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The Vapidity of Ideology: Seventh-day Adventism, Communism, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and *Native Son.*

by

Aaron Saari, MA
Xavier University
Cincinnati, Ohio

"Boy, are you reading for law?" my aunt would demand.
"No."
"Then why are you reading all the time?"
"I like to."
"But what do you get out of it?"
"I get a great deal out of it."[1]

Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is regarded as one of America's most enduring accounts of the segregated South in the early 20th century.[2] Similarly, Wright's *Native Son* still stands as a controversial and powerful work exploring the possible outcomes of continued institutionalized prejudice. Dozens of books, articles, and reviews highlighting Wright's chronicling of the realities and damaging effects of racism have been written over the past seven decades. While one should never disregard Wright's significance as a black voice in a racist society, lost in the consideration of Wright's work is an understanding of his discussions of philosophy, religion and theology.

Wright, for a time, was raised in a household of Seventh-day Adventists. A marginal and esoteric sect of Christianity, Seventh-day Adventism adversely colored Wright's opinions of religion, and the results of this experience can be seen in his later work. In this paper, I offer an overview of Adventist beliefs and provide explicit connections between the faith and Wright's narrative in *Black Boy*. I draw my own conclusions as to how Wright's understanding of religion influenced the character of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son.*

While Wright rejected religion as essentially meaningless, he also dismissed Communism. He admired communist ideology, but Wright ultimately rejected Communism as a viable philosophy, largely as a result of his own negative experiences with communists in Chicago and the conflicts surrounding his literary work in the John Reed Club. I provide relevant passages

from *Black Boy (American Hunger)* to support this conclusion, and analyze the characters of Jan and Max in *Native Son* as literary representatives of Communism's failure to understand the Black community.

In the conclusion to this paper, I argue that Wright found his *raison de'etre* in writing, reading, and learning about the human condition. Wright accepted Western secular humanism as the only way he could sustain his existence, and ultimately rejected as vapid the forms of extreme ideology represented by both Seventh-day Adventism and Communism.

Seventh-day Adventism

The Adventists are a sect of recent origin whose general contention is that on a number of vitally important points the whole of Christendom has gone wrong almost from apostolic times, and has remained wrong for 1800 years, until the Adventists discovered the truth which at last was to set everybody else right.[3]

Seventh-day Adventism is broadly a branch of Protestant Christianity, and more specifically an interpretation of Adventist Christianity, a movement that swept across the United States in the nineteenth century. Adventism focused on the Second Advent—or Second Coming—of Jesus the Anointed.[4] The Adventist movement was variegated, and included a vast and not-easily-connected number of interpretative schools. Indeed, Seventh-day Adventism emerged from an incorrect conjecture about the time in which Jesus would return. Religion scholar Everett N. Dick comments:

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The George Washington University
Department of English
801 22nd Street NW
Washington, DC 20052
Phone: 202-994-6743
Fax: 202-994-7915
Email: jam@gwu.edu

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Seventh-day Adventism developed out of a movement that seems to end in ignominious failure. William Miller, during a widespread resurgence of interest in millenarianism, predicted that Christ would come in 1843 or 1844, and he gained a wide following in the northeastern United States. Although the announced event never took place, leaving the believers in bitter disappointment, the Millerite movement bequeathed a system of prophetic interpretation and biblical literalism that helped shape the character of Adventism that arose from its ruins. In the Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s lie the roots of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that, though small by comparison with the mainline Protestant denominations, today circles the world.[5]

Seventh-day Adventism is similar to other Adventist and Protestant denominations in several important respects. Their foundational tenet is the primacy of Scripture. The "Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Beliefs," issued in 1872, opens with the following words: "In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible."[6] Following from this is the belief that Ten Commandments are a law "immutable and perpetual"; that human beings are reconciled to God only through Jesus the Anointed; that baptism represents a new birth as a result of relationship through Jesus the Anointed; that Jesus is God, and part of the Holy Trinity; and that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead.[7]

Seventh-day Adventism is different from other Christian denominations based upon a handful of simple, yet uncompromising beliefs regarding biblical prophecy, the time of the Advent, the nature of resurrection and the final judgment, and the observance of the Sabbath. Seventh-day Adventists believe that biblical prophecy is not only "part of God's revelation to man" but that it is also easy to interpret.[8] This stands in stark contrast to traditional Catholic belief, which holds that biblical prophecy is complicated, nuanced, and often outside of human ability to interpret. Jesuit priest Ernest R. Hull wrote a scathing critique of the fledgling faith in 1920, and took exception to the notion that biblical prophecy is open to interpretation by any believer. "History is full of attempts to interpret prophecy, especially about the second coming, all of which have proved false and the Adventist attempt only adds one more to the previous failures."[9] While Father Hull may make a strong theological point regarding the hermeneutics of the Advent, he is incorrect if his summation about interpretations of the second coming is meant to imply that Seventh-day Adventism fixes a time for this event. In fact, Seventh-day Adventism is distinct among Adventist faiths in "setting no times for the advent to occur."[10] They believe that 1844 was a hallmark year, as Miller contended it was, but not as the date for Jesus' return; rather, it marks the beginning of "the cleansing of the sanctuary," a period of undetermined length in which the just will be separated from the unjust in preparation for the Second Coming.[11]

Seventh-day Adventism is dissimilar from other Christian denominations in its beliefs about the "unconscious state of the dead."[12] Official Seventh-day doctrine holds that "the state to which we are reduced by death is one of silence, inactivity, and

entire unconsciousness."[13] Humans are then liberated from "the prison house of the grave" through a "bodily resurrection: the righteous having part in the first resurrection, which takes place at the second advent of Christ; the wicked, in the second resurrection, which takes place a thousand years thereafter."[14] The wicked, upon resurrection, are subjected to judgment and consumed by fire; unlike traditional Christian belief, Adventism contends that the wicked do not toil in hell for eternity. Rather, upon the second resurrection, they are wiped out from existence. After this event, the very same fire cleanses the earth of the stain of sin. Then "a new heavens and earth shall spring by the power of God from the ashes of the old, to be, with the New Jerusalem for its metropolis and capital, the eternal inheritance of the saints, the place where the righteous shall evermore dwell."[15] Therefore, Seventh-day Adventists adhere to unique beliefs about the state of the soul, the nature of death, the manner in which resurrection occurs, and the kingdom of God.

Seventh-day Adventism holds that the Sabbath is to be observed on Saturday, the seventh day of the week according to the Jewish calendar.

That the fourth commandment of this law [the Law, or Torah, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai] requires that we devote the seventh day of each week, commonly called Saturday, to abstinence from out own labor, and to the performances of sacred religious duties; that this is the only weekly Sabbath known to the Bible, being the day that was set apart before paradise was lost, Gen 2:2,3, and which will be observed in paradise restored, Isa. 66:22, 23; that the facts upon which the Sabbath institution is based confine it to the seventh day as they are not true of any other day; and that the terms, Jewish Sabbath and Christian Sabbath, as applied to the weekly rest days are names of human invention, unscriptural in fact, and false in meaning.[16]

This view stands as a direct challenge to traditional Christian doctrine. Originally, the Sabbath was changed from Saturday to Sunday as a result of a definitive split between followers of the Jewish faith and followers of beliefs that would become Christianity. Sunday, the first day of the week, is the day associated with Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the defining aspect of Christian faith. While Jesus himself did not abrogate the Sabbath—Father Hull admits as much in his critique of Adventism—the Catholic and Protestant Churches recognized the Sunday Sabbath as an "apostolic abrogation."[17] In this way, the founders of Christianity definitively changed the Sabbath day. Seventh-day Adventists thus stood on the other side of nearly nineteen hundred years of history.

Seventh-day Adventism and Richard Wright's Black Boy

Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshipping her God, which was her exaction for my keep. The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of the clouds, of men

wading upon water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising the living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking; a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet; sermons of statues possessing heads of gold, shoulders of silver, legs of brass, and feet of clay; a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with the clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with the Armageddon; dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead...[18]

Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* stands as one of the most eloquent and powerful testaments of the American black experience in the early twentieth century. While Wright was subjected to much of the same poverty, hunger, racism, and hatred as were his fellow African Americans—particularly those who lived in the South, as did Wright—his religious experiences were unique, given that he was exposed to a marginal Christian sect. I believe these peculiar experiences tempered Wright's opinions regarding Christianity and God.

The history of Seventh-day Adventism in the African-American community is a fascinating one. Although many Adventists were abolitionists during the Civil War, the church was slow to move into southern states. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that an influential and important Seventh-day Adventist family, the Whites, began a mission targeted at poor blacks in the South. Edson White "conceived and prepared a *Gospel Primer* that could be used for teaching illiterates to read at the same time for presenting Bible messages in simple form."[19] White's primer was a success, and made him enough money to purchase a steamboat in which he could travel down the Mississippi River and spread his faith. The boat, the *Morning Star*, stopped first in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The crew, "after receiving a cordial welcome in the black community...soon launched a night school for old and young alike. More than fifty students attended on the first evening, and soon the number passed one hundred; they then opened a second school several miles outside the city."[20] Some students joined with the teachers in founding a religious community that, after facing opposition, succeeded in building a chapel. Other Seventh-day Adventist churches, schools, and industrial colleges were formed throughout the South, training whites and blacks alike. Eventually, the deeply ingrained racism of the area prevailed, and it was decided that whites and blacks should be segregated. Consequently, separate schools were established for each race.[21]

While living with his grandmother in Mississippi, Wright was enrolled in an all-black Seventh-day Adventist school. His grandmother did not make this decision out of a desire that young Richard should receive an education and better his chances at securing a stable job or pulling himself out of the confines of poverty. Rather, her only goal was to "save" Wright's soul, and this end could be achieved because the teacher in charge of the classroom was his own flesh and blood, his Aunt Addie.

But Granny won an ally in her efforts to persuade me to confess her God; Aunt Addie, her youngest child,

had just finished the Seventh-Day Adventist religious school in Huntsville, Alabama, and came home to argue that if the family was compassionate enough to feed me, then the least I could do in return was to follow its guidance. She proposed that, when the fall school term started, I should be enrolled in the religious school rather than a secular one. If I refused, I was placing myself not only in the position of a horrible infidel but of the hardhearted ingrate.[22]

Wright's relationship with Addie was especially contentious because, as he saw it, she was a new teacher and had in her classroom a "relative who would not confess her faith and who was not a member of her church."[23] She physically beat him at school and at home; Wright made an explicit connection between undeserved violence and the faith held by his grandmother and aunt. Finally, Wright succeeded in stopping the beatings by pulling a knife on Addie after she wrongfully accused him of eating in the classroom. The violence ceased, but the attempts at conversion did not.

Wright's family then attempted to appeal to him through the use of a peer. This effort was doomed to failure from the start. As a result of his idiosyncratic childhood—being a drunkard at age six, watching his father leave his mother to begin another family—Wright regarded himself as different from other children. He always had a difficult time relating to his peers, but this was especially true at the Seventh-day Adventist school. "I was able to see them [the other students] with an objectivity that was inconceivable to them. They were claimed wholly by their environment and could imagine no other."[24] He saw them as a "docile lot, lacking in that keen sense of rivalry" that he had seen in public school children, and concluded that the Adventist students were "will-less, their speech flat, their gestures vague, their personalities devoid of anger, hope, laughter, enthusiasm, passion, or despair."[25] It is not surprising then that the attempts of one such boy did not result in the desired objective.

Attempts to convert Wright to Seventh-day Adventism were initiated by his aunt, who resorted to violence, and by a classmate for whom Wright inherently had no respect.

"Richard, think of Christ's dying for you, shedding His blood, His precious blood on the cross."

"Other people have shed blood," I ventured.

"But it's not the same. You don't understand."

"I don't think I ever will."

"Oh, Richard, brother, you are lost in the darkness of the world. You must let the church help you."

"I tell you, I'm all right."

"Come into the house and let me pray for you."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings..."

"You can't. I'm talking for God."

"I don't want to hurt God's feelings either," I said, the words slipping irreverently from my lips before I was aware of their full meaning.

He was shocked. He wiped tears from his eyes. I was sorry.

"Don't say that. God may never forgive you," he whispered. [26]

That Wright felt sorry for hurting the boy's feelings shows that he had no antipathy toward his classmate; rather,

Wright is rejecting a view of God that does not address his own reality.

It would be facile to argue that Wright would have embraced Christianity if he had encountered another "denomination." However, the extreme nature of Seventh-day Adventism—with its focus on the judgment of non-believers, and doctrines supporting a violent view of the afterlife for non-members—certainly influenced Wright's attitudes toward religion.

I had not settled in my mind whether I believed in God or not; His existence or nonexistence never worried me. I reasoned that if there did exist an all-wise, all-powerful God who knew the beginning and end, who meted out justice to all, who controlled the destiny of man, this God would surely know that I doubted his existence and He would laugh at my foolish denial of Him. And if there was no God at all, then why all the commotion? I could not imagine God pausing in His guidance of unimaginably vast worlds to bother with me... Before I had been made to go to church, I had given God's existence a sort of tacit assent, but after having seen His creatures serve Him first hand, I had had my doubts.[27]

His observations of Seventh-day Adventists directly influenced his doubts about God. Wright did not dismiss the existence of God on theological or philosophical grounds, but as the result of interactions with a group of people who represented a small, and largely dismissed view of Christianity.

Theologically, Seventh-day Adventists have an extreme interpretation of God's judgment of human beings. Wright experienced this firsthand while living with his grandmother.

My position in the household was a delicate one; I was a minor, an uninvited dependent, a blood relative who professed no salvation and whose soul stood in mortal peril. Granny intimated boldly, basing her logic on God's justice, that one sinful person in a household could bring down the wrath of God upon the entire establishment, damning both the innocent and the guilty, and on more than one occasion she interpreted my mother's illness as the result of my faithlessness.[28]

The belief that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous is known as the Law of Retribution. It is an ancient understanding of God and human suffering. Seventh-day Adventists, however, extend the belief by including the notion that guilt can be spread by association, in fact overriding the righteousness of others. Both his aunt's and his grandmother's attempts to convert him seem to have been borne of a selfish desire to not be subjected to hell as a result of young Richard's state of sinfulness. It is therefore not surprising that Wright felt threatened by religion.

Attempts to convert Wright were relentless, and for a while he was unable to avoid the onslaught. His living situation intrinsically demanded that he acquiesce to church attendance, praying, and all-night revivals.

Granny made it imperative, however, that I attend certain all-night ritualistic prayer meetings. She was the oldest member of her church and it would have been unseemly if the only grandchild in her home could not be brought to these important services; she

felt that if I were completely remiss in religious conformity it would cast doubt upon the staunchness of her faith, her capacity to convince and persuade, or merely upon her ability to apply the rod to my backside.[29]

Again, it appears that the primary concern of Wright's grandmother was not the state of Richard's soul, but how she would be viewed by others in her church community. Wright was not presented with a loving, forgiving image of God. Instead, he was confronted by a God that would damn others based upon his legitimate questions regarding the peculiar faith practiced by his family.

Wright's own experiences on the street, his extreme hunger, the loss of his father, the forced separation from his brother, and the deteriorating health of his mother exposed him to consistent suffering throughout his childhood. Therefore, Wright desired to find a God and a religion that explained suffering, and did something concrete to alleviate it. This is made particularly clear in his conversation with the classmate who attempts to convert him.

During our talk I had made a hypothetical statement that summed up my attitude toward God and the suffering in the world, a statement that stemmed from my knowledge of life as I had lived, seen, felt, and suffered in terms of dread, fear, hunger, terror, and loneliness. "If laying down my life could stop the suffering in the world, I'd do it. But I don't believe anything can stop it," I told him.[30]

One can argue that had Wright found an understanding of God that directly addressed these concerns, he might have been persuaded to believe. Whether a more forgiving view of God and human suffering can be found in Christianity is not within the scope of this analysis. Instead, the point of a comparison of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine and Wright's own recollections of childhood is to show that he was exposed to religion that did not represent mainstream Christianity, and that his family did not attempt to reach out to him and ask about his own needs from God. Had either of these two ingredients been different, Wright himself may not have reacted against religion in the manner he did.

Eventually, Wright's family stopped their attempts at conversion, but the limited and dogmatic views of his grandmother continued to adversely affect his life. Having gone hungry for most of his life, when Wright was old enough to work for himself, he desired to get a job that would enable him to stop his slow starvation. Invariably, the only jobs he could find required him to work on Saturdays, the Sabbath for Seventh-day Adventists.

To see a boy go into a grocery store at noon recess and let his eyes roam over filled shelves and pick out what he wanted—even a dime's worth—was a hairbreadth short of a miracle for me. But when I broached the idea of my working for Granny, she would have none of it; she laid down the injunction that I could not work on Saturdays while I slept under her roof. I argued that Saturdays were the only days which I could earn any worth-while sum, and Granny looked me straight in the eyes and quoted Scripture {the fourth commandment]. And that was the final Word. Though we lived just on the border of actual starvation.[31]

The religious view of the world offered by Wright's family did not speak to his understanding of the human existence; it also prevented him from alleviating the very *real* situations that caused him to suffer. Wright did not feel spiritually fed by Seventh-day Adventism, and its strict dictates prevent him from being physically fed as well. From a young age, Wright leaned that stringent ideologies often stand in stark tension with reality.

In the end, Wright's attitude toward God can be described as skeptical, at best. However, it would be incorrect to say that he denied the existence of God. He remained agnostic, even after moving away from his family. It was religion—an ideology—that Wright rejected. He writes in *Black Boy*:

But full emotional belief never came. Perhaps if I had caught my first sense of life from the church I would have been moved to complete acceptance, but they hymns and sermons of God came into my heart only long after my personality had been shaped and formed by unchartered conditions of life. I felt that I had in me a sense of living as deep as that which the church was trying to give me, and in the end I remained basically unaffected.[32]

Religion and Richard Wright's Native Son

I believe that Wright's personal experience of Seventh-day Adventism was directly responsible for his later attitudes regarding Christianity as a whole. This becomes clear when one examines *Native Son* and the character of Bigger Thomas, particularly his reactions to Reverend Hammond, who attempts to convert him in jail.

Wright believed that religion, particularly Christianity, did not address the real needs of people in this world. Just as Wright's grandmother and aunt preached a faith that did not relate to his reality, the character of Reverend Hammond presents Bigger with a philosophy that does nothing to deal with the situation of a black man accused of raping and killing a white woman in 1930s America. Upon entering the cell, Hammond extols Bigger:

Fergit ever'thing but yo' soul, son. Take yo' mind off ever'thing but eternal life. Fergit whut the newspaper say. Fergit yuh's black. Gawd looks past yo' skin 'n' inter yo' soul, son. He's lookin' at the only parta yuh that's His. He wants yuh 'n' He loves yuh. Give yo'se'f t' 'Im, son.[33]

Bigger is told to forget one of the few things he knows about himself, one of the few vital details he can use for self-identification: his race. The facts that he is black and that he is accused of a violent crime against a white woman are inextricably linked to one another. He is certain to receive a death sentence because of the reality of the times. Yet not only does the preacher tell him to ignore this, but the one thing the preacher tells Bigger to focus upon—his soul—*does not even belong to him.* It belongs to God. How, we can hear Wright ask, is this supposed to comfort a person for whom murder is "the first full act of his life?"[34] In the moment Bigger has begun to live, the only thing the preacher can do is tell him to get ready to die.

Wright's use of crucifix imagery in *Native Son* has direct connections to

experiences he described in *Black Boy*. Wright recalls:

Many of the religious symbols appealed to my sensibilities and I responded to the dramatic vision of life held by the church, feeling that to live day by day with death as one's sole thought was to be so compassionately sensitive toward all life as to view all men as slowly dying, and the trembling sense of fate that welled up, sweet and melancholy, from the hymns blended with the sense of fate that I had already caught from life.[35]

No single religious symbol is more heavily associated with death than the crucifix. Certainly, the Christian crucifix is also associated with Jesus the Anointed dying a salvific death, and for believers his resurrection forever changes the nature of human existence. But Jesus had to *die* before any of those events could transpire, and the method of his death was crucifixion. To Wright, then, the cross represents that all human beings are slowly dying.

Wright comments on this theme in *Native Son*. Bigger is given a cross necklace by Reverend Hammond.

Look, son. Ah'm holdin' in mah hands a wooden cross taken from a tree. A tree is the worl's, son. 'N' nailed t' this tree is a sufferin' man. Tha's whut life if, son. Sufferin'. How kin yuh keep from b'lievin' the word of Gawd when Ah'm holding' befo' yo' eyes the only thing that gives meaning to yo' life? Here, lemme put it roun' yo neck. When yuh git along, look at this cross, son 'n' b'lieve...[36]

The symbol is tied to belief; Bigger is told to believe in order to find meaning in his suffering. Yet Bigger does not need a cross to know that life is suffering; his whole existence is mired in suffering. Further, Bigger does not need to look at the cross to see a suffering man; he need only look in a mirror. Wright sets up a situation that comes to a climax in subsequent pages.

After leaving the courthouse, Bigger is confronted by the image of a burning cross.

It gripped him: that cross was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of the Ku Klux Klan. He had a cross of salvation round his throat and they were burning one to tell him that they hated him! No! He did not want that! Had the preacher trapped him? He felt betrayed. He wanted to tear the cross from his throat and throw it away.[37]

Bigger makes the connection: The symbol that is supposed to remind him of his true self—that is meant to provide meaning to his suffering—is being used as a symbol to encourage his violent death. The cross of the Ku Klux Klan was being burned because Bigger was black, the one fact of his life the preacher told him to forget. Back in his cell, Bigger reaches his breaking point.

He gripped the cross and snatched it from his throat. He threw it away, cursing a curse that was almost a scream.

"I don't want it!"

The men gasped and looked at him, amazed.

"Don't throw that away, boy. That's your cross!"

"I can die without a cross!"

"Only God can help you now, boy. You'd better get your soul right!"

"I ain't got no soul!"

One of the men picked up the cross and brought it back.

"Here, boy; keep this. This is God's cross!"

I don't care!" [38]

Wright's use of language in this passage is wrought with meaning. The cross, after being rejected, goes from being Bigger's to being God's. The cross is meant to ease Bigger's death, to allow him to die. Bigger rejects this, and instead claims that he can die without its aid. Wright's own beliefs should not be separated from this passage. Just as religious symbols and belief ultimately failed to transform his life in any significant way, so too do they fail with Bigger. Whether or not the reader likes the conclusion of *Native Son*, it is undeniable that Bigger finds a sense of individuality and strength in his impending death, and he does it wholly removed from Christianity.

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em...It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know that I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right when I look at it that way..." [39]

James Baldwin, in his famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," interprets Bigger as a figure "defined by his hatred and fear."[40] While I agree completely, and am fascinated by Baldwin's adept analysis of *Native Son* and the comparison between it and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, I take exception to Baldwin's closing remarks and his summation of Bigger Thomas. Baldwin writes:

For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American black; but that he had accepted a theology [sic] that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only todo what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.[41]

Baldwin couches Bigger's reaction in theological terms, but Baldwin misuses the word theology (literally "words about God"). Bigger does not accept *any* theology; in fact, the climax of the novel is about the rejection of theology. Wright presents Bigger as rejecting Western culture's most enduring story about God and human suffering as facile and ineffectual. We cannot go so far as to say Bigger becomes an atheist because he does not reject the existence of any deity; rather, he refuses to accept the Christian archetype as a valid means of interpreting his own death. Baldwin's objections have more to do with Bigger's—or perhaps Wright's—understanding of human ontology, i.e., the nature of existence, rather than theology, and even in that regard I believe that Baldwin misses the point. What life, what beauty does Bigger have to embrace? Bigger's readiness to die

without a cross, to understand that his life has meaning outside of the empty categories offered by religion is a statement about the capacity of the human person. Bigger—and most certainly Wright—embraces the enduring ability of the human person to fashion meaning for his or her own existence outside accepted standards that do not adequately address his or her needs and conditions.

Richard Wright and Communism in Black Boy (American Hunger)

From a young age, Wright yearned to escape the oppressive racism of the South, to flee from the ignorance of his family. At the age of twenty, he headed to Chicago for a new life. In the city he encountered another ideology that would shape his life: Communism.

Wright arrived in Chicago shortly before the stock market crash of 1927. As millions of people around the country faced unemployment, starvation, and homelessness, Wright took to the streets to find work. As the Depression began, Americans began to question the efficacy of democracy. How viable, they asked, is a capitalist system that requires continual growth in order to sustain itself? Communism, with its promises of workers' rights and the abolition of class distinctions that kept the poor perpetually hungry and near-death, appealed to many men who had seen their country go from the peak of prosperity during the Roaring Twenties to a staggering economic low that would not be corrected until the United States entered World War II in 1941. Wright pounded the Chicago pavement with others who, while perhaps not so experienced as he (an impoverished black from the South) in dealing with chronic hunger, were faced with the same reality: One needed to eat to live, and one needed to work to eat. It was in this atmosphere that Wright was introduced to communism.

What is fascinating about Wright's entry into the Communist Party is that economic considerations did not attract him to their worldview. Rather, he felt communism could offer the human connection and fulfillment he had not found in religion.

> *It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. My cynicism—which had been my protection against an American that had cast me out—slid from me and timidly, I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. My life as a Negro in American had led me to feel—though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself—that the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself; for I felt that without a common bond uniting men, without a continuous current of shared thought and feeling circulating through the social system, like blood coursing through the body, there could be no loving worthy of being called human.*[42]

It is vital to understand that Wright yearned for a feeling of humanness and community that many people find in religion, and that the course of Wright's life represents a desire to discover a way of living that would help him this end without violating the intrinsic ideas—in

whatever unformed manner they might be—that he held true.

Wright encountered other black Communists who were attempting to communicate the platform of the party.[43] Wright recalls:

Once a Negro Communist speaker, inveighing against religion, said, "There ain't no goddamn God! If there is, I hereby challenge Him to strike me dead!"

He paused dramatically before his vast black audience for God to act, but God declined. He then pulled out his watch. "Maybe God didn't hear me," he yelled. "I'll give Him two more minutes!" Then, with sarcasm: "Mister God, kill me!"

He waited, looking mockingly at his watch. The audience laughed uneasily. "I'll tell you where to find God," the speaker went on in a hard, ranting voice. "When it rains at midnight, take your hat, turn it upside down on a floor in a dark room, and you'll have God!"

I had to admit that I had never heard atheism of so militant a nature; but the Communist speaker seemed to be amusing and frightening the people more than he was convincing them.

"If there is a God up there in that empty sky," the speaker roared on. "I'll reach up there and grab him by his beard and jerk him down here on this hungry earth and cut his throat!" He wagged his head. "Now, let God dare me!"

The audience was shocked into silence for a moment, then it yelled with delight. I shook my head and walked away. That was not the way to destroy people's outworn beliefs...They were acting like children...[44]

Note that Wright does not indicate whether or not he agrees with the speaker's atheism. Rather, Wright objects to the manner in which the Communist was attempting to change people's views regarding God. Given the statements Wright has made about his own beliefs, which reflect more of an agnostic view, it is clear that he saw the need for a more suitable way to communicate communism to the black community.

Wright expresses his dissatisfaction with black Communists in another passage in *American Hunger*:

I was convinced now that they did not know the complex nature of Negro life, did not know how great was the task which they had set themselves. They had rejected the state of things as they were, and that seemed to me to be the first step toward embracing a creative attitude toward life. I felt that it was not until one wanted the world to be different that one could look at the world with will and emotion. But these men had rejected what was before their eyes without quite knowing what they rejected and why.[45]

Wright believed that his experience as a poor black boy growing up in the South had put him in touch with the needs, wants, and concerns of his community. He reasoned that he could communicate with blacks in Chicago more effectively than the members of the party:

They had a program, an ideal, but they had not yet found a language. Here, then, was something I could do, reveal, say. The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the

meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words to try to put some of that meaning back. I would address my words to two groups: I would tell the Communists how the common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of the Communists who strove for unity among them.[46]

Wright became involved with the John Reed Club, an artists' organization that was under Communist leadership. Membership in the club did not entail membership in the Party, but the two groups were closely aligned. As a result, Wright was exposed to communist literature and propaganda. After he published some of his own stories in a periodical printed by the club, he believed he had found the vehicle through which he could communicate communist ideas to the black community.

I sat through several meeting of the club and was impressed by the scope and seriousness of its activities. The club was demanding that the government create jobs for unemployed artists; it planned and organized art exhibits; it raised funds for the publication of Left Front [a communist newspaper]; and it sent scores of speakers to trade-union meetings. The members were fervent, democratic, restless, eager, self-sacrificing. I was convinced, and my response was to set myself the task of making Negroes know that Communists were. While mopping the operating room of the medical research institute, I got the notion of writing a series of biographical sketches of Negro Communists. I told no one of my intentions and I did not know how fantastically naïve my ambition was.[47]

Wright theorized that he could make a difference through his writing, by using words to reach a population he felt would benefit from the goals and aims of Communism. By focusing on the lives of black members of the party, he sought to demystify Communism and, as a result, have a positive impact on the lives of people in his community.

Wright was elected leader of the Chicago John Reed Club despite not being a member of the Communist Party. Initially, he believed he would be able to make a difference, but his optimism began to fade. He discovered that factionalism within the club prevented real progress, and political division within the Communist Party frequently interfered with his ability to pursue his art. Further, Wright's project was viewed with skepticism by his fellow club members, and black Communists were reticent to speak with him for fear party leaders would declare them part of the *bourgeoisie*. Having the opportunity to write and reach an audience was what had appealed to Wright most about belonging to the John Reed Club. Sensing this was going to be impossible, he tried several times to resign, but each time he was persuaded to stay. As it became more and more difficult for him to remain employed—times grew increasingly tougher and jobs exceedingly more scarce—Wright decided to dedicate himself to creative pursuits. Despite his negative experiences with the club, he was optimistic that once he explained his plan to the right people, he would receive the party's blessing:

I had read widely in revolutionary literature, had observed many Communists, white and black, and had learned to know the daily hazards they faced and the sacrifices they made. I now wanted to give time to writing the book of biographical sketches I had planned. I did not know Negro Communists as well as I wanted to, and when, on many occasions, I had sought to question them about their feelings, their work, and their actions, they had been reticent. My zeal made me forget these rebuffs, for I was sure than an atmosphere of trust would be created as soon as I had explained my project to them.[48]

After joining the party, Wright approached fellow black members in order to explain the biography project. He believed they would embrace the opportunity to extend their influence in the community, thereby increasing their membership and improving the quality of life for blacks in Chicago. The reality, however, was much different. Wright was viewed with skepticism because of his penchant for reading books; some black Communists laughed at him, while others saw him as a threat. Wright comments in *American Hunger*:

During the following days I learned through direct questioning that I had seemed a fantastic element to the black Communists. I was shocked to hear that I, who had been only to grammar school, had been classified as an intellectual... "He talks like a book," one of the Negro comrades had said. And that was enough to condemn me forever as bourgeois.[49]

Soon, party members began to warn Wright that "intellectuals" in the Soviet Union had been purged from the ranks. Wright refused to be frightened into submission; he remained cautiously optimistic that his writing would win people over:

An invisible wall was building slowly between me and the people with whom I had cast my lot. Well, I would show them that all men who wrote books were not their enemies. I would communicate the meaning of their lives to people whom they could not reach; then, surely, my intentions would merit their confidence. I dismissed the warning about the Soviet Union's trouble with intellectuals. I felt that it simply did not apply to me. The problem I faced seemed a much simpler one. I had to win the confidence of people who had been misled so often that they were afraid of anybody who differed from themselves. Yet deep down I feared their militant ignorance.[50]

In the early months of his affiliation with the John Reed Club, Wright had met a black Communist under indictment for "inciting a riot."[51] Wright believed this man—referred to as Ross—would make a perfect subject for his series of biographical sketches. Although Ross was hesitant to allow Wright to interview him, the two began to meet on a regular basis. The relationship quickly resulted in a flurry of party activity, and before Wright realized it, he was embroiled in a full-scale controversy:

Then political problems rose to plague me. Ross, whose life I had tried to write, was charged by the Communist party with "anti-leadership" tendencies, "class collaborationist attitudes," and "ideological factionalism," phrases so

fanciful that I gasped when I heard them. And it was rumored that I, too, would face similar charges. It was known that I had visited Ross, had taken notes on his life, and it was believed that I had been politically influences by him, though in what way was not stated.[52]

The vague, but insistent suspicion that had followed Wright around since he broached the subject of his biography project now overwhelmed his every activity. He was being accused of "Trotskyism," a charge that brought with it almost assured banishment from the rolls of the party. Wright continued his interviews with Ross, who was beginning to crack under the constant pressure and accusations. Finally, Wright was forbidden to associate with Ross. His disillusionment deepened.

Wright became increasingly restricted creatively. *Left Front*, the magazine for which he wrote, was disbanded by party leadership, despite his intense efforts to keep the periodical a vital part of the movement. He continued to stress the importance of art to the success of the Communist agenda, but to no avail. His already limited role was even more narrowly defined:

The party leader demanded that writers be assigned the task of producing pamphlets for the use of trade unions. I contended that it would be a mistake for the Communist party to persuade writers to abandon imaginative work to write pamphlets. I explained the advantages that could be derived from the long-terms artistic products of the club's writers. And pointed out that these more durable products would outweigh the pamphleteering. This, too, was rejected by vote. I then appealed for an organizational structure that would include provisions for artistic work of all types, hoping in this way to eliminate constant quarrels over tactics and strategy. But all my proposals were voted down.[53]

Wright tried to find a meaningful outlet within the increasing restrictions, but when he was accused of leading a subversive splinter group meant to undermine the party, it proved too much. "My relationship with the Communists reached a static phase. I shunned them and they shunned me."[54] A hunt for "Negro Trotskyites" began, and Wright frequently was the subject of accusations.

Wright had not yet quit the Party, primarily because a national writer's congress was being held in New York City. He believed he might have a modicum of success in voicing his support for a vital, national Communist artists organization. Ironically, the Chicago Communists encouraged Wright to attend as the local delegate. He regarded this as their attempt to "save" him; party leaders believed that if Wright was exposed to more mainstream comrades, he would alter his errant ways.[55] Just as had happened with his Seventh-day Adventist family, Wright's own desires and ideas were ignored and concerted efforts were made to change his mind, to save him from the erroneous ideas that kept him from realizing the "truth." He was surrounded by ideologues whose stringent beliefs and unbending ways prevented Wright from entering into relationship with them. Despite his own well-intentioned efforts, he was still marginalized by the party.

At the New York congress, Wright witnessed not the resurrection of the Chicago John Reed Club; instead, he watched as all artists organizations

within Communist Party purview were dissolved. Wright was disgusted. "It was irrational that Communists should hate what they called 'intellectuals,' or anybody who tried to think for himself. I had fled men who did not like the color of my skin, and now I was among men who did not like the tone of my thoughts."[56] He decided that his creative voice had been stifled long enough. He vowed to strike out on his own as an independent artist, not beholden to anyone or anything, other than himself and his vision. Although it took Wright a while to extricate himself from party control, he finally achieved his autonomy.

I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well, I would wait, day and night, until I knew what to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dreams of achieving vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.[57]

Communism in Native Son

Out of his experiences in the South and the North, out of a vision of social realities fine-tuned by his association with the Communist Party, Wright boldly outlined a frightening aspect of race in America: the possibility that incipient pathology among young adolescents who were consistently denied the chance to develop healthy psycho-social identities might manifest itself in extreme violence. Native Son asserted that deferred dreams might explode in the Bigger Thomases of America.[58]

The defining aspect of *Native Son* is its unflinching commentary on race relations in the United States. Any consideration of Wright's novel must be done under this thematic umbrella. However, certain details of *Native Son* are crystallized when read against the events of Wright's own life recorded in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Wright's damning indictment of Communism in *Native Son* is rooted in his own experience. From the outset, he was ambivalent about the true feelings of Communists regarding American blacks. He met whites who seemed to be genuinely interested in hearing his opinions, but it was difficult for him to overcome his distrust of white society. After one particular meeting, Wright recalled:

I went home full of reflection, probing the sincerity of the strange white people I had met, wondering how they really regarded Negroes. I lay on my bed and read the magazines and was amazed to find that there did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated.[59]

Whether Wright at any point in his affiliation with the Communists felt that race was not an issue is debatable—that he joined the John Reed Club and the Communist Party indicate that he at least felt comfortable enough to attempt a relationship with whites on an equal basis, even though most of his

interactions were with fellow blacks. What is clear, though, is that at party functions, Wright experienced the same type of racism with which he had grown up. While attending the writer's congress in New York City, he found it exceedingly difficult to secure lodgings for the night:

We arrived in the early evening and registered for the congress sessions. The opening mass meeting was being held at Carnegie Hall. I asked about housing accommodations and the New York John Reed Club members, all white members of the Communist Party, looked embarrassed. I waited while one white Communist called another white Communist to one side and discussed what could be done to get me, a black Chicago Communist, housed. During the trip I had not thought of myself as a Negro; I had been mulling over the problem of the young left-wing writers I knew. Now, as I stood watching one white comrade talk frantically to another about the color of my skin, I felt disgusted.[60]

I believe this event, which occurred near the end of Wright's affiliation with the Communists, served as inspiration for two white characters in *Native Son.*

In my reading, the characters of Jan and Max are meant to represent white Communists Wright had encountered during his association with the John Reed Club and the Communist Party. Specifically, these two characters represent Communists who believed they had dismissed race as an issue, and that by focusing on class distinctions, they could ingratiate themselves with blacks. Wright understood that "dismissing" race as inconsequential did nothing to change deeply entrenched racism in American society. I will consider both Jan and Max in turn.

When Bigger is introduced to Jan by Mary he is forced to shake Jan's hand, an action that goes against every survival mechanism Bigger has employed in his life. The tension of the moment build as Jan holds onto Bigger's hand:

"It's all right, Bigger," she said. "Jan means it."

He flushed with warm anger. Goddam her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it they wanted? Why didn't hey leave him alone?...He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise black skin? Then why was Jan doing this?[61]

Jan and Mary believe that their dismissal of Bigger's race should be enough to set him at ease. While they believe that they are "enlightened," they do not recognize that Bigger lives in a completely different world, one in which a person of color has to walk a thin, vaguely defined line in order to survive. Bigger has had life experiences that prevent him from trusting the words of white people. It is impossible for Bigger to be comfortable with Jan and Mary because of race, and no actions taken in one night can change this fact. The unfolding events between Bigger, Jan and Mary prove this: Bigger being forced to ride in the front seat of the car, pressed between Mary and Jan, causes him extreme stress; the dinner at a restaurant in Bigger's neighborhood puts him in a socially untenable position; the drive around the park results in Mary's excessive intoxication and

Bigger has to take Mary to her bedroom. In all of these situations, Bigger's race is the defining issue. Communist ideology is irrelevant to him when the blind Mrs. Walker enters Mary's room. For Bigger, he is a black man in the bedroom of a white woman. Countless blacks had been hung for centuries as the result of being caught in—or accused of—far more innocent situations. No pamphlets of words about racial equality can change this situation. By trying to silence Mary's drunken mumblings, Bigger inadvertently commits murder because he is trying to save himself. Despite the lack of intention, the result is the same: "He was a murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman. He had to get away..."[62]

Wright continues the theme of Communists' inability to understand the true situation of the American black by introducing the character of Max, Bigger's attorney. In the climax of *Native Son*, Max delivers a soaring speech meant to stir the hearts of the jury, to enlighten them about the condition of the black community. Max argues that when Bigger murdered Mary he "was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live."[63] Indeed, Max insists that Bigger's actions are indicative of a larger population that will, if circumstances do not change, unleash itself upon America. In his summation, Max says:

Is he the exception? Or are there others? There are others, Your Honor, millions of others, Negro and white, and that is what makes our future seems a looming image of violence. The feeling of resentment and the balked longing for some kind of fulfillment and exultation—in degrees more or less intense and in actions more or less conscious—stalk day by night through this land The consciousness of Bigger Thomas, and millions of others more or less like him, white and black, according to the weight of the pressure we have put upon them, forms the quicksands upon which the foundations of our civilization rest.[64]

Max, a Communist himself, uses socialist theory to present a nuanced argument for why Bigger commits murder, and offers prognostication about the future if circumstances do not change. But does Max really believe his own words? I believe the answer is no.

After being sentenced to death, Bigger retires to his cell and Max follows. They have a conversation that culminates in Bigger internalizing Max's defense, but now Bigger speaks in his own words:

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em...It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know that I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right when I look at it that way..."

Max's eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still.[65]

In Wright's own experience, he found that Communists did not want to know what he had to say, even when he could offer insight into the reality of a community they wished to reach. Rather, the Communists wanted to tell him how he should understand himself, his race,

and his place in society. Likewise, Max took it upon himself to voice the reality of Bigger's life and those of his race and socio-economic class, but when Bigger speaks for himself and expresses his own understanding of his actions—an understanding that has simulacra with Max's presentation—the lawyer is horrified. Ideology, Wright says at the end of the novel, can rarely conform with reality.

Richard Wright: The Western Secular Humanist

Wright spent his early life under the influence of two very different, yet equally stringent and limited ideologies: Seventh-day Adventism and Communism. In many ways, he had to fight the same battles in order to free himself from the confines of both. The repeated attempts of his family to save him from the fires of hell failed, ultimately, because their vision of God did not correspond to his own reality. His desire for community and connection could not be fulfilled because he did not respect the individuals who represented the church community, whether they be elders or peers. Likewise, once in the Communist Party, Wright found that his desire to reach out to others and establish a genuine relationship based on a mutual exchange of ideas was thwarted by the picayune mindset of his comrades. What remained consistent throughout Wright's life, however, was his belief that literature and secular thought express the true nature of the human condition.

The first positive insight Wright experienced came as a result of reading secular literature. He recalls in *Black Boy*:

> *It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities. Of course, I had never seen or met the men who wrote the books I read, and the kind of world in which they lived was as alien to me as the moon. But what enabled me to overcome my chronic distrust was that these books—written by men—seemed defensively critical of the straitened American environment. These writers seemed to feel that America could be shaped nearer the hearts of those who lived in it. And it was out of these novels and stories and articles, out of the emotional impact of imaginative constructions of heroic or tragic deeds, that I felt touching my face a tinge of warmth from an unseen light...*[66]

Despite the suffocating atmosphere in which he was living, Wright continued to read. He began to dream, to imagine possibilities for himself beyond the Jim Crow South. His first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre," was published by a local paper; Wright received no praise from his teachers, peers, or family. Instead, he drew their criticism, mistrust, or damnation. His grandmother's response summed up the response of the community: "'That's the Devil's work,' she said and left."[67]

Once he was in Chicago, Wright dedicated himself to reading monumental works of fiction that are still studied and revered today:

> *At night I read Stein's Three Lives, Crane's The Red Badge of Courage, and Dostoevski's The Possessed, all of which revealed new realms of feeling. But the most important discoveries came when I veered from fiction proper into the field of*

psychology and sociology. I ran through volumes that bore upon the causes of my conduct and the conduct of my people. I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime, relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment, relating racial insecurities to the conflicts between whites and blacks...[68]

Exposure to these works provided Wright insight into his own life as a human being and as a black man in American. Where religion and Communism failed, the works of secular literature succeeded. Wright began to feel a sense of personal power and purpose he had been unable to discover in any other aspect of his existence.

Had it not been for his failed experiences with religion and Communism, Wright may not have written at all. He recalls in *American Hunger*:

I read Proust's A Remembrance of Things Past, admiring the lucid, subtle but strong prose, stupefied by its dazzling magic, awed by the vast, delicate, intricate, and psychological structure of the Frenchman's epic of death and decadence. But it crushed me with hopelessness, for I wanted to write of people in my environment with an equal thoroughness, and the burning example before my eyes made me feel that I never could.[69]

Wright doubted his own ability to write works that could approach the importance of classic world literature, but when he realized that the Communist Party would not provide him the outlet he had hoped, he threw himself headlong into becoming a writer. His first novel was *Native Son.*

Conclusions

Today, Richard Wright is regarded as a significant American modernist writer. He has been lauded as one of the most significant black authors in history, and a majority of his writings are still in publication today. Wright's rejection of both religion and Communist philosophy came as a result of their failure to satisfy a basic need in him to feel connected to his fellow human being. Seventh-day Adventism and Communism both became vapid ideologies to Wright because they did not speak to his reality. Both systems, in different ways, required him to alter his view of the world as he experienced it, something he refused to do. When Wright encountered secular literature, he found in the pages of literary masterpieces a vision of the human person that made him feel hope and promise. These works inspired Wright to take up the pen and enter into the Grand Conversation, to contribute stories, novels, and essays that represent his vision of America and human existence. Is this not what Western secular humanism embodies? The opportunity of every person to contribute his or her voice without the constraints of ideologies—whether they be religious, political, or cultural. Wright's lasting legacy is not that he rejected Christianity or Communism, but that he produced a collection of works that are still read over fifty years after his death. By not allowing himself to be constrained by ideology, Wright discovered who he really was, and was generous enough to share it with the world.

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—. Black Boy. New York, Harper & Row, 1937.

—. Native Son. New York: Harper & Row, 1940.

Endnotes

[1] Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 21

[2] The first published edition of Black Boy tells the story of Wright's life in the South until the age of twenty, when he left Mississippi for Chicago. Originally, Wright had wanted to include with Black Boy the material that was released posthumously as American Hunger in 1977. Wright published portions of American Hunger as "I Tried to Be a Communist" in *The Atlantic* (1944), and included another variation of the text in his collection The God That Failed (1949). Many editions of Black Boy published today include the American Hunger material. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to Black Boy with the understanding of Wright's original vision, but passages pertaining to Wright's life in Chicago are taken from the originally published version of American Hunger, with corresponding page references. For an excellent discussion concerning the evolution of American Hunger and its various incarnations, see Christopher Z. Hobson, "Richard Wright's Communism: Textual Variance, Intentionality, and Socialization in American Hunger, 'I Tried to Be a Communist," and The God That Failed" Text: Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship. Ed. D.C. Greethham and W. Speed Hill, New York: AMS Press, 1994. 307-43.

[3] Hull, p. 65

[4] "Christ" literally means "Anointed one of God." As a scholar of religion, I believe that the title "Jesus Christ" does not express in English the true meaning of the Greek moniker. As a result, like many contemporary biblical exegetes, I prefer Jesus the Anointed.

[5] Dick, p. 1

[6] Land, p. 231

[7] Land, p. 234

[8] Lyons, p. 232

[9] Hull, p. 65

[10] Land, p. 231

[11] Land, p. 235

[12] Land, p. 231

[13] Land, p. 236

[14] Lyons, p. 236

[15] Lyons, p. 237

[16] Lyons, p. 234

[17] Hull, p. 67

[18] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 113

[19] Schwarz, p. 113-114

[20] Schwarz, p. 114

[21] Schwarz, p. 114-116

[22] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 115

[23] ibid.

[24] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 116

[25] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 115

[26] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 126-127

[27] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 127

[28] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 114-115

[29] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 123

[30] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 127-128

[31] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 139

[32] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 124

[33] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 263

[34] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 364

[35] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 123-124

[36] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 265

[37] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 313

[38] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 313-314
[39] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 392
[40] Baldwin, p. 22
[41] Baldwin, p. 22-23
[42] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 63
[43] For the sake of clarity, I retain the wording that Wright used himself. While I am aware that "black" and "Negro" are antiquated terms, attempts to include the "politically correct" language when referring directly to words and ideas written by Wright unnecessarily muddy my argument.
[44] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 40
[45] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 40-41
[46] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 65-66
[47] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 67
[48] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 75
[49] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 77
[50] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 78
[51] ibid.
[52] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 87
[53] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 90
[54] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 90
[55] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 94
[56] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 119
[57] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 135
[58] Hull, p. 177
[59] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 62
[60] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 94-95
[61] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 67
[62] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 86
[63] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 366
[64] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 386
[65] Wright, *Native Son*, p. 392
[66] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 283
[67] Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 185
[68] Wright, *American Hunger*, p.19-20
[69] Wright, *American Hunger*, p. 24

East Saint Louis/Edwardsville, Illinois
--For its Spring 2008 issue, *Drumvoices Revue*, a journal of Literary, Cultural & Vision Arts co-published by the Eugene B. Redmond Writers Club and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, is issuing a call for Kwansabas for Richard Wright (1908-1960) in honor of the Wright Centennial (1908-2008). Select Kwansabas (7-line poems) will be published in the Spring 2008 issue of Drumvoices. Final date for submission of the Kwansabas is Nov. 1, 2007.

The Kwansaba, a 49-word poetic form invented during the Writers Club's 1995 workshop season (in East St. Louis), consists of seven lines of seven words each, with no word containing more than seven letters. (Think 7-7-7!) Exceptions to the seven-letter rule are proper nouns and some foreign terms. Previous issues of Drumvoices have featured Kwansabas for Miles Davis (2003), Katherine Dunham (2004), Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez (2005), Jayne Cortez (2006), and Maya Angelou and Quincy Troupe (2007). Following is an example of a Kwansaba from *Drumvoices* #15 (2007):

Kwansaba for Quincy Troupe
Reginald Lockett

Lion roaming the vast Serengeti of verse
On the Great Plains he stalks words
Dogs the scents of verbs and nouns
King of musical lines tracks poetry's song
In the forest there stands his prize,
A sleek gazelle of a poem desired
He makes a quick study and pounces

Kwansaba submissions should be sent by Nov. 1, 2007, to Drumvoices Revue, English Department Box 1431, SIUE, Edwardsville, IL 62026-1431. Submissions may be sent in hard copies and/or on Microsoft Word disk. For more information, call 618 650-3991, email eredmon@siue.edu or fax 618 650-3509. Interested persons may also write EBRWC @ P.O. Box 6165, East St. Louis, IL 62202.

Founded in 1986 and named after East St. Louis Poet Laureate Eugene B. Redmond, Writers Club trustees include Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Avery Brooks, Walter Mosley, Barbara Ann Teer, Troupe, Jerry W. Ward, Jr., and Lena Weathers. Trustees also serve on the editorial board of Drumvoices Revue. Deceased Trustees include Margaret Walker Alexander (1915-1998), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), and Raymond R. Patterson (1929-2001).

The Club is currently celebrating its 21st year of twice-monthly meetings (first/third Tuesday), 6:00-8:00 p.m., in the Library (Building B) of the East St. Louis Higher Education Campus, 601 J. R. Thompson Drive. Meetings are held

September through May. All writers, beginners to professionals, are welcome. More examples of the Kwansaba . . .

And Still Counting . . .
(Drafts of Kwansabas inspired by Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Wright wanted his life to count for something.)

Patricia Merritt

Longing begins as a pest that drips
into the mammoth bucket without end. Impish
drops become a steady flow that over-
takes a dry-rotted wooden floor before
creepin' up my feet and lappin' around
naked ankles. I rush to get away,
hurling greens, lard and starch at it.

Desire appears to have fangs as it
reaches the bottom of my pant zipper.
Is it trying to baptize me? I
wade to another part of the room.
My feeble mother lays silent in bed,
while Granny's stern eyes follow me. Aunt
Addie snarls: Boy, stop all that moving.

My heart screams out: I just don't
want my life to count for nothing!
Uncle Tom brushes past, his disdain cutting
like razors. Waters circle my waist. I
thrash toward door and run. But wanting
is hard on my heels. Hunger just
won't cease . . . in my stomach or mind.

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RICHARD WRIGHT: THE CENTENARY CELEBRATION

The American University of Paris announces the International Richard Wright Centennial Conference. It will be held 19-20 June 2008 at The American University of Paris and at the Musee des Annees Trente (Museum of the Nineteen Thirties), in Boulogne-Billancourt. The Conference will encourage broad international and interdisciplinary explorations of Wright's life and writing, with a special emphasis on the Paris he inhabited (1947-1960), both what it was and what it is today as a result of the marks he left behind, and on his experiences in Africa. Stressing the importance of Richard Wright, the conference hopes to be an international point of intersection for all those interested in Wright's work from literary and cultural critics, to political activists, poets, musicians, publishers and historians. We seek the widest range of academic and public intellectual discussion around Wright's work that has influenced so many and so much.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

-Wright in the black Atlantic: Transnationalism and transatlanticism

-Wright and expatriate Paris

-Wright as exile and travel writer

-The reception of Wright's work in various non-U.S.settings

-Wright and African American satire, irony, and comedy

-Wright and the African American literary canon

-Wright, whiteness, and black masculinity

-Wright and African American confinement literature

-Wright, gender, and the political use of modernism

-Wright's cultural criticism

-Wright and literary friendships and influences

-Wright and films

-Wright and teaching pluriculturalism

-Wright's influence on the world today

Paper/presentation proposals should include:

1. A brief (250-300 word) abstract.

2. A brief (1-2 pp.) vita.

The deadline is January 15, 2008. Submit abstracts to: Alice Craven at **Alice.Craven@aup.fr** or **William.Dow@wanadoo.fr**

Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly $10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to one double issue of the Newsletter: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. In order to continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to ensure that we have your latest address and relevant information) along with a $10 check or money order (made out to the Richard Wright Circle). Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

Richard Wright Circle Membership

Please send your dues and form to the Circle's Editor:

Richard Wright Circle (c/o James A. Miller)

The George Washington University, Department of English

801 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20052

(please detach here)

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