three stories [of *Uncle Tom’s Children*]”?<sup>80</sup> Similarly, in her insightful 2009 essay, Cheryl Higashida notes that the domestic scene of “Bright and Morning Star” can be seen as limiting the otherwise progressive gender politics of this exceptional story. “In representing female solidarity arising out of the domestic sphere, Wright also confines Sue and Reva’s relationship within it.”<sup>81</sup> These are valid concerns. And yet, in re-evaluating the gender politics of the closing story of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, we would do well to reframe the discussion somewhat. For one, can we not read this politicizing of domestic space as itself a positive, progressive, even proto-feminist move? Contrary to a certain masculinist, militant bias that would suggest that the class war is won primarily on the picket lines and the barricades — an approach privileging highly confrontational, even overtly violent actions as the primary site or figure for radical politics — “Bright and Morning Star,” as we have re-interpreted it, suggests that the struggle may be won or lost in the “private” sphere, in the kitchen and the pantry. With “Bright and Morning Star,” Wright revises his famously violent and bloody collection to suggest that the key moments in the struggle for communism may involve not (just) guns, but conversations; trust, comfort, and patience among comrades may be as important as militancy, political consciousness, or courage.

Appreciating this aspect of Wright’s work thus means rethinking a line of Wright criticism that extends back to Zora Neale Hurston’s original review of *Uncle Tom’s Children* (in 1938), a review that took to task a version of *Uncle Tom’s Children* that did not yet include “Bright and Morning Star.”<sup>82</sup> Notoriously, Hurston accused Wright of offering readers — and especially black male readers-- “wish fulfillment” grounded in violence. “In each story,” she wrote, “the hero suffers but he gets his man.” To this she added that “Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work”<sup>83</sup> Putting to one side the retaliatory harshness of Hurston’s review as an interpretation of even the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, it is tempting to read “Bright and Morning Star” as a kind of reply — perhaps even a self-corrective one — to Hurston’s critique. That is, “Bright and Morning Star” certainly does provide us with what may appear to be violent “wish-fulfillment,” but it presents it in order to critique it. Sue “gets her man”... and that that isn’t enough. Dramatizing the limits of heroic

violent individualist action, Wright gives us a story that is precisely about the need for “understanding and sympathy” between comrades, and about how difficult it is to achieve this combination in the context of race-class struggles in the Jim Crow South.

Beyond replying to Hurston, “Bright and Morning Star” suggests not only that such gun-slinging heroism can be inadequate to the task of revolution in times of crisis, but that a focus on this dramatic, climactic, “total” mode of action threatens to blind subjects to the less dramatic but nonetheless essential social and political tasks, tasks that remain essential if individual confrontational heroics are actually to mean anything at all. It’s not just that violence is risky or inadequate, but that thinking in terms of such “total acts” aimed at blotting out of the Enemy can blind us to other crucial, collective work that needs to be done. Embedded in “Bright and Morning Star” then is an argument for taking seriously the contexts of comradeship, the mundane habits of speaking and listening, the cultivation of interpersonal relations — “understanding and sympathy” — traditionally “feminine” and feminist concerns. Sue’s error is that she reaches for Johnny-Boy’s gun instead of finding words for Reva.

In order to change the world, Wright’s “Bright and Morning Star” suggests, we need to get better at understanding the processes by which human consciousness changes, as both subject and object of the world it seeks to shape, and also better at transforming the way comrades relate to one another, and to the masses of people in their uneven, emerging political development. In this light, critical examination of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of existing political collectivities — or the contradictions at work in revolutionary symbolism — is not a diversion or a “retreat” from the “real movement that abolishes the present state of things.”<sup>84</sup> It is rather a part of that emancipatory movement, insofar as the things to be abolished and transformed are not just out there, but also in here, internal to political consciousness and, indeed, to the relations between comrades and the people. To become true participants in such a communist movement, Wright reminds us, is not only a matter of courageously “showing” the enemy, or of “proving” oneself a hero. It is a matter of more fully and honestly engaging the masses of people and fellow comrades alike, in the light of a strategic view of what truly needs to be done. Revolution is not only a matter of producing or clinging to symbols, but of grasping their meanings more fully, of making space and time for full and collective communication that can transcend the social divisions created by white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism, even in the midst of crisis. Even the best symbol can buckle or boomerang, if not handled dialectically, critically, and collectively.

Here, in the light of his own communist fiction, Wright’s classic metaphor for revolutionary writing too demands renewed critical reflection. In *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), Wright famously wrote of H.L. Mencken as his first radical literary influence: “The man was *fighting with words*. He was *using words as a weapon*, using them as one would use a club ... Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?”<sup>85</sup> Here is

where the classic quote usually breaks off, with Wright endorsing the idea of using words “as a weapon.” But Wright goes on: “No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but *how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.*”<sup>86</sup> It’s not the weapon but the will and courage to wield it that most strikes the young Wright. Where does the courage to speak such fighting truths come from? Of course, reading against the grain here, the idea of using words “as one would use a club” can signify doubly; a *writer’s club* is not only a metaphoric *weapon* that can be gripped by an individual, but also a *group* where people meet to build trust, to chart the best course, to choose the best metaphoric weapons, and to gather courage for collective action. Similarly, Wright’s vision of a writer “fighting with words” takes on an enriched dialectical meaning in light of the struggle “Bright and Morning Star” dramatizes, the struggle to ‘mould’ the ‘warped’ materials of an oppressive society in a revolutionary direction. The struggle is not just to target the enemy (whether with words or with bullets), but also to cultivate — in oneself and in others — the courage to speak suppressed truths. Words then become not just “weapons” to be deployed against an enemy, but part of the very terrain of the struggle to constitute revolutionary collectivity as such. And so, yes, perhaps we should use Richard Wright’s communist writing as one would use a *club*, not just as a *weapon* but as a *collective space for critical reflection in the midst of struggle*. As we do so, we might recall that Wright’s own courage to speak so powerfully was sustained by his participation in the Chicago John Reed Club, that short-lived worker-writer project that fused his life-work with mid-20th century Communism. As Wright later described that movement’s passionate call: “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.’”<sup>87</sup>

### Notes

1. Here I follow Barbara Foley, who has argued convincingly in her essay, “The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *American Tragedy* and *Native Son*,” that Wright’s literary practice in *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) is aimed more at getting readers to scrutinize critically the social conditions shaping the narrative before them than at getting readers to “feel for” or identify with the protagonist of that narrative. I would add only that while *Native Son* may be a privileged case of Wright’s “apologue” approach, such a tendency characterizes a great deal of Wright’s oeuvre. Foley’s essay can be found in the anthology *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. (New York: Amistad, 1993).
2. My approach differs here from that taken by a critic such as Sherley Anne Williams, who appears to argue the opposite in her quite brilliant and illuminating essay “Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995). Williams finds that Wright’s male characters all too often embody a tradition of “black male heroism” (64) which “tends to foreground black male protagonists’ struggle for self-definition and against oppression and their social environment in such a way as to push women into the “background.” As she writes, “Neither women or ‘women’s questions’ figure centrally in Wright’s fiction; when they appear at all, they are subsumed under larger philosophical or political themes” (64). I do not contest that a number of Wright protagonists can be viewed as “heroic” in the problematically macho sense that Sherley Anne Williams outlines. My point is precisely that, read closely, and in the wake of the work of black feminist criticism, these characters no longer appear heroic. I will go one step further below, to argue that — against the grain of the “black male tradition” which Williams criticizes — the supposedly “heroic” characters’ in Wright’s fiction, whatever their own imputed intentions, *are shown by Wright to fail*, and even, in many cases to *compound rather than to relieve the oppression against which they seek to act*. Williams herself admits that “their acts of heroism” are “often nihilistic and Pyrrhic” (67).
3. There are a number of critics for whom Bigger Thomas represents a “hero” of one sort or another. For an interesting, but to my mind problematic reading of Bigger as a kind of “existential hero” see Petar Ramadanovic’s essay “Native Son’s Tragedy: Traversing the Death Drive with Bigger Thomas,” in *Richard Wright: New Edition*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2009). A more recent, and very rich reappraisal of Bigger as a positively exemplary figure can be found in Anthony Dawahare, “Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and the Dialectics of Black Experience.” *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craven and Yoko Nakamura (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)
4. “How Bigger Was Born” *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 521. That Wright would later come to equate somewhat these two social tendencies, (reminding of Hannah Arendt’s thesis of “two totalitarianisms”) in his 1953 novel *The Outsider*, should not keep us from seeing the radical distinction he drew between them earlier. While sharing roots in a common situation of modern alienation, Communism and Fascism were, for the early Wright, diametrically opposed social-political responses to that situation.
5. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).
6. See for instance Barbara Foley’s essay, “A Dramatic Picture ... Of Woman from Feudalism to Fascism: Richard Wright’s Black Hope.” in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craven and

William E. Dow (New York, Bloomsbury: 2014).

7. The 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) contained in order, "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," "Long Black Song," and "Fire and Cloud." The 1940 edition added, at Wright's insistence, the opening "autobiographical sketch," "Ethics of Living Jim Crow," and the closing story, "Bright and Morning Star."
8. The story was subsequently included in both Edward O'Brien's *Best American Short Stories of 1939* and *Fifty Best American Short Stories (1914-1939)*.
9. For present purposes I exclude here Wright's non-fiction works, such as *Ten Million Black Voices* (1941) and his autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945, 1977). Reverend Taylor, the protagonist of "Fire and Cloud" is another obvious candidate. His heroism however hinges precisely on his coming to refuse individualist leadership over or apart from "the people." In effect, I would argue, echoing Gregory Meyerson and others, that the real hero of "Fire and Cloud" is not so much Taylor as the mass of militant workers and peasants; Taylor's major "heroic" contribution is to realize this basic fact and to step back and out of the way, merging with and being subsumed by this emerging collective subject.
10. It is worth noting that the basic arc of Sue's final heroism — hiding a gun in a white sheet to shoot the racists who have violated her loved one — here repeats almost exactly a tale that Richard Wright would later report having heard and been deeply inspired by as a child. In his autobiography, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, written years after "Bright and Morning Star" and *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright devotes two pages to discussing the overheard story. That Wright singles out this overheard childhood tale underscores its importance (to him as a child and/or to him as an author in the mid-1940s). Moreover, the way he reflects on this story, and its psychological-emotional resonance in his life, as a kind of symptom of his sense of powerlessness as a child, has implications for how we should read the "Bright and Morning Star" version as well. I am treating this topic in a forthcoming essay.
11. Sheryl Anne Williams "Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," 67.
12. Williams does qualify her praise a bit, noting that "Wright's loving characterization also reinforces the image of the black woman as a symbol of the reactionary aspects in Afro-American tradition implicit in the preceding three stories" (Williams 67).
13. Cheryl Higashida, "Aunt Sue's Children: Reviewing the Gender(ed) Politics of Richard Wright's Radicalism" (*Bloom's Modern Critical Views New Edition of Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2009) 89. In this essay, she invaluablely locates Sue within an emergent discourse of interracial proletarian solidarity that emerged during the Communist-led effort to free the Scottsboro Boys, arguing that "Sue is Wright's rendition of a Popular Front symbol — the radical black mother" (86). "In contrast to her sons' monolithic Communism that uncritically privileges class over race and gender," she continues, "Sue constantly negotiates and eventually transcends the contradictions between black nationalism and Communist integrationism."
14. For a range of readings of the story that reproduce this heroic interpretation of the ending, despite their marked differences in other areas, see: Edward Margolies, "Wright's Craft: The Short Stories" in Gates and Appiah, *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993). Richard Yarbrough's introduction to Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), ix-xxix, especially xxvi-viii; Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction*,

- 1929-1941 (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 206-9; Abdul JanMohamed, "Rehistoricizing Wright: "Psychopolitical Functions of Death in *Uncle Tom's Children*" in *Richard Wright* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views), ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House) 191-228; and Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism and African American Literature between the Wars* (Oxford: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 2003) 117.
15. For a recent example, see A. C. Kilinski's "Flinging a New Star: 'Fire and Cloud' and 'Bright and Morning Star' as Reflections of Richard Wright's Changing Relationship with Communism," *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies* 5.1 (2012).
  16. Gregory Meyerson, "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star'" *Reconstruction: Studies in Culture*, <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/084/meyerson.shtml>, ed. Graham Barnfield and Joseph G. Ramsey. The conclusion of the essay offers a useful reader-response analysis of what may account for the universal misreading of this widely hailed story. To date, I am not aware of a single scholarly citation of Meyerson's 2008 article.
  17. Gregory Meyerson, "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star.'" "
  18. Richard Wright "Bright and Morning Star" *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 235.
  19. Richard Wright "Long Black Song" *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 153. Uttering this statement, Silas initiates a gun battle that he knows will lead to his death, leaving his wife Sarah and their newborn baby destitute, homeless, and abandoned. Whatever their symbolic force, such individual 'heroics' leave the others in the story no better off. Positive appraisals of Silas's last stand, such as George Yarborough's in the Harper Modern Classic introduction of *Uncle Tom's Children* — Yarborough deems Silas and Mann's choice of death-terms "an existential triumph of no small order" (xxiv) — demand a great deal of qualification.
  20. Richard Wright, "Fire and cloud," *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 209, emphasis added.
  21. Richard Wright "Fire and could" 210
  22. This interpretation also casts new light on Wright's — otherwise quite odd — naming of Mary Dalton's communist lover in *Native Son*, Jan Erlone. In light of Wright's playing on this trope in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Erlone's last name calls our attention to the way this would-be communist has become detached and disconnected from the common people he would ostensibly serve or represent. A full tracing of Wright's complex and evolving negotiation of the relationship between collectivity and individuality is beyond the scope of this essay. However, readers surely will agree that from the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children*, to *Native Son*, to *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, to *The Outsider*, while Wright's work often implies criticisms of actually existing collectives (from the lynch mobs of the South to the contradiction ridden Communist Party) he simultaneously explores the dread, desperation, and often the death to which isolated individuals are destined, insofar as they attempt or are forced to try to manage their dangerous situations *erlone*. We might provisionally conclude that despite its political shifts after 1940, Wright's work consistently embodies a negative, anti-individualist politics, if not a positively collectivist one.
  23. See Meyerson's discussion of "Down by the Riverside" in *Reconstruction* 8.4. The two key moments in "Down by the Riverside" are 1) when Mann fails to ask the pastor to exchange boats — which he knows could allow him to avoid the police, who are looking for Mr. Heartfield's stolen vessel; and 2) when Mann neglects to speak up to the black man Brinkley, to stop them from heading to the Heartfield's house, where Mann knows his doom awaits. A third, less collective moment comes when, after arriving at the



house, Mann briefly considers killing the rest of the Heartfield family with his axe — a moment that clearly foreshadows Bigger Thomas's notorious suffocation of Mary Dalton in *Native Son*. Meyerson helpfully draws out the way the Wright's text foregrounds these silences as moments of self-conscious alienation. Mann knows that he must speak up, but he cannot bring himself to do so.

24. We should add here that Wright's opening story, "Big Boy Leaves Home," does provide a more collective model of community resistance, albeit a defensive one. It is only due to Big Boy's reliance on his family, and their reliance on neighbors and networks across the Black community, that he is able to escape the lynch mob that is looking for him.
25. This essay will thus attempt to provide a more satisfying answer to the question of "What was Wright 'trying to say' by thus subverting his reader's expectations [in "Bright and Morning Star"]?" A question to which Meyerson in his essay admits: "I don't have a fully convincing answer."
26. The most extended of several passages clarifying this point comes on page 244: "Then all the horror of it flashed upon her; [Sue] saw flung out over the rainy countryside an array of shacks where white and black comrades were sleeping; in the morning they would be rising and going to Lem's; then they would be caught. And that meant terror, prison, and death. The comrades would have to be told; she would have to tell them; she could not entrust Johnny-Boy's work to another..."
27. The Aunt Sue-Reva relationship has been insightfully explored in somewhat competing ways by Sherley Anne Williams and by Cheryl Higashida.
28. For an overview of Wright's depictions of white women, an account that does not attend to Reva's exceptional status, see Tara T. Green "The Virgin Mary, Eve, and Mary Magdalene in Richard Wright's novels. In *Richard Wright: New Edition* edited by Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House, 2009) 35-53.
29. Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" 231. That Sue refers to Reva as "the brightest glow," using language so close to the symbolically overdetermined title of Wright's story, "Bright and Morning Star" again suggests the importance, perhaps even the emblematic status, of the Sue-Reva relationship. We will return to this symbolism below.
30. Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" 250-251.
31. Once she is sound asleep, Sue fetches the pistol from the dresser beside her bed, watching the young communist sleep as she quietly gathers the weapon. Re-read in light of Sue's mistake, this scene ominously foreshadows Booker Thomas's silent smothering of (white communist fellow traveler) Mary Dalton in the crucial scene of Wright's *Native Son*. And indeed, Sue's fear of disturbing Reva leads inexorably to death, destruction, and police repression in the community every bit as much as Bigger's suffocating Mary, an act which is similarly executed to prevent a racially tinged misunderstanding from coming between a Black person and his would-be white allies. Sue now appears as a forerunner for Bigger Thomas.
32. It's also worth noting here the uncanny similarity between the name *Reva* and *Eva*, the name of the main romantic interest and potential artistic comrade (another young white woman) that Cross Damon briefly connects with but ultimately drives to death (by suicide) in Wright's later novel, *The Outsider*. As with the Sue-Reva relationship, the major tension and struggle structuring the Damon-Eva relation — and arguably the book's climactic section itself — is the question of whether it is possible to fully and meaningfully communicate across racial lines. Though he knows what he'd like to say to Eva, Damon Cross doubts that Eva's life-experience and worldview will allow her to accept him and his situation in all its complexity (and horror). Indeed, in some ways, like the disconnect in "Bright and Morning Star" (to

be discussed further below), Eva's very (romanticizing, oversimplifying) sympathy for oppressed black people — or at least Damon's perception of this sympathy — becomes not just a bridge but ultimately a barrier to meaningful mutual understanding. Unlike in "Bright and Morning Star," however, Damon does finally spill his heart out to Eva, though never in its full complexity (he too is convinced that Eva can't handle the truth), and only after he has committed a number of irreversible and violent acts. Shocked by his confessions (of murder as well as love) Eva leaps to her death through a window, in a sense confirming Damon's sense that she could never understand him. While a full discussion of the parallels, similarities, and differences between the various scenes of failed interracial communication in Wright's work — even or especially between would-be intimates — demands more space than the present essay offers, we can at least observe here that Wright's concern with the complex psychological and cultural barriers to interracial communication — even and perhaps especially between would-be friends, lovers, comrades, and confidantes — runs through from his earliest to his latest fiction. Closely related to this is Wright's ongoing concern with exposing and challenging white liberals and communists idealization of black people. Such a de-idealizing of "the oppressed black masses" can be seen as a black-red thread running through "Bright and Morning Star" (among other stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*), *Native Son*, as well as *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, and *The Outsider*.

33. "Bright and Morning Star" 229.
34. "Like a gleaming sword above her head" (221), a "blade of light" (226).
35. For an astute discussion of this concept, see Žižek "The Interpassive Subject," Talk given at Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998. A classic example is that of belief in Santa Claus, as it operates in households with children approaching adolescence. The parents don't believe — but think (or want to believe) that the kids do. The kids don't believe — but don't want to disturb their parents' belief that they still do. Each 'believes' for the other. They don't believe in Santa Claus, but believe in the other's belief in Santa Claus, or (in the case of the child who performs belief for the parents) believe that the other still believes in one's own belief. The fascinating thing of course is that the entire ritual can continue, and can retain its "magic," even as none of the participating parties "actually" believe in old Kris Kringle.
36. "Bright and Morning Star" (229)
37. Again, this may or may not be in fact the case; what Reva *actually* believes or is capable of is another matter; we are dealing here with Sue's subjective perceptions, which is all that Wright's text allows us.
38. See for instance *Black Boy (American Hunger)* where Wright notes that "I talked with white Communists about my experiences with black Communists, and I could not make them understand what I was talking about. White Communists had idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw" (339).
39. Here and elsewhere I use the term *anti-Communist* to describe ideas or actions that are antagonistic to the particular institutions, positions, or leadership of the Communist Party; *anti-communist* signifies ideas or actions antagonistic to the ideas and goals of communism as such. Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is in many respects an anti-Communist text; however, it is not until *The Outsider* that Wright's anti-Communism slides into outright anti-communism.
40. Anthony Dawahare brilliantly explores Wright's use of "the white mountain" to explore the reification and de-reification of consciousness in *Native Son*, particularly at the very end of the novel. This developing treatment of this "white mountain" across these two late-thirties texts is yet another piece of evidence

suggesting the deep connections between “Bright and Morning Star” and *Native Son*, suggesting the ways in which Aunt Sue is a kind of predecessor for Bigger Thomas. See Dawahare’s “Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and the Dialectics of Black Experience” in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craen and William E. Dow (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

41. Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1995) 199.
42. “Bright and Morning star” (250, 253).
43. “Bright and Morning Star” 248.
44. “Bright and Morning Star” 248.
45. “Bright and Morning Star” 248-249.
46. “Bright and Morning Star” 249, emphasis added
47. “Bright and Morning Star” 231.
48. The role that perceptions of time and depictions of temporality play in this story, and across *Uncle Tom’s Children*, deserves further study.
49. “Bright and Morning Star” 229.
50. “Bright and Morning Star” 229-230.
51. This recalls also the moment in “Long Black Song,” where Silas’s long speech addressed to the dead white man, is juxtaposed to his failure to communicate with his wife, Sarah. “He began to talk to no one in particular; he simply stood over the dead white man and talked out of his life...” (*Uncle Tom’s Children* 152).
52. “Bright and Morning Star” 225
53. One could perhaps speak here of a distinction between a *subject of rebellion* — aimed at gaining recognition from an oppressor (or an oppressive system), and a *subject of revolution*, which aims not to gain recognition from an oppressor, but to supplant that oppressor (or oppressive system) entirely. Paulo Freire addresses the issue in the opening chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000): “The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.”
54. “Bright and Morning Star” 239-240, emphasis added.
55. “Bright and Morning Star” 240, emphasis added.
56. “Bright and Morning Star” 251.
57. This itself is an interesting fact, considering, as Cornell West has recently put it, Wright’s status as “the most secular thinker the Black tradition has ever produced.” *Black Prophetic Fire: in Dialogue with and Edited by Christa Bushendorf* (Beacon Press, 2014) 22.
58. Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” 198-199.
59. For Wright’s most sustained critical — but also deeply dialectical — treatment of the Church, see *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, “Part One: Southern Night.” *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) also engages the contradictory — ideological, but also utopian — tendencies at work in the Black Church.
60. “Fire and Cloud,” 204 and “Bright and Morning Star” 225. Wright was not merely imagining this christian-communist dialectic. For the classic study of the syncretic practices that characterized Communist work in the Jim Crow South, see Robin Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great*

*Depression* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1990).

61. "Fire and Cloud" 220.
62. "Bright and Morning Star" 224.
63. Sue sings, "He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Mawnin Star / He's the fairest of Ten Thousand T Mah Soul" (222), as she hopes for Johnny-Boy's return in time for supper. While an earlier verse of this hymn — "Though all the world forsake me, and Satan tempt me sore, / Through Jesus I shall safely reach the goal," — makes it clear that the song refers to Jesus, the lines Wright includes in "Bright and Morning Star" do not.
64. Just to show how open this startling title-secret has been for some time: As of August 9, 2013, a Google search for the phrase "Bright and Morning Star," retrieves the following top 'results': "*Is the Morning Star in the Bible Jesus or Lucifer?*"; "*The Bright and Morning Star — Jesus of Lucifer?*"; "*Why are both Jesus and Satan referred to as the Morning Star?*" Among other intertextual signs that Wright was often thinking about the coincidence of Christ/Antichrist we can include: his writings on Seventh Day Adventism; his paraphrase of black church doctrine in *12 Million Black Voices* (68-75), where both Satan/Lucifer and God/Jesus are depicted as "going down" to earth; and Wright's later naming of his protagonist in *The Outsider*, Cross Damon.
65. "Bright and Morning Star" 221, 226. The likening of light as "blades" also echoes — and gathers ominous association from — the closing pages of "Big Boy Leaves Homes," as Big Boy hides from the light in the back of his Chicago-borne wagon.
66. "Ah got to make her go t bed! Yes; Booker would tell the names of the comrades to the sheriff. If she could only stop him some way! *That was the answer, the point, the star that grew bright in the morning of new hope...* Ah could wade the creek n beat him [Booker] there...but what would she do after that? 'Reva, honey, go t bed. Ahem alright. Yuh need res." (250-1, emphasis added).
67. In "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star,'" Meyerson offers some compelling reader reception analysis near the end of the "Aunt Sue's Mistake" essay. "That Wright's closing story, and hence his collection as a whole, has been so long misread, that Sue's narcissistic death-dream has been mistaken for a radical and heroic encounter with reality, even on the left, is perhaps testimony to the continuing power that such fantasies of the "total act" continue to exert on contemporary readers."
68. In a sense we can see false consciousness here (in a political register) as somewhat analogous to Marx's famous critique of commodity fetishism (in an economic one). In the first chapter of *Capital vol. 1*, Marx traces the way in which the mystified consciousness of fetishism is not merely a matter of ideology, but is the effect of actual social relations of production; the crucial corollary is that to abolish, overcome, and transform this fetishism of commodities requires not just scientific discovery, but an actual revolutionary transformation of the social relations that give rise to this mystification. Similarly, one could hypothesize that the individualist errors Sue makes cannot be educated away in a direct sense, but only by addressing the lack of collectivity of which "individualism" is a symptom; communist consciousness requires communist social relations within the movement itself!
69. "Bright and Morning Star" 221. This is in accordance with Johnny-Boy's belief that class commonality is more fundamental than racial difference, and that, furthermore, practically speaking, it is impossible to grow the party if one maintains a stance of suspicion towards potential comrades (234).

70. For a very clear and useful review of Richard Wright as a writer deeply committed to Marxism and the communist cause, see James Smethurst's essay, "After Modernism: Richard Wright Interprets the Black Belt," *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alie Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (Bloomsbury: New York, 2014).
71. Likewise, we can see "Bright and Morning Star" as offering a sobering counterpoint to more triumphalist tendencies in proletarian literature or socialist realism, which, though — contrary to anti-communist stereotypes — seldom depicting the revolutionary road ahead as an easy one or victory as inevitable, often did suggest that the revolutionary consciousness that had been gained would not be easily lost. This counterpoint becomes clear when one juxtaposes "Bright and Morning Star" to one of Wright's likely models for this story, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. I take up the many textual relations of these two works in a forthcoming essay.
72. For a compelling formal account of communist political subjectivization see the closing chapter on Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010). Also see Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Living in a Time of Riots*. (New York: Verso, 2012).
73. See Dean's penultimate chapter, "Desire" in *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012). Notably, Dean's most recent book, *Crowds and Party* (Verso, 2016) published while the present essay was in production, turns to the Chicago section of Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* in order to develop her account of the relationship between individuality and collectivity in the U.S. Communist Party the 1930s. I review Dean's discussion of these issues — and of Wright's treatment of them — in a forthcoming essay.
74. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 179, 197, 199.
75. *The Communist Horizon* 195.
76. "Blueprint for Negro Writing" 199.
77. The "Note on the text" in the Harper Perennial edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* points out that Wright wanted "Bright and Morning Star" added to the 1938 edition of the text, but was refused by publishers. Rejected, "Bright and Morning Star" first appeared in *The New Masses* in May 1938, two months after the appearance of the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*. Wright offered to pay the costs of adding "Bright and Morning Star" to the 1940 edition out of his own pocket (298). Apparently, he felt it was important that the story be added to the volume.
78. A recent essay by April Conley Kilinski does explore the rupture signified by adding "Bright and Morning Star" (and "The Ethics Of Living Jim Crow") to *Uncle Tom's Children* in 1940. Kilinski however argues in a direction diametrically opposed to the present project, arguing that the addition of "Bright and Morning Star" represents the beginning of a mid-to-late-Thirties *anti-communist* turn in Wright's work, rather than a swerve within that continued pro-communist orientation. Kilinski's interpretation, which would date Wright's break with the Communist party and with communism in 1937, hinges on a seriously flawed reading of both Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and his later biography *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Lacking the space to refute in full here, I will just note that the linchpin of the misinterpretation is Kilinski's erasure of the explicitly pro-Marxist and implicitly pro-communist perspective in both of these texts. She also ignores the fact that in 1937, for instance, Wright wrote over 200 article for the pro-Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper, and would continue producing fiction, poetry, and journalism for pro-Communist publications such as *The New Masses* for years to come. See

A.C. Kiliniski "Flinging a New Star: 'Fire and Cloud' and 'Bright and Morning Star' as Reflections of Richard Wright's Changing Relationship with Communism" in *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*: Vol. 5, No. 1, 2012.

79. Perhaps then we can say of emotional catharsis what Sue says at the very outset of "Bright and Morning Star," lines which, for readers of *Uncle Tom's Children*, come but a page after Rev. Taylor's teary-eyed epiphany at the end of F&C: "Rains good n bad. It kin make seeds bus up thu the groun, er it kin bog things down lika watah-soaked coffin" (221).
80. "Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," 67.
81. "Aunt Sue's Children: Reviewing the Gender(ed) Politics of Richard Wright's Radicalism" 91.
82. Hurston's review is at least in part a response to Wright's own scathing — and equally uncharitable — criticism of Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For a brilliant critical discussion of Wright and Hurston's fiction that complicates the operative opposition that frames much "debate" about these two writers, see William Maxwell "Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright -- Zora Neale Hurston Debate," *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).
83. Zora Neal Hurston, "Stories of Conflict," *Saturday Review of Books*. April 2, 1938, 32-33
84. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: The German Ideology* ed. Chris Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970) 56-57.
85. Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. The first part only is quoted in the Yarborough introduction to *Uncle Tom's Children*, xiii.
86. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* 248, emphasis added.
87. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* 318.