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RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE

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Barry Gross
Major professor

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BEYOND PRIMITIVISM: RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE

By

Byron Douglas Mason

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ABSTRACT

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By

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With the publication and favorable reception of *Native Son* in 1940, Richard Wright became the leading black writer of his time. This novel would be the culmination of nearly two decades of creative endeavors. It would also be the creative centerpiece of the Chicago Renaissance. Wright's vivid, groundbreaking story of Bigger Thomas and his demise would mark a significant departure from previous African-American writing in its stark realism and social protest.

Three years earlier, Wright made it clear what he thought black writers should be doing in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." The new generation of black writers, according to Wright, should speak directly to the needs of black people. In order to do this, these writers should study, understand, and embrace black folklore, black nationalism, and Marxism. Through this enlightenment, black writers would produce literature that was socially relevant.

Wright articulated the key principles of the Chicago Renaissance. This study will analyze Wright's role as a facilitator of this renaissance.

In this study, I will contextualize the Chicago Renaissance historically. Then I will explore Wright's literary and cultural theories. Following that, I will focus on how Wright's novels *Lawd Today!* and *Native Son* illustrate Wright's theories. More specifically, I will describe how they signify a departure from the Harlem Renaissance of the previous decade. I will also discuss Wright's peers within the Chicago Renaissance community. Finally, I will assess the significance of the Chicago Renaissance years on Wright's career.

To Ma and Dad

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INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Renaissance is a somewhat overlooked black cultural movement of the 1930's and 1940's. This renaissance would reach its apex with the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. With this novel, Wright put his theoretical arguments into practice in a most profound manner. He would also, as Robert Bone has noted, "change the course of Negro writing in America." This study is an analysis of Richard Wright's ideas and activities as they relate to the Chicago Renaissance. I will maintain that Wright was a facilitator of this renaissance. Through his theoretical arguments, the formation of the South Side Writers' Group, as well as the publication of *Lawd Today!* in 1935 and *Native Son* in 1940, Wright articulated and exemplified the key principles of this Chicago-based black cultural movement.

In terms of a theoretical framework, this study will analyze the Chicago Renaissance as a transitional phase in black cultural expression in the twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 1930's witnessed the emergence of the New Negro who sought to define the black identity through a celebration of black folklore, the black middle-class, and the "primitive" facets of black culture that were untouched by modernization. The Chicago

Renaissance of the 1930's and 1940's witnessed a shift from a celebration of jazz culture and primitivism to a new social consciousness. Just as World War I and the Marcus Garvey movement served as social catalysts for the new black militancy of the 1920's, the Great Depression forced a new generation of black writers and intellectuals to take a hard look at the plight of the masses of black people and the black experience in general. This new social consciousness gave way to social protest in black expression.

The social protest of the Chicago Renaissance would become much more militant and nationalistic during the Black Arts movement of the 1960's and 1970's. As an outgrowth of the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement witnessed the development of a Black Aesthetic. Black self-assertion reached a new level as a generation of writers and intellectuals sought to create whole new criteria by which to evaluate black art. The cultural ideology of the Black Arts movement was obviously rooted in the social consciousness, protest and realism of the Chicago Renaissance.

I will begin the study by contextualizing the Chicago Renaissance historically(Why Chicago? Why the 1930's?). Chicago's rich cultural and intellectual history lended the city to a newphase of black creative expression. Throughout the mid and late nineteenth century, Chicago was transformed

from a Midwestern prairie town to a sprawling metropolis. In the advent of this transformation, the city witnessed significant developments in newspaper publishing as well as the growth of literary realism. As Chicago became a new cultural center, it also became the focal point of a mass migration of African-Americans. Hailed as the "Promised Land," Chicago attracted scores of black southerners from across the deep South. In addition to the historical background of the Chicago Renaissance, I will analyze the intellectual atmosphere of the period as well as Richard Wright's role in the formation of the South Side Writers' Group.

I will then analyze Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In this essay, Wright postulates that in order for black writers to truly understand the black experience in America they must study and embrace black folklore. Black folklore contained historical experiences and rich cultural expressions that would serve as excellent source material. Black folklore was created by the black masses. By tapping into this folklore, black writers could give their art a certain depth and realism.

Another issue that Wright wanted black writers to confront is black nationalism. According to Wright, black nationalism was a direct consequence of segregation and racial violence. It was an unavoidable aspect of black life.

Black artists, maintained Wright, should work to transcend black nationalism by understanding and embracing it. Then the issue would cease to be a serious "problem" and black writers could broaden their perspective.

The perspective of black writers could also be broadened through a Marxist analysis of the plight of their people. Wright pointed out quite forcefully that this analysis would expose the horrors and injustices of capitalism. Black artists would then have a deeper understanding of the exploitation that affects their community. Again, as with black folklore and black nationalism, if black artists were able to grasp and comprehend this ideology, they would be more capable of speaking to the masses and their experience. Wright was advocating a realism that he did not see in the Harlem Renaissance a decade earlier.

Wright would significantly depart from his Harlem Renaissance predecessors with his 1935 work *Lawd Today!* and his 1940 work *Native Son*. *Lawd Today!* is significant because it was his first attempt at a serious novel. The subject of the work is one typical day in the life of Jake Jackson. Jackson is a man consumed by self-hatred and he blindly pursues his middle-class aspirations. His life consists of perpetual debt, a dreary dead-end job, and debauchery. He is unconscious about his plight as a working poor

African-American living on the South Side of Chicago. He is hostile to reading and education because he believes that they addle the brain.

Jake's warped and self-destructive mentality is shared by his peers at the post office. In addition to playing cards, drinking, and chasing prostitutes, Jake and his friends often reminisce about their southern past. They describe, in vivid detail, the smell of flowers and other pleasures of their rural environment. This world is lost to them in their urban environment. Wright dramatizes the loss of folk culture and folkways in the urbanization process which consumes Jake and his cohorts.

This loss of folk culture is dramatized even further in Wright's 1940 work *Native Son*. In *Native Son* Wright created a central character and articulated themes that would significantly depart from the Harlem Renaissance. Bigger Thomas was frightening because he was very real. He is a composite character based on black youths that Wright observed in his native Mississippi and Chicago's South Side. He is also, according to Wright, the product of a racist and oppressive society. Bigger, like many black folks living in northern urban centers, is the end result of an urbanization process that robs people of their humanity. Unlike Claude McKay's Jake or Banjo, Bigger is not a free-spirited, jazz-loving primitive-exotic rebelling against a modernized

society. He is a "monster."

The world in which Bigger lives is evoked quite effectively by Wright throughout the novel. The claustrophobic kitchenettes are permeated with rats and roaches and help to create a sense of dread and despair. They also help to create a sense of realism that Wright had advocated in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." The reality that Wright presents was hardly seen during the Harlem Renaissance. During the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem was often celebrated as a place of good music, good food, and racial pride and self-determination. The city was a place where the only thing that black people had to do was "be black." There was no Jim Crow or racial violence. In *Native Son*, the city was a ghetto. It was a place of poverty, isolation, and self-hatred.

The dominant themes of *Native Son* and *Lawd Today!*(urbanization, the loss of folk culture) would be the dominant themes of the Chicago Renaissance. The social realism of the renaissance would tie a new generation of black writers together. The Chicago Renaissance community included William Attaway, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and two veterans of the Harlem Renaissance--Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes. One year after *Native Son* was published, William Attaway produced an epic tale of the black migration experience. In *Blood on the Forge*, Attaway

examined the lives of three Kentucky brothers who are forced to leave their native south. They end up in a Pennsylvania steel mill and are transformed from simple country folks into "gray men." Attaway chronicles, in vivid detail, how each brother is destroyed, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, by the new machine environment.

Although Attaway describes the new urban environment as a destructive force, he does not romanticize the southern past. The Moss brothers are subjected to exploitation in a harsh sharecropping system and live in the shadow of Jim Crow and various forms of racial violence. Although they escape these southern realities, they soon discover new forms of segregation, violence, and exploitation in the industrial north. Over the course of the novel, the Moss brothers lose bits and pieces of their humanity.

Urbanization and its destructive consequences was also a theme echoed by Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks wrote almost exclusively about Chicago's South Side, which soon became known as "Bronzeville." In 1945, her first collection of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville* was published. Brooks examined the lives of the dispossessed. These were people who were seemingly trapped in a desolate world of kitchenettes and dark, deadend alleys. But in describing the plight of the residents, Brooks provides a small glimmer of hope. Some of the characters find joy in small, seemingly

insignificant things. Like her Chicago Renaissance peers, Brooks took a sociological analysis and transformed it into evocative poetry. This poetry exemplified a certain social consciousness that defined the period.

Social consciousness was also at the heart of another poet's work. Margaret Walker was militant in her call to the black community to "rise and take control" in her 1942 collection of poetry *For My People*. In the title poem Walker speaks to the folk history and struggles of black people in America. She describes a history of slave songs; hard, fruitless work; and the painful discovery of the realities of race and class. She also describes the plight of the disenfranchised in 1942 America. These are people who hunger for the basics of survival(food and decent clothing) as well as some kind of ownership(land) in their lives. The poem is also critical of social institutions(churches, schools, clubs and societies) which, according to Walker, have failed miserably in affecting the lives of the masses of black people. Most importantly, Walker's work speaks directly to those masses.

The Chicago Renaissance community was not limited to one generation of black writers. Two veterans of the Harlem Renaissance--Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes-were pivotal figures in the era of social realism and protest. Arna Bontemps was attending graduate school at the University of

Chicago during the 1930's. In 1936, his novel *Black Thunder* was published. The story is a fictional account of an aborted slave revolt in 1800 Virginia. The power of the novel comes from its realism. Bontemps captured the language of the slaves and provided a detailed description of the slave community and customs. Power also stems from the novel's underlying theme--the attempt by black people in an oppressive society to assert their humanity. Richard Wright praised the work in a book review for its realism. He saw it as a welcomed departure from previous forms of black writing.

Langston Hughes was another "elder statesman" of the Chicago Renaissance. In 1936, Hughes attended the first meeting of the National Negro Congress. Arna Bontemps and Richard Wright were also there. After the meeting, Bontemps introduced Wright to Hughes. Hughes spent months at a time in Chicago doing research for a historical novel. He served as a mentor, benefactor, and friend to younger writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks. Most importantly, Hughes, like Bontemps, was a transitional figure between the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance. Although he was central to the New Negro movement, he was never content with simply celebrating the uniqueness of black people and their culture. He always advocated producing art that was socially relevant.

In 1926, he produced a manifesto on the direction of black writing at the time. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes scolded his contemporaries for running away from their "blackness" in their attempts to become more "American." He urged black artists to look to their community, more specifically, he wanted them to turn away from the black bourgeois and focus on the masses. He also wanted black artists to stop being afraid to create art that was racially conscious and race specific. Hughes' essay was a precursor of sorts to Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

Finally, I will conclude this study by assessing the significance of the Chicago Renaissance years on Wright's career. It was during this period(1937-1947) that Wright emerged and evolved as an artist and an intellectual. In addition to publishing "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *Lawd Today!*, and *Native Son*, Wright also produced what many critics regard as the strongest and most profound writing of his entire career. Between 1941 and 1945, Wright published three works of non-fiction: the introduction to Horace Cayton's and St. Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis*, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, and *Black Boy*. In each of these works Wright demonstrates that his non-fiction is just as provocative and emotionally charged as his fiction. These works also demonstrate Wright's assimilation of readings from across

numerous disciplines--history, sociology, philosophy, political science.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLACK BELT TRANSFORMED: RICHARD WRIGHT, CHICAGO, AND THE SOUTH SIDE WRITERS' GROUP

Richard Wright's personal and professional history with the city of Chicago is rich, multilayered, and critical in understanding the man, his career and his role in the Chicago Renaissance. Chicago was Wright's intellectual and creative birthplace. He fled Mississippi seeking to escape racism and oppression but soon learned that the problems of black people were not unique to the southern United States.[1] At the same time, "he discovered a rich cultural, social, and intellectual life in Chicago" and eventually "helped to create the hot center of that interesting milieu."[2]

The city of Chicago came to represent a land of opportunity and hope for many African-Americans during and after World War I. Historian James Grossman has stated that the Great Migration of African-Americans to Chicago "turned the attention of thousands of thousands of black southerners toward a northern industrial world previously marginal to

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[1]**Richard Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 24.**
[2]**Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 54.**

their consciousness."[3] The meatpacking houses of the city offered new employment opportunities and many black southerners saw northern cities as an escape from Jim Crow and oppression.

Equal to racial violence and Jim Crow(but not in the same negative class), the *Chicago Defender* was instrumental in encouraging black migration to the city. The popular weekly was founded in 1905 by Georgia native Robert Abbott. From its inception, the paper displayed a militancy that was virtually unheard of at the time. It reported extensively on racial violence throughout the South. And it was highly critical of the white Southern social and political establishment.

Wide circulation of the paper was built through a unique process. Black railroad workers from Chicago would "get the word out" about the paper to black Southerners during their travels. Often Pullman porters were actually given copies to distribute to their friends.[4] By 1916, the *Defender* "seemed to be everywhere; readers could by it in the church or barber shop, two major centers of socializing and discussion."[5] By the time of the Great Migration, the *Defender* had become the nation's leading black newspaper(in

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[3]James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.
[4]Ibid., 78.
[5]Ibid., 79.

terms of circulation and readership). During the summer of 1916, a larger number of unskilled industrial jobs became available to African-Americans.[6] As black southerners poured into northern cities, the *Defender* began to encourage the movement. As James Grossman points out, "Fearless, sensationalist, and militant, the *Defender* advertised the glories of Chicago so effectively that even migrants headed for other northern cities drew their general image of the urban North from their pages."[7]

During the 1920's, black Southerners found a new autonomy in Chicago. They could vote, they could send their children to quality schools and they could work in factories where they earned high wages.[8] However, this did not mean that the city was without problems. Prior to this social and economic boom, racial tensions reached an apex with the infamous riot of 1919.

Also, Grossman observes that in spite of this new found "freedom," there were "ominous forces invisible to most migrants" which had devastating effects on the black community.[9] Although blacks could vote, their political participation was ultimately controlled and manipulated by white politicians. Industrial opportunity "was often limited

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[6]Ibid., 74.
[7]Ibid.
[8]Ibid., 259-61.
[9]Ibid., 260.

by a lack of advancement beyond semiskilled positions and discriminatory layoff practices" and by the end of the 1920's, Chicago seemed to be "a city committed to ghettoizing its black inhabitants."[10]

Richard Wright arrived in Chicago during this ghettoizing process. Margaret Walker makes this declaration in her account of Wright's life and career:

> In 1927, Chicago was on the eve of a decade of drastic changes that reflected the radical changes taking place all over the United States in politics, economics, education, the arts and subsequently, all race relations. Richard Wright's life and writing reflect these changes, and his maturation years parallel the growth and development of a great American city from a sprawling prairie town to a modern urban metropolis.[11]

Indeed, the Great Migration "transformed the black belt into a black metropolis" as the ghetto of the South Side soon became known as "Bronzeville" and by 1930, it "constituted one of the world's largest concentrations of African-Americans."[12]

In addition to its complex social history, Chicago has a long and intriguing cultural, intellectual, and literary history. As Carla Cappetti has noted in *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel*, starting with the 1890's and for a long half-century, Chicago "came to embody

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[10]**Ibid., 262.**
[11]**Walker, 54.**
[12]**Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* (Summer 1986): 451.**

the most advanced sectors of the U.S. economy, and the most avant-garde expressions of American art."[13] It was during this period that Chicago became a "mecca of modern journalism and newspaper humor, as well as the home of a great deal of early American literary realism."[14] As a result, "this period has been the most documented in Chicago literary and cultural history."[15] Given this history, it is not surprising that an African-American Chicago Renaissance would occur. In order to understand the dynamics of the Chicago Renaissance, it is important to understand the intellectual atmosphere in which the movement flourished. The 1930's was a decade of transition among African-American thinkers and writers. As James Young points out, a new generation emerged to challenge the prevailing ideologies of the "aged race men" of the previous decades.[16]

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of "race spokesmen." They were race spokesmen because "this was their primary function in life. The race and its welfare received their almost undivided attention and they seldom commented on issues or events which did not in some way relate to racial matters."[17]

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[13]Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12.
[14]Ibid., 6.
[15]Ibid.
[16]James Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), ix-xii.

One of these older race men was historian and educator Carter G. Woodson. Woodson advocated an educational system that would provide the basics for African-Americans as well as instill pride in the African and African-American heritage and culture. According to Woodson, "this system would help to create a unity of thought that was indispensable to the organization of the race from within."[18]

This organization and unity of the race was also a primary concern of W.E.B. Du Bois. During the 1930's, Du Bois began to focus on the economic aspects of the "race problem" in America. He urged African-Americans to create a separate "economic nation within a nation." In Du Bois's mind, socialism was the solution to the race's economic problems.[19]

In concert with the young radicals of the day, Du Bois postulated that "all power in society was channeled through well-organized conglomerations."[20] However, as James Young notes, "unlike the young radicals, Du Bois's socialism was racial rather than working-class in orientation."[21] Du Bois argued that the exploitation of African-Americans was perpetrated by both white capitalists and the white

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[17]Ibid., 34.
[18]Ibid., 16.
[19]Ibid., 20-23.
[20]Ibid., 23.
[21]Ibid., 24.

proletariat. Therefore, a separate black socialist economy must be created.

Many younger observers were highly critical of Du Bois's plan. They labeled it as "black chauvinism." The emphasis on race seemed to create a rift between the "old guard" and the new generation of black thinkers came of age during a revival of American radicalism.

During the 1930's, in the advent of the Great Depression and social instability, the Communist party gained a considerable foothold on the American landscape. The party staged food, unemployment, and eviction protests. They led unionizing drives and courted intellectuals and African-Americans with their commitment to labor and civil rights.

The party was aggressive in its attempts to recruit African-Americans. They achieved minor success with a relatively small number of black "radicals" who joined their ranks. The numbers among whites were reportedly even smaller. However, although the membership may have been small, there were numerous intellectuals who allied themselves with Communist causes.

Through these affiliations, radical magazines such as *New Masses* became the official organ of the party. There were similar radical publications which reflected Communist

ideology.[22] Many aspiring writers of the day, including Wright, had their first works published in these magazines. In fact, Wright's first proletariat poem "A Red Love Note" was published in *Left Front* in 1934. The inclusion of Wright's work in *Left Front* and *New Masses* spoke to a relationship between the black community and the Communist party.

Perhaps the most vivid example of the presence of the Communist party within the black community was the organization of the National Negro Congress in 1936. The National Negro Congress represented an attempt "to bring together over 500 labor, religious, civic, racial, and interracial organizations into some semblance of unity."[23] It was believed that if these organizations could work together, "then they could more efficiently educate Negroes, mold public opinion, and apply pressure for the rights of Negro citizens."[24]

The Communist party used the National Negro Congress as part of an effort to create a "United Front Against Fascism." By 1940, the Congress was firmly under the control of the party. The Congress disintegrating as members began to realize that it was no longer an organization dedicated

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[22]Nina Baym and others, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 1673.
[23]James Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, 58.
[24]Ibid.

to racial equality.

In spite of these setbacks, racial equality remained at the forefront of black intellectual activity during the 1930's. The harsh realities of the Great Depression caused the new generation of black intellectuals to broaden their perspective. Many came to believe that economic forces were more important than race in the lives of African-Americans.[25] As James Young observes:

> It was precisely this de-emphasis of race which most significantly distinguished the young radicals from their elders. These young thinkers were social scientists, recently instructed in the latest social theories which contended that race was indefinable. During the Depression, it became "fashionable" to look at all problems in an economic frame of reference. The economic interpretation seemed to fill the void which was left by the elimination of the race motive.[26]

Although there was a de-emphasis on race during the period, there were some within this new generation of thinkers who "could not be categorized as either traditionally racial or newly radical, for they incorporated elements of both into their own thinking."[27]

A. Philips Randolph, a pioneering labor organizer, was a member of this group. Randolph emphasized race pride, solidarity, and self-reliance in the struggle for black equality. He also concentrated on the economic issues facing

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[25]Ibid., x.
[26]Ibid., 62.
[27]Ibid., 65.

the black community. Unlike the new generation of radicals, Randolph saw race and class as being inextricably linked and equal in the lives of African-Americans.

Randolph's analysis was informed by his work as a labor organizer. He stated on numerous occasions that since the majority of African-Americans were workers, "their problems were the same as other workers--long hours, low wages, and unemployment."[28] Randolph's message gained national attention when he was elected president of the National Negro Congress in 1936.

Throughout his tenure as head of the Congress and chairman of the March on Washington movement, "he taught that organization was the basis of real power."[29] He advised that "only through the exercise of power attainable through the organization of wage earners is it possible increasingly to exact higher wages and shorter hours."[30] This organization of wage earners would lead to political activism, Randolph postulated. This political activism was invaluable in gaining complete black equality. In January of 1941, he issued a call to African-Americans to march on Washington in order to protest segregation and other forms of discrimination in the armed forces and defense industries. James Young makes this comment about Randolph's

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[28]Ibid., 66.
[29]Ibid., 73.
[30]Ibid., 67.

call:

> Randolph's call was highly significant because it was directed to the masses of blacks. It was widely published in the Afro-American press, not just in sophisticated race journals. It was the most concise and simple explanation of the use of power which any black intellectual published during the whole depression decade. Randolph did not just talk about the black masses, he talked to them.[31]

It was this emphasis or turn toward the masses of African-Americans which helped to shape and define black social, political, and cultural thinking during the decade. There was a sentiment during this period that the masses held the key to understanding the black experience in America.

These masses were the subject for an emerging group of American intellectuals--professionally trained black sociologists. E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson were at the forefront. Frazier is best known for his groundbreaking 1939 work *The Negro Family in America*. Throughout the 1930's, Frazier dedicated his energy to the study of the black family. Within this study, Frazier also examined the "Status of the Negro." In league with other radicals of the day, Frazier maintained that the problems facing African-Americans were created by "dominant economic forces" which affected the nation as a whole.

However grim the picture may have been, Frazier was

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[31]**Ibid., 72-73.**

optimistic about the future. Urbanization would "save" African-Americans from an existence of isolation and exploitation. As more African-Americans migrated to the cities, they would come into contact with white workers. This contact, along with other social forces, would help to create a new labor consciousness among African-Americans.

Interracial labor solidarity would lead to the "complete emancipation" of black people in America. Ultimately, Frazier postulated, black equality would come from the "complete assimilation of the values, culture, and institutions of the dominant white society."[32]

Frazier's theoretical arguments were shaped by his training under Robert Park at the University of Chicago. It was Park, "more than any other sociologist, who had redirected the study of race relations away from an emphasis on race and racial differences and toward an emphasis on the ideas of caste, class, and status."[33] Charles S. Johnson also studied under Robert Park during the 1920's. As a social scientist, "he went out of his way to try to be objective."[34] This objectivity was needed in order for black scholars to be "completely honest" in their analysis of the black experience.

With this "objectivity," Johnson argued, like Frazier,

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[32]Ibid., 50.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid., 76.

that African-Americans were desperately behind the rest of the mechanized world because of the isolation of their peasant existence. Johnson also concurred with Frazier that urbanization was paramount in "advancing the general culture of the group."[35] In addition to urbanization, the black community needed a modern education to "bring them into the twentieth century."[36]

Johnson emphasized a labor education that echoed Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee program. African-Americans would be trained to develop techniques of accuracy and skill. This would allow them to adapt and compete in a new complex, industrial world.

Johnson's ideas were frequently published in the organ of the National Urban League *Opportunity*. Throughout the 1930's, Johnson served as editor and "published insightful critiques of American racial practices and policies as well as the work of a number of emerging black novelists, poets, and playwrights."[37] Meanwhile, black journalist George Schuyler maintained that racism flourished in America because it was "profitable to the owning class and flattering to the white proletariat."[38] He also stressed the

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[35]Ibid., 79.
[36]Ibid.
[37]Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey*, Vol.2 (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Printice Hall, 2000), 429.
[38]Young, *Black Writers*, 87-91.

fact that the black masses should fight for economic rather than political power. Ralph Bunche was probably one of the most strident critics of the methodologies and ideologies of the older race men. He contended that race and racialism were constructs and tools used by the owning class to keep white and black workers divided. He shared the belief of many of his contemporaries that the key to black empowerment was for black workers to identify with their white counterparts in a larger class struggle.

These young intellectuals emerged during the Great Depression. As mentioned earlier, the Depression caused this generation to incorporate a new economic interpretation into the analysis of the problems of African-Americans. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was a response to the Depression and it would have a profound effect on black intellectuals and artists of the era.

The Federal Writers' Project, a subdivision of the Works Projects Administration, became a viable institution for many black writers and intellectuals. The purpose of the project "was to create work for unemployed writers by utilizing their literary skills in the public interest;" more specifically, these writers were responsible for creating "handbooks" or guides for each of the forty-eight mainland states.[39]

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[39]**Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale**

The Federal Writers' Project was more than a source of employment, it was a world unto itself. As Robert Bone points out, "writers were brought together through various affiliations and activities surrounding the project: a WPA government worker's union, an independent political and cultural monthly entitled *Direction* as well as an anthology called *American Stuff* which contained contributions from Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, and Wright."[40] Margaret Walker makes this observation:

> What this wonderful boom to artists and writers meant was more than bread and meat on the table. It afforded a rich intellectual camaraderie--shop talk or conversation on the craft and politics and some of the most valued friendships in the literary history of the period.[41]

The WPA not only brought creative artists together, it helped to connect these artists with scholars in various fields. Louis Wirth, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, was the first director of the Chicago Writers' Project. He apparently had a profound impact on Richard Wright.

Wirth provided Wright with reading lists of sociological material. He also introduced Wright to Robert Park and Robert Redfield and as a result, he collaborated with St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton on his own *12,000,000*

University Press, 1965), 113.
[40]Ibid., 113.
[41]Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 70.

Black Voices(1941) and their *Black Metropolis*(1945). Carla Cappetti explains the relationship between the Chicago School of Sociology and the Chicago School of Writing:

> Chicago urban sociologists and novelists intellectually rubbed elbows, and conceptually and methodologically, aesthetically and thematically stood as reference points for one another. The practice of Chicago sociologists and novelists points to a time when good sociology and good literature held hands.[42]

And Wright himself explains the sociological connection:

> The huge mountains of fact piled up by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago gave me my first concrete vision of the forces that molded the urban Negro's body and soul. It was from the scientific findings of men like the Robert Park, Robert E. Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew the meanings for my documentary book *12,000,000 Black Voices;* for my novel *Native Son*[43]

The sociological dimension of the Chicago Renaissance was one of several factors which distinguished the movement from its predecessor--the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance witnessed the emergence of the New Negro. This New Negro's task "was to discover and define his culture and his contribution to what had been thought of as a white civilization."[44] In Alain Locke's words, the Negro "now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of

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[42]**Cappetti, *Writing Chicago*, 32.**
[43]**St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), xviii-xix.**
[44]**Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 59.**

collaborator and participant in American civilization."[45] Making contributions to civilization was part of the larger effort of race-building. Harlem Renaissance intellectuals emphasized black achievement and race pride. They often avoided serious problems within the black urban community at the time. To look at these issues(poverty, crime, violence) would have been detrimental to the building of racial self-esteem.

Race pride was paramount in this era of post-World War I black militancy. This New Negro would reject accommodation and fight vehemently for social equality. World War I was a social catalyst for millions of Americans. African-Americans had fought to make democracy and self-determination a reality throughout the world. In light of this contribution, African-Americans now demanded to be treated as full citizens.[46]

This demand for equality would be bolstered by an indisputable wave of cultural productivity. This productivity would be shaped by a new racial consciousness. Part of this new consciousness was embracing the new "Jazz Age." Black musicians introduced the world to a new sound which incorporated African and European musical elements. Harlem soon became the center of this new jazz culture.

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[45]**Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Charles Boni, 1925), 15.**
[46]**Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 54-55.**

The Harlem Renaissance also saw the development of primitivism--an ideology which emphasized the "primitive" or exotic aspects of black culture. Harlem Renaissance artists sought to tap into the rural folkways of the black southern past. They also sought to identify with Africa and the African past although their knowledge of the continent was somewhat limited. It was "through a cultural awakening that this New Negro was to express himself."[47]

Chicago Renaissance artists sought to express themselves through a new social consciousness. The Chicago Renaissance witnessed the emergence of a new social realism. The Chicago School of black writers, led by Richard Wright, included Chicago natives Gwendolyn Brooks and William Attaway as well as Margaret Walker, Willard Motley and Arna Bontemps, a veteran of the Harlem Renaissance. They "wrote extensively about the Great Migration and how it transformed the black community."[48] Chicago Renaissance artists described, in sometimes vivid detail, the pathology that emerged following that migration. Confronted with the devastation of the Great Depression, Chicago School writers began to rethink the nature of African-American literature. They felt that as artists, they had a social and political obligation to present a "realistic" portrait of the black

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[47]Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 60.
[48]Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* (Summer 1986): 466-467.

experience in America.

In order to achieve this portrait, it was crucial that black artists were accountable to themselves and to the black community. Instead of being "contributors" to the development of American civilization, these artists would be contributors of a new understanding of the social, historical, and cultural dynamics of the black experience.

Similar to its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago Renaissance was not limited to literary activity. Music was an essential element of any black cultural activity. Although the decade of the Harlem Renaissance has been documented as the "Jazz Age," the 1930's saw "the nurturing of a distinct jazz culture on the South Side of Chicago."[49] Jazz great Duke Ellington arrived in Chicago in 1930 to find a "glittering" community with a lively night life.[50] Louis Armstrong also passed through Chicago and helped to lay a foundation for a rich musical legacy. Darlene Clark Hine makes this statement:

> The South Side was the beating heart of the city's Jazz Age. Chicago did not replace New York as the major location for the aspiring jazz musician. It remained make a name for yourself.[51]

Another facet of this musical legacy was the development of gospel music. Chicago's Thomas Dorsey was

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[49]**Hine, Hine, Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey*, 456.**
[50]**Ibid.**
[51]**Ibid.**

"one of the nation's leading composers of the blues throughout the 1920's."[52] During the 1930's, Dorsey proved himself an innovator when "he synthesized elements of the blues with religious hymns."[53] The result was a new black urban gospel. Through relentless touring and promotion, Dorsey not only won individual acclaim but helped to bring gospel music to national prominence. Dorsey was aided in his campaign by Chicago-based performer Mahalia Jackson, who is considered by many to be one of the greatest gospel singers in American history.[54]

While Chicago-based gospel music was making inroads onto the national scene, a small black dance company was attempting to establish itself within the concert dance world. The company's founder was Katherine Dunham, a gifted choreographer and anthropologist who sought to create an institution for blacks to study dance.[55] With the support of the WPA, Dunham's Negro Dance Group survived and flourished throughout the 1930's and 1940's.

Dunham shared with her peers in the artistic community a commitment to socially relevant issues. She risked her career on several occasions when she spoke out against Jim Crow.[56] Dunham's actions spoke to the new school of social

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[52]Ibid., 457.
[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid.
[56]Ibid., 458.

realism which shaped the 1930's and the Chicago Renaissance.

Like their literary counterparts, Chicago Renaissance visual artists sought to portray the "real lives" of the common people. Chicago artists, such as Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, and Eldzier Cortor, and Harlem's Jacob Lawrence "celebrated both rural and urban working-class black people while implicitly criticizing the racial hierarchy of power and privilege."[57]

Richard Wright was at the forefront of this new Chicago school of artists. He envisioned a group of black writers who would "render the life of their race in social and realistic terms."[58] It was early 1936 and Wright was reeling from the demise of the John Reed Clubs. The John Reed Clubs were crucial to Wright's life and career because it was through the clubs that Wright was introduced to the Communist party. The clubs also provided him with one of the first opportunities to explore and make public his creative endeavors.

The John Reed Clubs had been organized at a national conference in Chicago in May of 1932. Closely controlled by the Communist party, "the clubs were designed to serve as one of its cultural instruments" with the goals of "making the club a functioning center of proletarian culture" and

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[57]Ibid., 459.
[58]Richard Wright, "Negroes Launch Literary Quarterly," *Daily Worker* (June 8, 1937): 7.

"creating and publishing art and literature of a proletarian character."[59]

Wright was introduced to the clubs by friends from the post office in the fall of 1933. His activities increased quickly soon after he joined. In 1934, "he was elected executive secretary of the Chicago branch, and in March of that year, he spoke to the John Reed Club of Indianapolis. Soon afterward he joined the Communist party."[60] The party came to provide "an intellectual framework and an emotional home for Wright during the next decade."[61]

Unfortunately, as Wright's activities increased, the Communist party decided to dissolve the clubs. This was because the party felt that it needed more influential representatives to advance the popular front. Since club members were not sufficiently well-known to serve party propaganda purposes, a national organization restricted to noted writers and artists would replace them.[62]

The American Writers' Congress opened in New York on April 26, 1935. Wright, along with thirty-eight others, was elected to the national council of the League of American Writers on the last day of the congress. The league replaced the John Reed clubs and Wright "remained a faithful member

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[59]Keneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 50-51.
[60]Ibid., 60-61.
[61]Ibid., 62.
[62]Ibid., 62-64.

of the league until his break with the Communist party itself."

In February of 1936, Wright attended the first National Negro Congress in Chicago. He was sent there by the Communist party which had organized the gathering. Here, he met the poet Frank Marshall Davis. Soon afterwards, "Wright introduced himself to playwright Theodore Ward and the two cooperated in forming a discussion group of black writers, most of whom were associated with the Federal Writers' Project."[63]

The South Side Writers' Group began in April 1936. The group was "an outgrowth of the National Negro Congress" and its first meeting was held in the South Parkway home of poet Bob Davis.[64] Margaret Walker provides this interesting account of that meeting:

> When I arrived at the address given on the card, I discovered I was very late. I heard a man expounding on the sad state of Negro writing at that point in the thirties, and he was punctuating his remarks with pungent epithets. I drew back in Sunday-school horror, totally shocked by his strong speech, but I steeled myself to hear him out. The man was Richard Wright.[65]

Walker goes on to say that Wright was "the leader, a kind of catalyst and exciting hot center of that group."[66] In addition to Ward and Davis, the group consisted of Edward

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[63]Ibid., 66.
[64]Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 71.
[65]Ibid., 72.
[66]Ibid., 73.

Bland, Russell Marshall, Fern Gayden, Dorothy Sutton, Marian Minus, Theodore Bland, Julius Weil, Banfield Gordon, Arna Bontemps, as well as other "less talented beginners."[67]

The second meeting took place at the Lincoln Center on Oakwood Boulevard. Margaret Walker read a group of her poems and received a favorable reception. Wright also read a piece of prose in progress. Arna Bontemps was later introduced to the club.[68]

In article of the June 8, 1937 issue of *Daily Worker*, Wright recalled the agenda of a new generation of black writers:

> Following the National Negro Congress in Chicago, a year ago, a group of writers...formed the first group whose aim was to render the life of their race in social and realistic terms. For the first time in Negro history, problems such as nationalism in literary perspective, the relation of the Negro writer to politics and social movements were formulated and discussed.[69]

And one year earlier, Wright said this:

> There are young writers and artists in Chicago who stand clear of the mire...The job is a big one, it is nothing less than the task of building our own organs of expression, mobilizing our own audiences, maintaining our own critical standards, and nursing and developing our own talent. And the beginning of such a movement has already started.[70]

As Margaret Walker asserts, Wright's sociopolitical

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[67]Ibid., 77.
[68]Ibid., 74.
[69]Wright, "Negroes Launch Literary Quarterly," 7.
[70]Wright, "In Defense of Meyer Levin," *Poetry* (June 1936): 3.

orientation "began in Chicago and it was this orientation that he passed on to the members of the South Side Writers' Group. This political direction Wright expressed was rooted in black nationalism."[71] The issues raised at the South Side Writers' Group meetings would be the issues central to Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

During the weekly meetings of the group, Wright would ask group members to bring at least one piece of writing to read aloud to the group. Margaret Walker recalls that most members were very reluctant to comply at first. In addition to the early draft of "Blueprint," Wright read stories that would appear in *Uncle Tom's Children*.[72]

In November of 1936, Wright achieved his first real success in fiction with the publication of the short story "Big Boy Leaves Home." He was now a professional writer and pursued his career in New York. He arrived in New York in May 1937 and would attend the second American Writers' Congress the following month. He later moved to Harlem and became immersed in various forms of writing. On crucial project was an ambitious literary magazine entitled *New Challenge*.

Although Wright had moved to New York City, he remained the leader of the South Side Writers' Group. He sought to

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[71]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 77.**
[72]**Ibid., 72.**

create an organ for the group with the publication of *New Challenge*. *New Challenge* was actually a revival of a magazine created by Dorothy West in 1934 called *Challenge*. Its purpose was to "revive the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance."[73]

According to Michel Fabre, the new magazine was

> part of a rather belated Party effort to unite the literary elements of the Left, but considering the brief career of *Left Front* and the almost immediate failure of *Midwest*, there was no telling whether *New Challenge* would finally realize Wright's dream of bringing together a group of progressive black authors.[74]

Dorothy West was the editor of the new magazine but "Wright was ultimately responsible for the radical orientation of the publication."[75] Keneth Kinnamon asserts that "West compromised her stylistic standards in order to encourage young writers."[76] However, she was eager to print "competent social protest material." Wright and his Chicago group shared her aspirations and "Wright's correspondence with Margaret Walker reveals that he eventually did most of the work for the publication and made almost all of the editorial decisions."[77]

Kinnamon postulates that the editorial emphasis of the

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[73]**Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, 68-69.**
[74]**Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), 142.**
[75]**Ibid.**
[76]**Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, 69.**
[77]**Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 142.**

magazine indicated a general shift in African-American writing from "the exotic bohemianism of the Harlem Renaissance to the social consciousness of Wright and other WPA writers."[78] Wright's WPA associates included Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, Willard Motley, Robert Hayden, Frank Marshall Davis, Theodore Ward, and William Attaway.

As mentioned earlier, Wright announced the launching of the magazine in an article for the *Daily Worker*. Wright described the South Side Writers' Group and its exploration of the relationship between folk tradition and literature. He also discussed at length his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," which appeared in the first issue of the magazine. In the essay, Wright presents a scathing critique of the traditional trends of black writing which he characterized as pandering to a white audience. He also contends that black writers ignored the concerns of black people and in turn, ignored the collective consciousness embodied in black folklore. Ultimately, Wright concluded that social consciousness and responsibility should be the guiding factors for black writers.

In November of 1937, *New Challenge* debuted; "almost two months behind schedule."[79] The contents came from friends or acquaintances of Wright's. They included poems by Frank

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[78]**Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, 69.**
[79]**Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 145.**

Marshall Davis and articles by Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, and Alain Locke. It also contained one of the first literary efforts by Ralph Ellison.[80] In Wright's absence, Margaret Walker "became the most active member of the South Side Writers' Group."[81] She "obtained subscriptions for *New Challenge*, did research for Wright and kept him informed of current events through frequent correspondence."[82] Unfortunately, the subscriptions Walker received for the magazine were not enough to keep it in circulation after the first issue. In addition to the absence of regular subscribers, "the magazine had no advertising nor an assured audience."[83]

The demise of *New Challenge* seemed to foreshadow the fate of the South Side Writers' Group. According to Margaret Walker's account of events, she was at the center of a major controversy involving Wright and members of the group. Walker "was accused by Theodore Ward of breaking up friendships in Chicago between Wright and all the members of the South Side Writers' Group."[84] She was also accused of "having designs" on Wright; manipulating and controlling him.[85] She was told that "she prevented Ward's play from

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[80]Ibid.
[81]Ibid.
[82]Ibid.
[83]Ibid., 146.
[84]Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 143.
[85]Ibid.

being published in *New Challenge*."[86] One of the most sensitive and volatile accusations was that she created and then spread the rumor that Ward and Langston Hughes had a sexual relationship.[87]

Michel Fabre makes an intriguing observation in his biography of Wright:

> As far as he[Wright] was concerned, she[Walker] was a devoted friend with deep feelings for him, but in her frankness, she apparently committed indiscretions which almost lost Wright some of his friends in Chicago, with the result that her visit, which could have been a happy reunion, in fact marked the date when Wright withdrew from her.[88]

And Walker offered this thought on the situation:

> Years would pass before I let the thought pass my mind that both Wright and I had been set up by Ted. I knew his motivations were jealousy, ambition, and open malice but it never occurred to me that people would go to such lengths to destroy a friendship nor that close ties of friendship could be so easily broken.[89]

By the fall of 1938, the South Side Writers' Group had dissipated. Apparently, rumors, accusations, and innuendoes created tension and rifts among group members.

The South Side Writers' Group was one facet of a multifaceted vision that Wright had for transforming African-American literature and African-American cultural expression in general. Creating an organization was a

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[86]**Ibid.**
[87]**Ibid.**
[88]**Fabre, *Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 195.**
[89]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 143.**

crucial step in the process of making radical changes to an existing form of creative expression.

CHAPTER TWO

REVISING THE PARADIGM: RICHARD WRIGHT'S THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS

I

The Chicago Renaissance signified a transition in black cultural expression. Richard Wright was a facilitator of this transition. Wright sought to transform the nature of black writing in America. He implored and instructed black artists to look to themselves, to their community, and to their folk heritage for their art. Through this process, he argued, a new social consciousness would emerge, exemplified in a new social realism, the social realism that was central to the Chicago Renaissance.

In 1937, Wright published what Michel Fabre called "the most complete, coherent and profound statement of Wright's theories of Afro-American writing."[1] "Blueprint for Negro Writing" signifies an ideological shift from the "art for art's sake" thinking of the Harlem Renaissance to a new racial and social consciousness. Informed greatly by black

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[1]**Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Marrow and Company, 1973), 143.**

nationalism and Marxism, the essay was Wright's effort to articulate a new aesthetic that would speak directly to the masses of African-Americans.

Wright's ideas have been discussed in numerous biographies. Eugene Miller has provided an insightful study of these ideas in his work *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright*. However, these studies have not provided a close examination of "Blueprint" itself. The essay is divided into ten parts which detail Wright's theories. The opening section, entitled "The Role of Negro Writing: Two Definitions," chronicles the history of black writing in America. Wright postulates that black writing has "been confined to humble novels, poems and plays" in which black writers have begged white America for recognition, acceptance, and respect. However, their efforts were in vain for white America never took them seriously as artists.

When white America did recognize black writing, it was an "accident." Wright dismisses the literature of the Harlem Renaissance as "the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money."

Wright moves on to discuss the role of black writing within the black community. He characterizes black writing as being "something external to the lives of educated

Negroes themselves." In the concluding paragraph of the section, Wright states his two part thesis-- "(1) the best of black writing rarely addressed the needs, sufferings, and aspirations of black people themselves and (2) the recognition of this fact places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises a doubt as to the validity of its present direction."

The next section of the essay describes what Wright calls "The Minority Outlook." Here Wright invokes Lenin in his arguments about the "unique minority position" of black creative writers. Wright opens the section by pointing out Lenin's observation that "oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves." This is the mistake that black writers have been making over the years, according to Wright.

In order to correct this problem, asserts Wright, black writers need to align themselves with black workers:

> The Negro workers, propelled by the harsh conditions their lives, have demonstrated this consciousness and mobility for economic and political action there can be no doubt. But has this consciousness been reflected the work of Negro writers to the same degree as it has in the Negro workers' struggle to free Hendon and the Scottsboro Boys, in the drive toward unionism, in the fight against lynching? Have they as creative writers taken advantage of their unique minority position? The answer decidedly is no. Negro writers have lagged sadly, and as time passes the gap widens between them and their people. An emphasis

> upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook.

Black writers need to catch up with black workers in this sense. Black writers also need to adopt an "attitude of self consciousness and self-criticism," Wright says, which must come through an understanding of black culture. This culture, according to Wright, "stems mainly from two sources: (1) the black church and (2) black folklore."

The black church proved crucial to African-Americans during their struggle for human rights between 1820-1860. This struggle was revolutionary until, Wright says, "religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial." Wright ultimately expresses great disappointment with religion and the black church when he insists that the "archaic morphology of Christian salvation" became the only sense of a whole universe.

Wright has a different perspective on black folklore, however. He characterizes black folklore as the "most indigenous and complete expression" of the American Negro:

> Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns--all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. One would have thought that Negro writers in the last

> century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path.

As a result of black writers "straying" from this path, two separate cultures emerged: one, unwritten and recognized, for the black masses and another, "parasitic and mannered," for the Negro bourgeoisie. Because black writers have lost a certain consciousness, which is embedded in the life experiences of the black masses.

This racial consciousness is a crucial issue in the next two sections of the essay which deal with black nationalism. Wright asserts that black nationalism is an intrinsic and unavoidable aspect of the black experience in America: "psychologically, this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore." This folklore "embodies the memories and hope of a struggle for freedom in the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture." It also "contains the collective sense of Negro life in America."

The nationalism Wright sees in black folklore is also "manifest in the social institutions of black people." According to Wright:

> There is a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world,a Negro school system, Negro

> professions; in short, a Negro way of life in America. The Negro people did not ask for this, and deep down, though they express themselves through their institutions and adhere to this special way of life, they do not want it now. This special existence was forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet and mob rule. They accepted these negative conditions with the inevitability of a tree which must live or perish in whatever soil it finds itself.

In order for black writers to mold or influence the consciousness of black people, they must speak directly to the people through this "warping way of life." Wright goes on to say how black writers should address black nationalism:

> Negro writers must accept the nationalist 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.
> And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. 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 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.

Ironically, as Wright instructs black writers to accept black nationalism, he also makes a case for Marxism. Wright presses young writers to adopt a Marxist analysis and vision:

> Many young writers have grown to believe that a Marxist analysis of society presents such a picture. It creates a picture which, when placed before the eyes of the writer, should unify his

> personality, organize his emotions, butters him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world. And in turn, this changed world will dialectically change the writer. Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer. Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.

A Marxist analysis would expose the horrors and injustices of capitalism. Once black writers are able to "see" these horrors and injustices, they would no longer be controlled and manipulated by them. This would, in turn, free them to present a more "clear" vision of the black experience. This presentation "should be simple but not simplistic." It should "contain all the complexity, the strangeness, the 'magic wonder' of life."

In the next section, Wright moves on to address the "Problem of Perspective." He defines "perspective" as:

> that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.

Perspective also means that:

> a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth's surface belongs to the working

> class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.

But a black writer's sole concern should not be "rendering the social scene." Black writers should embrace all of the social, political, and economic aspects of the black experience. Wright speaks of the "whole life and culture" of African-Americans. The black experience should be approached from numerous angles with no limitation on technical and stylistic freedom.

This approach is crucial in the depiction of a "new reality," and requires a "greater consciousness and discipline than was necessary for the so-called Harlem school of expression." Wright urges black writers to "seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals," to serve as a social force or entity within the black community. But Wright also warns that black writers should not try to take on too much responsibility, for if they attempt to perform the social office of other professions, "then autonomy of craft is lost and writing becomes detrimentally fused with other interests."

The concluding section of the essay discusses "The Necessity for Collective Work." Wright opens the section by describing the isolation of the black writer, isolation

among black writers and isolation between black and white writers. This isolation exists because of years of segregation and exclusion. Wright offers a two-prong solution to this problem: "(1) the ideological unity of black writers and (2) an alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of the day." This, he says, "is the prerequisite for collective work." By placing cultural health above "narrow sectional prejudices," liberal writers of all races could "help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow." Simultaneously, black writers could "help weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with hardier and sturdier types."[2]

II

"Blueprint for Negro Writing" is a synthesis of numerous theories that Wright collected and absorbed as part of his own intellectual development. Wright's ideas were informed by several factors: (1) his personal background, (2) his reading of American and European writers and thinkers, and (3) the influence and impact of the Communist party.

According to Margaret Walker, during Wright's five years in Jackson, Mississippi, between the age of twelve and

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[2]All direct quotes, summarizing, and paraphrasing are from the essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *New Challenge* (Fall 1937): 53-65.

seventeen, he "solidified his antagonism not only toward organized Christian religion but toward black bourgeois aspirations."[3] He described this period vividly in *Black Boy*. His most profound memories focus on his grandmother Margaret Wilson's "fanaticism" as a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Margaret Walker calls Wilson and Wright's aunts "religious fanatics who sublimated fear, sex, and hatred of the world around them into their religion."[4] Bible reading and praying were daily occupations and long prayers were said morning and night. The Bible was constantly quoted and "Wright was told early that nothing good would come of him."[5]

Wright "was bewildered and frightened by the strict fanaticism of his grandmother's house."[6] As years passed, his confusion turned to rage. He became wary and "learned how to avoid whippings by keeping his activities to himself."[7] In *Black Boy*, Wright says he attempted to compromise when he confessed belief in his grandmother's religion and submitted to baptism but afterwards, according to Margaret Walker, he "hardened himself against his family" and "he was determined to be himself, even pitted against

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[3]Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 35.
[4]Ibid., 33.
[5]Ibid., 34.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Ibid.

his grandmother, her unmerciful God, and the devil himself."[8]

But, although enraged and repulsed by his grandmother's attitude and behavior, Wright was also fascinated by another aspect of her personality and outlook. According to Eugene Miller in *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright*, Wright felt that his grandmother was motivated by "something that lay behind her obvious and pervasive religious consciousness."[9]

The "something" that Wright describes in his unpublished essay "Memories of My Grandmother" he also found in the blues and other forms of black expression, an emotional atmosphere that gave these forms of expression meaning. It was "something in the spontaneous black American 'folk psyche' which Wright saw as a defining characteristic of African-American thought and emotional processes."[10] This "something" that "lay behind Wright's grandmother's attitude toward life and the attitude of black folks in general was crucial to his goal as a creative artist;" to produce, as he described it in *American Hunger*, a "vast, delicate, intricate, and psychological structure" and "write of the people in his own environment," to achieve a level of

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[8]Ibid.
[9]Eugene Miller, *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 6.
[10]Ibid.

expression that captured a "physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression."[11]

His grandmother had it-- "something" that "enabled her to give a reality to the world she created."[12] This was the reality he strove to give his works:

> I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spirit of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a new world.[13]

Eugene Miller asserts that this passage, "read with knowledge of his grandmother's influence on his poetic development, underscores religious ritual as the analog of his ideal of literary activity."[14]

Wright gave the "something" that he discovered in his grandmother numerous labels throughout his career-- "black power," "a primal attitude," a "curtain," or "paganism." Eugene Miller refers to it as a "fluid, intense feeling at the center of human mental life which provides the touchstone of reality."[15]

Wright first began his exploration of this "feeling" mentioned above in his earliest published works "Superstition" and "Big Boy Leaves Home." "Big Boy Leaves

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[11]Ibid., 7.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 21-22.
[14]Miller, *Voice of a Native Son*, 8.
[15]Ibid., 22.

Home," a lynching story dealing with Southern racism and race relations, is, as Margaret Walker observed, "saturated with black folklife--folk speech, folk action, and folk ways."[16] In the story, "violence and tragedy are inevitable, implacable, and absolute.[17] The story is "stark realism," a copy of real life horror that is authentic.

According to Eugene Miller, Wright's poetics are found in a "structure of mythic overlay--projecting one set of events or constructs against another," a structure, it can be argued, he derived from the folk expression he had absorbed during his childhood, another version of his grandmother's penchant for "yoking disparate things together in some overruling 'mood' that gives these elements their meaning."[18]

The years Wright spent with his grandmother in Jackson, Mississippi also saw the emergence of his class consciousness. The black social and business worlds of the South were tightly knit enclaves of segregation led by members of the black elite.[19] Wright was excluded and alienated from this elite by poverty. This poverty also helped to shape "deep resentments and early complexes."[20]

In *Black Boy* Wright describes an incident that

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[16]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 82.**
[17]**Ibid., 83.**
[18]**Miller, *Voice of a Native Son*, 60.**
[19]**Walker,35.**
[20]**Ibid.**

indicates his "contempt and repugnance" for the black bourgeoisie:

> I had to make up my mind quickly; I was faced with a matter of principle. I wanted to graduate, but I did not want to make a public speech that was not my own. "Professor, I'm going to say my own speech that night...He grew angry...I went home, hurt but determined. I had been talking to a "bought" man and he had tried to "buy" me. I felt that I had been dealing with something unclean.[21]

Margaret Walker contends that Wright "grew to believe that educated black people with middle-class aspirations were disdainful."[22]

Wright's experiences with the black bourgeoisie as well as his family and Southern whites caused him to turn away from Jackson, Mississippi and look toward the North, a.k.a. the "Promised Land." At the age of seventeen, Wright took the money he had been saving over the years and ran from his Mississippi home. He ended up in Memphis, Tennessee where he found work at an optical company. Memphis came to "serve as a kind of a way station or halfway house for Wright, between the rural South and the urban North."[23]

It was in Memphis that Wright discovered H.L. Mencken. In a copy of *Commercial Appeal*, Wright ran across an article that scorned the social critic.[24] Wright "wondered what on Earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn

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[21]**Wright, *Black Boy*, 193-195.**
[22]**Walker, 36.**
[23]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 40.**
[24]**Wright, *Black Boy*, 267.**

of the South" and "set out to learn more about the man."[25]

Wright obtained two books by Mencken--*A Book of Prefaces* and *Prejudices*. As he read, he says, he was "jarred and shocked" by Mencken's style:

> Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hat denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weakness of people, mocking God, authority.[26]

At one point, Wright was so moved by what he read that he "stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words."[27] His reading "made him aware of the inadequacy of his formal education" and he "developed a mixed feeling of inferiority and awesome respect for the printed word."[28]

Wright's intellectual development began in Memphis. He was running away from a South which had oppressed him and other blacks in numerous ways. Although he never internalized or accepted the racism that plagued him, he was "permanently scarred with a psychic wound of racism" and "he would carry the South with him everywhere he went: the nightmare of lynching, the trauma of Jim Crow, and the psychological fear and intimidation of white oppression and violence."[29] Margaret Walker provides keen insight into the

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[25]Ibid., 267.
[26]Ibid., 270-271.
[27]Ibid., 271.
[28]Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 41.

connection between Wright's personal background and his art with this observation:

> I am convinced that the best of Richard Wright's fiction grew out of the first nineteen years of his life. All he ever wrote of great strength and terrifying beauty must be understood in this light. His subjects and themes, his folk references and history, his characters and places come from the interest in violence, lynching, rape, and murder goes back to the twilight of a Southern past.[30]

Wright left the south in November of 1927 and arrived in Chicago later that year. He had "yearned to be in a place where he could participate in a democracy; more specifically, he wanted the right to vote."[31] This was the cornerstone of living in a free society. The South that he left behind would have surely consumed him physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Political freedom was only one of several reasons it was imperative for Wright to "escape" his birthplace.

Wright's political development "moved in stages over five years from 1927 until 1932."[32] In 1930, Wright was working in the Chicago post office, where he met his lifelong friend Abe Aaron, among other intellectuals and radicals who contributed to his political education.

The Chicago post office proved to be crucial in

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[29]Ibid., 42.
[30]Ibid., 43.
[31]Ibid., 57.
[32]Ibid.

Wright's personal and professional development. It was here that "Wright made friends who would lead him to join the John Reed Club and the Communist party" and in turn, "the Communist party would be the place where Wright's social consciousness was raised to a new level and he became a revolutionary."[33]

During his affiliation with the John Reed Club, Wright received his "political education." After a "steady diet of Communist propaganda, he absorbed a reading list of recommended books" and was fascinated to learn that "there were poor people all over the world, a working class of more than black people, and that race as a stigma had an economic base and a social purpose."[34] He read Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and was intrigued. However, Marx's ideas proved limited in terms of addressing the plight of black people in America. As a result, he began to read sociology, psychology, and history. In *American Hunger*, he recalled his lack of the general theoretical knowledge that would have sustained his creative attempts:

> Something was missing in my imaginative efforts: my flights of imagination were too subjective, too lacking in reference to social action. I hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living, for a knowledge of the forms of life about me for eyes to see the bony structure of personality for theories to light up the shadows of conduct.[35]

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[33]**Ibid.**, 63.
[34]**Ibid.**

In addition to his extensive reading, Wright would often observe and record various aspects of black life in and around Chicago. After being laid off from a hospital, Wright was assigned by the relief system to a South Side youth club.[36] It was here that he found a wealth of material that would serve as the foundation for such works as *Native Son*:

> Each day black boys between the ages of eight and twenty-five came to swim, draw and read. They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house. For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics, and crime. I kept pencil and paper in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions. The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, twisted dreams, their all too clear destinies; and I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here.[37]

Here, as Michel Fabre notes, "Wright was able to acquire the social and psychological background that was later crucial to the creation of Bigger Thomas, but also to share without condemning the passions of the delinquents."[38]

As Wright continued his reading and absorbing of materials, he soon learned to analyze the plight black people in Marxist terms:

> It seemed to me that here at last in the realm of

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[35]Wright, ***American Hunger***, 23.
[36]Kinnamon, ***The Emergence of Richard Wright***, 62.
[37]Wright, ***American Hunger***, 100.
[38]Fabre, ***The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright***,108.

> revolutionary expression was where Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for experiences of the disinherited, and there were none of the same lispings of the missionary in it.[39]

It was during this period that he found his voice as a poet. He wrote:

> Feeling for the first time that I could speak to listening ears, I wrote a wild, crude poem in free verse, coining images of black hands playing, working, holding bayonets, stiffening finally in death...I read it and felt that in a clumsy way it linked white life with black, merged two streams of common experience.[40]

Wright was educated by friends in the party on professional writing. He was taught "how to express himself, how to find publishing outlets and an agent, and how to promote himself."[41]

Wright's intellectual and creative development "coincided with the growth and development of American naturalism" as he "wrote prose in the naturalistic tradition" and "his use of the anti-hero and the subhuman being characters was naturalistic."[42] It is also important to note the significance of Wright's being in Chicago during this period. As Margaret Walker observes, "American naturalism seems to have been born in the Midwest. So many of its progenitors lived in Chicago it seemed made for that

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[39]Wright, ***American Hunger***, 134.
[40]Ibid., 135.
[41]Walker, ***Daemonic Genius***, 64.
[42]Ibid., 81.

city."[43]

As Wright grew into his new home city, he expanded his knowledge with an array of reading. As mentioned earlier, he read across disciplines. This reading inevitably informed his reading of literature and literary theory. In *American Hunger*, Wright mentions his "accidental discovery" of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* on a library shelf. He also speaks of the profound impact of Stein on his creative development:

> Repeatedly I took stabs at writing, but the results were so poor I would tear up the sheets. I was striving for a level of expression that matched those of the novels I read. Under the influence of Stein's *Three Lives*, I spent hours and days pounding out disconnected sentences for the sheer love of words.[44]

Wright was quite adamant about Stein's "influence" on him as an artist. However, Eugene Miller points out some inconsistencies in Wright's account. After careful examination, Miller concludes that "the extent to which Wright used Stein's stylization as a model for his own is at best limited."[45] Miller also contends that Wright's efforts to imitate Stein's style "left few traces."[46]

But Miller does admit that Stein's prose provided Wright with "a kind of forest of Arden or Prospero's island,

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[43]**Ibid., 82.**
[44]**Wright, *American Hunger*, 22.**
[45]**Miller, *Voice of a Native Son*, 65.**
[46]**Ibid.**

functioning for him as Paris had done for American expatriate writers and artists of the 1920's."[47] Wright "seems to have felt that prose contained the deeply attractive 'something' that he found in his grandmother's outlook. It was the something that he could never fully explain but that led to some valuable, speculative insights concerning African-American folk imagination."[48]

Wright's discovery and exploration of this folk imagination was part of an intellectual and creative journey. When he arrived in Chicago in November 1927, Wright was a "callow youth nineteen years old having only his dreams and ambitions as baggage."[49] When he left ten years later, he was a "mature man who possessed a keen social perspective on the problems of black people, a political animal who had become a radical and a Marxist, and most importantly, he was a professional in the craft and art of writing."[50]

Wright certainly solidified his place as one of the great American and African-American writers of his time. As Margaret Walker asserts, "he must be remembered for a number of reasons, and one of these is illustrated best in his theories of creativity. His ideas changed as his

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[47]**Ibid., 62.**
[48]**Ibid.**
[49]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 85.**
[50]**Ibid.**

philosophies changed. These changes can be seen in his fiction. In his earliest stories, one sees the unconscious schoolboy who is under the influences of but rebelling against the fundamentalism of his grandmother's fanatic religious beliefs."[51]

In Chicago Wright experienced an awakening in his social consciousness. Wright was evolving as an intellectual and an artist. He was constantly searching for answers and trying to understand himself, black culture, American culture, and the world in general. He found many of the answers to his questions through extensive self-education and his involvement with the Communist party. This intellectual journey culminated with the publication of "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in 1937.

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[51]Ibid., 101.

CHAPTER THREE

THE APPRENTICE NOVEL: *LAWD TODAY!*

Richard Wright made his first attempt at a full-length novel sometime between 1935 and 1937, about seven years after he arrived in Chicago. This "apprentice" novel, *Lawd Today!*, originally titled *Cesspool* was published posthumously in 1963, and represented a significant and continued effort for Wright. In the forward found in the unexpurgated edition of *Lawd Today!*, Arnold Rampersad

> speculates that early on publishers could have possibly been repulsed by the extreme realism and the saturation of sexual language and situations of lust that Wright openly sets forth.[1] Rampersad further adds that the work's four main characters are allowed to include white women as objects and fantasies of their obsessive sexual desire. This obsession unrelieved by the slightest romantic element is recounted in language and scenes of a frankness and even crudeness seldom seen previously in America literature.

He continues to say that perhaps

> White editors might have believed, not without reason, that the American reading public was not ready for such renegade thoughts and

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[1]Arnold Rampersad, in Richard Wright, *Lawd Today!* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1963), vi.

undisciplined language on the part of blacks.[2] Rampersad also speaks of Wright's sense of kinship with major American realists and naturalists including Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. He says that when Wright borrowed a number of devices and techniques employed by Dos Passos who included the graphic use of newspaper headlines and radio announcements in his U.S.A. trilogy, he thereby gave *Lawd Today!* a sense both of history and immediacy.[3] He further states that as a young writer's book, obviously the novel sprang out of Wright's life and his particular experience as a sensitive, highly intelligent black migrant hungry for a sense of achievement and his trying to make his way in the midst of the Depression in the black South of Chicago.[4] On the whole, the novel has not received a great deal of attention from critics. However, the handful of critics who provide some crucial observations include Russell Carl Brignano's brief discussion of *Lawd Today!* in his work *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works*. Brignano primarily focuses on Wright's depiction of African-Americans and the 1930's Chicago environment. Edward Margolies provides valuable insight into the novel in his work *The Art of Richard Wright*. He analyzes the dissolution of folk elements and discusses Wright's literary

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[2]Ibid., vi.
[3]Ibid., vii.
[4]Ibid., viii.

models--James T. Farrell, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos as well as the psychology of Jake Jackson, the main character.

Furthermore, as Michel Fabre observes, "For the first time Wright was trying to transform, via dialogue and description both his sociological knowledge and his own experience."[5] Keneth Kinnamon discusses the novel in the context of Wright as an emerging artist and points out Wright's failure to fuse the elements of folklore and the numerous sociological themes. In addition, Kinnamon makes a connection between *Lawd Today!* and "Blueprint for Negro Writing":

> It is useful to approach *Lawd Today!* with "Blueprint for Negro Writing" clearly in mind, for the essay seems a clear statement of the novel's intention. . . .[6]

For sure, that this novel stands for more than a black migrant trying to make his way in the South Side of Chicago during the Depression is evident when one discerns that Richard Wright made certain that his work was "addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations," contrary to writers of the Harlem Renaissance era who "were far better to others than they had been to themselves":

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[5]Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Marrow and Company, 1973), 86.
[6]Keneth Kinnamon , *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 76.

> Negro writing in the past has been confined to . . . prim and decorous ambassadors who went-a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people.[7]

Wright continues when he says that for the most part, these "artistic ambassadors' were received "as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks." And under these conditions Negro writing was characterized by two aspects: "a sort of ornamentation, the hallmark of 'achievement' and " . . . the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice."[8]

To begin, Wright opens the novel with the first section called "Commonplace" and chronicles the main character's activities beginning with the time he awakens from a disturbing dream in the morning until he goes to work in the afternoon. The disturbing dream itself is quite revealing as it speaks to the nature of this man, a prototype of the Negro race. Edward Margolies says that the dream "not only relates the futility of Jake Jackson's strivings--it is all he could do . . . to remain in the same place--but announces the theme of the book--the senselessness, the purposeless-

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[7]Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," In *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates,Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1997), 1380.
[8]Ibid.

ness, the absurdity of his life" [9] And Wright, in *Lawd Today!* tells that:

> The steps blazed and shivered in a mist of bright gold, as if about to vanish. Then they grew real and solid.
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> . . . . . .
>
> He was flying up steps, but even at that the end was not in sight. "What the hell? There's a joke here somewhere! Damn tooting!' He stopped, sighed, wiped sweat from his forehead, and looked to see how many steps he had covered. He was right where he started![10]

This is, therefore, the way it is as the reader observes Jake Jackson as he eats breakfast, quarrels with and beats his wife, looks over his mail, leaves his house to visit a "policy parlor," gets a haircut at "Doc Higgins' Tonsorial Palace," plays bridge with three fellow postal workers, watches a street vendor selling quack medicine, eats lunch, witnesses a black nationalist parade, and rides to work on the elevated train.

The significance of this daily ritual, as observed by Margolies, speaks to the emptiness and nothingness of Jake's life. Wright, as "Negro" writer, informs the reader that the "Negro way of life in America" was not asked for, but was created by forced segregation:

> This special existence was forced upon

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[9]Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 95.
[10]Wright, *Lawd Today!* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1963), 5.

> them from without by lynch rope, bayonet and mob rule. They accepted these negative conditions with the inevitability of a tree which must live or perish in whatever soil it finds itself.[11]

Having migrated to Northern soil, Jake Jackson finds himself constantly struggling to survive. One struggle that continually plagues him is his battle with debts. Without realizing that he is a victim of a ruthless money system, Jake does know that "he owed so many debts he did not know which debt to pay first."[12] He felt pressured that he would have to pay for his wife's operation and

> Then there were other bills: the Furniture bill and the rent bill and the gas bill and the light bill and the bill at the Boston store and the insurance bill and the milk bill.[13]

Jake's steady post office job appears to help very little, and most of all

> he is even more a slave to the values of the civilization that exploits him. For Jake too strives for what Wright has called elsewhere the American lust for trash. He dreams of the millionaire life. . . . He implicitly accepts grafts as a political way of life--and expresses no resentment that he must he must pay a bribe to keep his job. Indeed, he rather admires the people to whom he must pay his money.[14]

Another point Wright makes is that Jake is ashamed of his blackness, and vividly describes Jake's "big job of the

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[11]Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1383.
[12]Wright, *Lawd Today!*, 19.
[13]Ibid., 20.
[14]Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 94.

morning." The big job began when Jake combed his hair.

> His nappy forelocks reared fanwise, . . . his hair had to be combed, combed flat so that not a ripple, not a crinkle, not a crease could show.[15]

Jake spent years dealing with this "foe" and had learned devices of strategy to which Wright likens to the playing out of a fierce battle that Jake always won. But in reality Jake had not learned strategies that would save him from the "malaise of being a Negro in America."

When approaching *Lawd Today!* with "Blueprint" in mind, the reader does so with a sense that the character of the story have not yet reached a point in their existence where their consciousness can be molded or influenced without messages coming "through ideologies and attitudes fostered in this warping way of life", segregated channels.[16] Because of this, the characters in *Lawd Today!* in many ways live distorted and fragmented lives, detached somewhat if not totally from all those things that make them whole and connected solidly to their roots.

After observing Jake from the time he awakens from a nightmarish dream to the time he rides with his friends on the elevated train to work at the post office, Part One, "Commonplace" ends. In Part Two, "Squirrel Cage", Wright describes each of Jake's duties at the post office in

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[15]**Wright, *Lawd Today!*, 23.**
[16]**Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1383.**

detail, characterizing the dismal nature of Jake's work. Edward Margolies observes that this detailed description brings further understanding of Jake's psychology when he contends that "part of the dull, heavy, perfunctory nature of his choice is somehow mysteriously transferred to his personality and outlook."[17]

Jake's day in the squirrel cage begins with his facing a review board because his wife has complained that he viciously beat her once again. A telephone call from the politically fluential barber Doc Higgins saves his job, but not before he grovels in front of two white men and a "Negro" who comprise the Board:

> "Mr. Swanson, I'm a black man. You can see my skin. I loves my race. I'm proud to be black. I wouldn't do nothing on earth to drag my race down, I ain't the kind of man what would beat his wife and stand her before you white gentlemens."[18]

When he is handed a resignation form in spite of this begging, he begs even harder:

> "I done worked hard all these years for the government . I ain't bothered nobody. I'm just a poor, hardworking black man. I ain't got nothing and Gawd knows I ain't never going to have nothing. I was a good worker. Youall knows I was. My life ain't been no bed of ease. I done had it hard all my day and I ain't complained. Now youall can have just a little mercy on me. Just a *little* . . .Please, you all, give me on more chance . . .Just *one* more . . .'[19]

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[17]**Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 93.**
[18]***Lawd Today!*, 126.**
[19]**Ibid.**

Although Jake is "saved" by a telephone call from Doc Higgins to whom he has to pay $150.00 in order for Doc to "put in a good word" for him to the Post Master, he is not saved from his own destructive behavior and warped existence. He does however demonstrate how all of his "energies are directed towards denying the reality of his situation."[20] Just as he bitterly "hates and resents his wife whom he regards as the source of all his difficulties when she is . . . but another symptom of the malaise of being a Negro in America,"[21] he resents and hates that he has to grovel in the presence of Howard, the "Negro" member of the Board:

> There's that Gawddamn Nigger Howard. . . . He would have to be here.

As a sense of shame spread over him, Jake thinks:

> How can I talk to these white folk with that nigger setting watching me? If I try to beg 'em to go easy on me, he'll think I'm a Uncle Tom. . . . He setting there at that desk just like he's a white man, Hell, he's the one who's a Uncle Tom.[22]

As he leaves, "Howard's pitying smile caught his eye and lingered on his mind, rankling, bitter." Jake also "stopped and stared, stared through the brick and steel walls of the Post Office, stared all the way to the South Side of the city where Lil was."[23] Acting in a "warped" manner, Jake

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[20]**Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 96.**
[21]**Ibid.**
[22]**Wright, *Lawd Today!*, 122.**

both denies and fails to accept responsibility for his own destructive and irresponsible behavior and recognize his plight as a "Negro in America."

Another example of this manifestation is seen when Jake

> and his friends attempt to lose sight of themselves over games of cards, liquor, or women. Or on other occasions they will surrender themselves under the guise of good-natured camaraderies, an orgy of self-hatred and race depreciation by telling 'nigger jokes.'[24]

On the other hand, Jake demonstrates that he is capable of "moments of bitter lucidity, resentment, and self pity. One of these moments occurs when he is yelled at and written up by the inspector for placing mail in the wrong slots. He tried desperately to contain his anger, but "Something engulfed Jake and his head swam. He felt as he had felt that morning when Lil had talked back to him" and he strikes out by saying:

> "How come you don't pick on some of them white clerks? How come you always hopping on us colored boys! Gawd-dammit I'm sick of this if nobody else is . . . ."

Al, Slim, and Bob, his friends, attempt to calm Jake as the inspector informs him that he will get two hundred demerits because of his behavior. After the incident is over, Jake says to his friends, "Whitefolks just want to ride a nigger to death." They respond by reminding him that there is

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[23]Ibid., 127.
[24]Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 96.

nothing he can do about being singled out that way. Jake went back to his station and bent his head lower and threw his mail faster, "thinking all the while: "'You sonofabitch! It ain't always going to be this way!'"[25] Next his "mind went abruptly blank because "he could not keep on with that thought. Where could he go with it?" As Lewis Leary says:

> He is what he is, what he was born to be, what he has been made, and circumstance offers little aid."[26]

As "a result of an impoverishment of the spirit," according to Margolies, "Jake is incapable of transcending the limitations of his environment. . . ."[27] Margolies points out that Jake does, however, possess heroic possibilities but his "activities, strivings, ambitions are shown to be petty, meaningless, and futile--matching somehow the shallowness of [his] character."[28]

Wright's belief that the "Negro" writer must have perspective can be applied to his character Jake. Jake does indeed function in the South Side of Chicago with limited and distorted awareness and consciousness; he is therefore exemplary of an individual

> destitute of a theory about the meaning, structure and direction of modern society [and] is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or

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[25]*Lawd Today!*, 142.
[26]Lewis Leary, "*Lawd Today:* Notes on Richard Wright's First/Last Novel," *CLA Journal*, 15(June 1972), 411-20.
[27]Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 98.
[28]Ibid., 98-99.

control.[29]

Jake does not have

> that fixed point in intellectual space where [he] stands to view struggles, hopes, and sufferings. . . . There are times when {Jake} may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.[30]

Wright would say that had Jake been aware that "the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side" is very much like the life of one sixth of the working class people on this earth, perhaps he would have been able to put his own life in perspective. This lack on Jake's part speaks to what Wright sees as a result of "being transplanted from a 'savage' to a 'civilized' culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional implications."[31]

Evidence of Jake's blurred vision may be examined when one looks at his views on "important things" that affect his very existence. As Wright postulates, "oppressed minorities often reflect the [views] of the bourgeoisie more [fervently] than . . . the bourgeoisie themselves." Jake, assimilating white middle class values in hopes of elevating himself into a higher social sphere, views communism as bad and sees capitalism as getting lots of money quickly.

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[29]**Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1385.**
[30]**Ibid.**
[31]**Ibid., 1386.**

Reading, according to Jake, addles the brain; and he is thoroughly seduced by movies starring blue-eyed blondes and darkly handsome menaces of golden-haired, white-thighed womanhood. As for his own race, Jake believes that

> "Niggers is just like a bunch of crawfish in a bucket. When one of 'em gets smart and tried to climb out of the bucket, the others'll grab 'im and pull'm back"[32]

Jake's attitude toward reading is evident when he tells his wife Lil that she will go blind from reading so much, and when he sees a black boy reading a book, he thinks that too much reading is bad, especially for young people. He recalls the time when one of his schoolmates became "queer" after trying to memorize the Bible. As a child he was told by his grandmother that "too much reading addles your brains, and if you addle your brains you'll sure have bookworms in the brain."[33]

It is no surprise then that when he looks at the library, he stares with curiosity. He had never been in a library and thought that it was odd that there were so many books. His lack of knowledge shows when he wonders what one has to pay in order to get inside. He actually views it as a place to come, eat a picnic lunch, look around, but it ver occurs to him that he could read in this odd and curious place. It is no surprise that when he sees the young white

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[32]***Lawd Today!***, 69.
[33]**Ibid.**

boys with books, he speculates that they will "get somewhere" and become "bigshots," and "a nigger just stays a nigger."[34]

Furthermore, Jake's blurred vision can be discerned once again when one examines how Wright uses media materials in the work. In the absence of "the whispered words, confidential wisdom channels through which the racial wisdom flowed"[35] are "words on billboard movie marquees, newspaper headlines, the words of popular songs, 'throwaways,' and advertising leaflets advising Negroes new'guaranteed' ways of discovering their lucky numbers, God, and various other desirable goals."[36] Crudely written and vulgarly conceived "this material is intended to exploit the very anxieties and insecurities it promises to assuage."[37]

Wright makes clear the absence of a racial folklore in Jake's life when Jake is awakened by the blaring radio:

> LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, JACK BASSETT SPEAKING! STATION WGN, TRIBUNE SQUARE,CHICAGO AT THE NEXT TONEBEAT THE TIME WILL BE EXACTLY EIGHT O'CLOCK, CENTRAL STANDARD TIME . . . TING! COURTESY THE NEVERSTOP WATCH COMPANY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!

Another example of this notion is that Jake never fails to read the daily newspaper where the headlines glare out at him with words such as

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[34]**Ibid., 117.**
[35]**"Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1382.**
[36]**Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 99.**
[37]**Ibid.**

ROOSEVELT STRIKES OUT AT MONEY CHANGERS
WILL DRIVE THEM FROM THE TEMPLE, HE SAYS

and

GERMANY DEMANDS ARMS EQUALIY
VOWS TO BOLT LEAGUE IF DENIED.

We even see Lil, Jake's wife, experiencing the same void as she depends upon a booklet called "UNITY," self described as "A MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO CHRISTIAN HEALING" which and has a caption underneath the picture of a "haloed, bearded man draped in white folds; the man's hand was resting upon the blond curls of a blueyed girl that reads

EVERY HOUR OF THE DAY AND NIGHT JESUS
FLOWS ALL THROUGH ME."[38]

Then there are the bundles of multicolored circulars and advertisements that spill out into Jake's hands when he opens his mail box every day. Some of them read as follows:

BELIEVE IT OR NOT
a mountain of golden dollars wait for you
$$$$$$ A SURE HIT $$$$$$ A BULL'S EYE BARGAIN
$$$$$$ ACT NOW $$$$$$
RISK NOTHING---PAY AFTER YOU WIN . . .

Another reads:

ASTONISHING$$$$$$ASTOUNDING$$$$$$
UNBELIEVABLE $$$$$$BUT TRUE
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN LEND ME YOUR EARS!!
I MAKE NUMBERS COME OUT OF ASHES--
I MAKE THE UNSEEN WORLD VISIBLE!! . . .

And still another:

VIM AND VIGOR AND VITALITY

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[38]***Lawd Today!***, 7.

FOR ALL MEN AND WOMEN . . .[39]

While the various forms of media are ubiquitous through sound and the written word, Jake and his cronies do manage to salvage a bit of their southern folk elements. These bits and snatches are found during some of their conversations and thoughts. Remembering their reason for migration from the South--to experience all aspects of a better life--they have all but forgotten their peasant orientation. Sometimes these men speak of the harshness of the South:

> "You see the white folks try to make believe we got the worst of [the race riot] so's we'll be scared..."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Yeah, they doing everything to beat us down."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> ". . . and the white folks stoned a little black boy and drowned 'im 'cause he was swimming in the wrong part of the lake."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "That's as bad as killing a man for breathing."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "You know, down South when a black man goes into a white store to buy a cigar he has got to say: 'Mister, please give me one of them *Mister* John Ruskin cigars'"[40]

Saying that they had to leave the South in order to escape

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[39]***Lawd Today,*** 172.
[40]**Ibid.**

racism and slavish labor, they remember what they had to do from "sunup to sundown, rain or shine":

> ". . .picking cotton 'til your
> back feels like it's going to break
> in two. . ."
> ". . . and that sun so hot you
> can't even sweat. . . "
> "and hoeing 'til your hands blister. . ."
> ". . .plowing. . ."
> "...shucking corn. . ."
> ". . .killing hogs. . ."
> ". . .cooking molasses. . ."
> ". . .hauling logs. . ."
> "...laying them railroad ties. . ."
> "...swing that hammer. . ."
> "...to drive them hard, hard steel spikes!"
> "Gawd, when you think of all the work we black
> folks done . . ."
> ". . .and ain't got a damn thing to show for it
> all. . ."
> ". . .but bent backs and weak minds. . ."
> ". . .you feel like going outdoors and looking up
> at the sun and cussing Gawd!"[41]

Just as they remember the bad times, Jake and his friends recount the good times too:

> "There were some good days in the South. . ."
> "Yeah, in the summer. . ."
> ". . . when you didn't have nothing to do but lay
> in the sun and live."
> . . . . . .
>
> "Look like the South makes a man feel like a
> millionaire!"
> "I use to go swimming in the creek. . ."
> "Fishing's what I love! Seems like I can smell
> them catfish frying right now!"[42]

Their remembering the "good times" in the South continues as they speak of Magnolia blossoms, sunflowers and sweet honey

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[41]Ibid., 176.
[42]Ibid., 179.

suckles, plums, sugarcane, blackberries. They even speak of "summer at night," "air soft and warm," and "them long rains in winter." Finally, Jake and his friends say,

> "Boy, the South's good. . ."
> ". . . and bad!"
> "It's Heaven. . ."
> ". . .and Hell. . ."
> ". . .all rolled into one!"
> "The only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and these up here'll let you starve to death."[43]

Throughout their conversation, the four speak with a kind of folk humor or break into "down home" rhyme at times:

> "A naughts a naught
> A figger's a figger
> All for the white man
> None for the nigger . . ."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Don't like liver
> Don't like hash
> Rather be a nigger
> Than poor white trash. . ."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Heaven is up
> South is down
> Lawd, Lawd
> I'm Northward Bound. . ."[44]

These are moments where Jake once again demonstrates that he not only has retained his Southern orientation but that he does so with lucidity and complete understanding. Suggested here is that there is no escape for

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[43]Ibid., 178-180.
[44]Ibid., 177-178.

the "Negro" in America until he becomes "propelled," as all other "Negro" workers, "by the harsh conditions of their lives,[and demonstrate] this consciousness and mobility for economic and political action."[45]

Wright's solution to this problem is discussed in "Blueprint" under "The Problem of Nationalism in Negro Writing," where he asks "Negro" writers to recognize the nationalistic character of the Negro people that psychologically reflects the whole of Negro culture, and especially folklore. He believes that

> in the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. Not yet caught in paint or stone, and as yet but feebly depicted in the poem and novel, the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remain in the fluid state of daily speech. How many John Henrys have lived and died on the lips of these black people? How many mythical heroes in embryo have been allowed to perish for lack of husbanding by alert intelligence.[46]

Wright continues:

> Negro folklore contains . . . the collective sense of Negro life in America. Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look as this body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a common life and a common fate.[47]

Wright also says, "It was . . .in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complex expression."[48]

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[45]"Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1381.
[46]Ibid., 1382.
[47]Ibid.

Jake and his friends survived the dull routine of the physically and emotionally draining postal work for another day, and at the end of the shift

> as though they were dead men come suddenly to life, they dropped the mail and ran to the timecard racks; then, holding to banisters, they galloped down the winding steel stairs three steps at a time. . . .[49]

This is the beginning of the final part of the novel, "Rat's Alley." Jake and his friends seek escape in a lurid night spot. Jake's "night out on the town" becomes a brutal misadventure when he accuses a prostitute of helping a pickpocket steal his money. He is beaten by club patrons and thrown out in an alley.

At this point, we are able to see what Jake considers "a deep sense of ease and freedom" as he looks over the crowd at the brothel. Jake pays a high price for this ease and freedom as he attempts to satisfy a hunger that he could feel in his stomach, in his legs, even in the tips of his fingers."[50] The treat is on him: he pays for the "likker," the taxi cab, the cigars, and the food at the brothel. When he is ready to pay the prostitute for impending services, he realizes that the remaining part of the one hundred dollars was stolen when the man bumped into him on the dance floor. Jake's outrage at losing his money causes him to be beaten

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[48]Ibid., 1383.
[49]*Lawd Today!*, 191.
[50]Ibid., 192.

and thrown out of the brothel into an alley, penniless and sexually unfulfilled. Jake, with the help of his friends, manages to get home that night. Wright ends the novel as it began, Jake beats his wife Lil and falls into a drunken sleep.

At this point, it is important to note that creating a sense of community through literature was crucial for Richard Wright. In "Blueprint," Wright states that creating this sense of community would come through developing a class and social consciousness:

> The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationship, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary.[51]

Wright is quite effective in providing a realistic portrait of a black community on the South Side of Chicago.

One facet of the community that Wright describes is the local barbershop:

> He [Jake] looked at the storefronts to see where he was. He pressed his face against the glass and looked inside. The shop was crowded with a mass of waving arms and flashing teeth and twisted black faces. A whirlwind argument was raging; everybody was screaming at once, contending for the right to speak by trying to drown out the other's voice. In the center of the crowd five black faces were yelling at one another. He caught a glimpse of Doc Higgins. His voice was far heavier than all the rest, and finally took the

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[51]Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1384.

> floor by sheer lungpower, pounding his chubby fist into his fat palm.[52]

As a gathering place for the men in the community, the barber shop serves as an informal town hall. The argument in the scene is over communism, and the reader gains insight into the social and political thinking of this community. The majority of the men think that communism is foolish and futile.

Recognizing that the Marcus Garvey movement is an integral part of the black community and the black experience, Wright includes the black pride march as one of the sights Jake sees before he goes to work:

> Then came two flags: the American flag and the African flag. The African flag was composed of three wide stripes of red, green, and black. Next came a group of men wearing black uniforms decorated with clusters of gold braid. They marched in close formation, eight abreast their left feet hitting the pavement in unison to the beats of music. These were the supreme generals of a mythical African republic, and the medals of unfought wars and unknown victories clinched against their uniforms with every rattle of the drums.[53]

It is important to note the reaction of Jake and his friends to the march:

> "You know what I don't like about them folks?" asked Jake.
> "What?"
> "They wants us to go back to Africa."
> "I don't like that either."
> "They's sure nuts on that point."

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[52]Ibid., 52.
[53]Ibid., 107.

> "And if we went back to Africa, what would we do?"
> "You'll have to ask them that"
> "Aw . . . They nuts as hell," said Jake, with an impatient wave of the hand.[54]

Here, Wright is voicing his own reservation about black nationalist movements. He "admired the dynamism and pride of the people involved in the Marcus Garvey movement; however, he was skeptical and distrusted the bombastic nature of the various revolutionary proposals."[55] Critic Russell Brignano states, "the single dominant image running through *Lawd Today!* is a call to freedom."[56] The black pride parade was supposedly a symbol of this call, but Wright makes it clear in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" that such endeavors have "unrealizable aims within the framework of capitalist America."[57]

In the final section of *Lawd Today!*, Wright depicts another facet of the black community that is both colorful and sordid. It is the brothel where Jake and his friends rushed to at the end of their workday:

> They pushed into a big room jammed with dancers. Shouts, laughter, and snatches of song swung through the smoky air. A threepiece jazz band--a cornet, a drum, and a piano--made raucous music in a corner There were gamblers, pimps, petty thieves, dope peddlers, smallfry

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[54]Ibid., 109.
[55]Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 80-81.
[56]Russell Carl Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 25.
[57]"Blueprint," 1383.

> politicians, grafters, racketeers of various shades, athletes, high school and college students in search of "life", and hordes of sexeager youngsters. The women were white, ivory, yellow, light brown, medium brown, solid brown, dark brown, near black, and black. They wore red, yellow, brown, blue, purple, and black gowns with V shapes reaching down almost to their waists. Their bosoms were high and bulging, and they danced with an obvious exaggeration of motion.[58]

Here, Wright is making strong commentary about the pathological existence of the community of urban blacks. It is a radical transformation from the rural existence described by Jake earlier in the novel.

Russell Carl Brignano makes this the observation about the community Wright created in the novel:

> The black world of *Lawd Today!* is lurid and disreputable.. On its periphery is the white man's land, entered by Jake and his friends only when they travel jobs in Chicago's central post office. After work they retreat into the noise, crime, and household tensions of the strip set aside for them by whites. The slice of the white world that they do see combines the inherent impersonal tendencies of the city with the reality of the whites' rejection of the Negro.[59]

In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright describes how and why this world/ community exists:

> The nationalist aspects of Negro life are as sharply manifest in the social institution of Negro people as in folklore. There is a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world, a Negro school system, Negro professions; in short, a Negro way of life in America. The Negro

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[58]**Wright, *Lawd Today!*, 194-95.**
[59]**Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works*, 25.**

> people did not ask for this, and deep down, though they express themselves through their institutions and adhere to this special way of life, they do not want it now.[60]

Although Wright is describing a Jim Crow South, it is indicative of a segregation that exists throughout 1930's America. Wright displays a certain social consciousness in his depiction of the Chicago urban environment. In turn, he also created a central character who embodied a particular mentality within the community.

The story of *Lawd Today!* is told through the life of Jake Jackson. The reader is taken through a twenty-four hour period in his life. This day is a typical one for Jake, and it is also Abraham Lincoln's birthday, February 12. The celebration of Lincoln's life and career is an ironic contrast to the current plight of African-Americans in 1930's America. Wright makes it painfully clear that despite Jake's legal freedom, he is indeed a slave. He is enslaved by a corrupt capitalist system through debt, and he is even more a "slave to the values of the civilization that exploits him." His ten suits hanging in the closet give him a sense of pride and achievement; "he regards America as the freest, happiest nation on Earth and labels anyone who criticizes America as "Reds."[61]

In addition to being enslaved by outside forces, and

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[60]**Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1383.**
[61]**Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 94-95.**

his own values, Jake is also enslaved by "subjective impulses, instincts and feelings which he only dimly understands."[62] He seems unable to understand or acknowledge the contradictions he feels about himself as an African-American as exemplified in the dream at the beginning of the novel. He expends great energy in his climb, but he makes no progress.

Affecting his apparent situation is that Jake lives in a perpetual state of denial. Edward Margolies makes this comment regarding Jake's denial:

> He [Jake} knows in a profound sense that the goals he wants to achieve are denied him because he is a Negro. Jake will thus identify himself with white people in chauvinistically hating "foreigners" and "Red". He will strive mightily before the mirror each morning to remove the kinks from his hair so that he will look less Negroid. He will try to overcompensate the shame of his blackness by buying expensive, ostentatious clothes he cannot afford. In denying his identity, he denies his experiences as well[63]

Jake Jackson and his friends may not be admirable characters, but as Russell Carl Brignano observes, "Wright is not creating people to be emulated or pitied. They are to be seen and understood."[64] Wright's comment in "Blueprint" makes this same point:

> The workers of minority people, chafing under exploitation, forge organizational forms of struggle to better their lot. Lacking the

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[62]Ibid., 95.
[63]Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 96.
[64]Brignano, *Richard Wright*, 36.

> handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness.[65]

What Wright means is that this what is needed within the black community. Jake Jackson and his friends symbolize the antithesis of this ideal. The absence of the consciousness is what makes Jake what he is. In that way, Wright makes the need more poignant.

In *Lawd Today*!, Richard Wright created a work explicit social comment. The work reflected Wright's development as an intellectual and artist. As Keneth Kinnamon states:

> Irony is indeed the pervasive mood of *Lawd Today!*, but the method is an unsparing naturalism. In classic naturalistic tradition, moreover, individual lives are determined by biological as well as socioeconomic forces. The exigencies of food, drink, and sex influence Jake and his friends as much as racial and economic discrimination.[66]

And Brignano states:

> Wright was directing his attentions in naturalistic fashion to a common reality of everyday life in an urban ghetto produced by much more than white attitudes toward Negroes.[67]

All and all, Wright is successful at putting into creative form the ideas he expressed in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In the essay, Wright implored black writers to provide an unflinching portrait of black people and their

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[65]**Wright, "Blueprint", 1381.**
[66]**Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, 77-78.**
[67]**Brignano, *Richard Wright*, 24.**

experiences. While Wright's apprentice novel lacks a certain depth that can be seen in his later work, *Lawd Today!* is quite effective and impressive on three fronts: (1) Wright's use of folklore, (2) the depiction of a black urban community and (3) the character of Jake Jackson.

For Wright, black folklore embodied the totality of the black experience in America. Wright recognized the significance of black folklore in understanding black culture. It is this recognition that allowed Wright to create it, in a very realistic fashion, the language of the characters in *Lawd Today!*. Through the language, the reader gains insight into the characters and their Southern/rural past.

In addition to understanding the importance of language, Wright was a keen observer of the South Side Chicago community in which he was living. In *Lawd Today!*, Wright evoked the sights, sounds, and general landscape of a black community in 1930's Chicago. Although the details that Wright provided were a bit monotonous at times, they were very effective in allowing the reader to "see" Jake Jackson's world.

The reader is also allowed to see Jake Jackson--the black anti-hero. Edward Margolies makes this provocative observation about Wright's central character:

> Jake Jackson is a loutish, heavyhanded, narrow, frustrated, and prejudiced petite bourgeois who,

> though unable to cope with his environment, refuses to reject it--and it is incapable of dreaming of a life different from the kind he knows. Yet, for all his limitations, Wright invests him with a sense of life that simmers just below the surface of his dreary existence. Here then lies the crux of Wright's success, for despite the huge indebtedness to other modern authors, the book is distinctly Wright's and the life and times he evokes are as immediate and as crushingly felt as his more popular radical fiction.[68]

Ultimately, Wright seems to be saying that Jake Jackson and others like him are the products of a racist society and of capitalism. And it is this society which creates and controls theirs.

Wright's first attempt at a novel represented a significant step in his development as a creative artist. The work that he produced was a critical foundation for him as a novelist. *Lawd Today!* was a prelude to *Native Son*. The structure, focus and thematic concerns raised in *Lawd Today!* would be more dramatically realized in Wright's second novel.

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[68]**Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, 90-91.**

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE ABSENCE OF SOUTHERN SOIL: *NATIVE SON* AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

In 1937, Richard Wright traveled to New York in order to "become a serious writer." New York was the center of the literary world. It was here that he wrote *Native Son*. This groundbreaking 1940 novel has been credited with "changing the course of Negro writing in America."[1] Much has been written about the work over the past sixty years. For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to analyze the work as the centerpiece of the Chicago Renaissance. Wright's *Native Son* represented a significant departure from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 1930's.

Although the main tenets of the Harlem Renaissance were challenged by Wright in his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *Native Son* is the creative manifestation of this challenge. Wright's novel signified a departure from Harlem Renaissance novels in several ways: (1) the creation of Bigger Thomas as a black anti-hero, (2) the focus on the harsh realities of urbanization and (3) the inclusion of

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[1]**Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* (Summer 1986): 448.**

Communist ideas. In order to fully understand the significance of *Native Son* as the creative centerpiece of the Chicago Renaissance, it is necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of the novel and the novels of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance signified a crucial phrase in the development of black culture during the early twentieth century. During the period, black artists and intellectuals searched for and forged an identity. The period witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of publications by African-Americans. These artist and intellectuals tapped into their own past(Africa, southern black folkways) in an attempt to define themselves and their experience.

Harlem Renaissance novelists, like other artists of the period, reflected the variety and scope of the "New Negro" movement. At the center of the works, however, was an attempt at self-definition. As Amritjit Singh points out, two patterns emerged in various depictions of black life in America--(1) primitivism and (2) "Americanness":

> On one side are McKay, Toomer and Bontemps who attempt to bring out the instinctive joy and abandon in the life of the black, and his ability to withstand commercialism and mechanization in a decade when the fear of standardization was almost obsessive in both Europe and America. These writers celebrated the life-styles of black folk in the plantations of Georgia or the West Indies, and in the growing black communities in urban centers such as New York, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. On the other side were writers and race leaders who thought that the Negro's best chance

> for greater civil rights lay in their presenting him as an American distinguished from white only in skin color.[2]

Primitivism was best exemplified by Claude McKay in his trilogy *Home to Harlem, Banjo,* and *Banana Bottom*. McKay, like other Renaissance artists, "was seeking new, distinctive and positive images of African-Americans."[3] He believed firmly that there were legitimate differences between blacks and whites. Each racial group had its own cultural identity which was shaped by a unique heritage and experience.

For McKay, the black experience was defined by a rich African past. McKay's characters sing, dance, love, and sleep with abandon and joy. These activities "represented the uninterrupted stream of values and attitudes which were brought from Africa and helped blacks cope with tortuous lives in the West."[4] McKay's African-American is a "vagabond" who lives on instinct. One of McKay's most notable "vagabonds" was Jake, the central character of his 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*. Jake is the "typical McKay protagonist--the primitive black man who is untouched by the decay of civilization."[5] He is fiercely independent and

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[2]Amrijit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black Writers 1923-1933* (University Park: Pennsylvania St. University Press, 1976), 42.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid., 43.
[5]Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 69.

rejects middle-class values. At the beginning of the novel, he has gone AWOL from "the white folks' war" and comes "home to Harlem." He picks up a prostitute and is fascinated by her. After their night together, Jake spends the rest of the novel searching for her throughout Harlem.

Through this journey, the reader comes to understand Jake quite clearly. As Robert Bone observes:

> Jake represents pure instinct. Physical well-being--whether from good food, good liquor, or a good woman--is his prime value. Work when you feel like it. Loaf when the mood strikes you. Take life easy. Joy is the key word in understanding Jake. Through Jake, McKay strikes at the heart of the Protestant ethic.[6]

And Amritjit Singh makes this insightful comment:

> Yet Jake is a part of the whole. Blues, ragtime songs, and jazzy dancing at the cabarets and speakeasies as well as brutal violence exhibited in fights over petty jealousies create the *Home to Harlem* world.[7]

Jake and the Harlem which he inhabits are central to McKay's view; a world view characterized by "black vagabond vs. white civilization."[8] McKay sought values to oppose bourgeois society.

McKay continued his search in the 1929 sequel to *Home to Harlem--Banjo*. The story moves from Harlem to Marseilles, France but the main symbols are the same. The main character, Banjo, is Jake, an irrepressible "free spirit."

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[6]**Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 68.**
[7]**Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, 44.**
[8]**Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 71.**

The sexuality of the main character, once again, helps to exemplify and dramatize primitivism. Banjo, like Jake, is a "natural philanderer" who deals with women with a certain coolness.[9]

Although Banjo is the central character, Ray, a secondary character, comes to dominate crucial sections of the story. As an aspiring writer, Ray is McKay's voice. As Amritjit Singh notes, Ray "opens a Pandora's box of unresolved and complex race-related issues."[10] He [Ray] is torn and confused by his predicament as an educated black man. Internally, he wrestles with race consciousness, education and his place within Western world. He doesn't have Banjo's "instinct" for living as a vagabond, but he feels that "he was a savage, even though a sensitive one."[11] He has received a classical education but does not see its value to black people. He loves Harlem for "its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its 'blues,' but hates it for "its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness."[12] This dichotomy is central to McKay's works as he explores African-Americans' relationship to the oppositions between "instinct" and "intellect," "primitivism" and "civilization."[13]

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[9]**Singh, *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, 48.**
[10]**Ibid.**
[11]**McKay, *Banjo*, 226-27.**
[12]**Ibid., 267.**
[13]**Singh, *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, 51.**

The world which Banjo inhabits--the Quarter Reserve on the Marseilles beach--is similar to the Harlem of *Home to Harlem* in that it is an environment free from the "stifling impediments of western civilization." It is depicted as a microcosm "where all human colors and shades come together in a continual celebrating and contesting of their instinct to live."[14] It is an environment permeated by free sex and other forms of "hedonism."

Ray, a secondary character, is crucial in expressing McKay's views on education when he explains that the objective of education should be teaching "something of real decency in dealing with all kinds and classes of people."[15] However, as Ray goes on to say, Western education fails in the task:

> You get a white man's education and learn to despise your own people...Then when you realize with the shock that you don't and can't belong to the white race...you are a lost crowd, you educated Negroes, and you will only find yourself in the roots of your own people.[16]

In addition to the self-deprecating effects of a Western education, McKay makes numerous references to the "poisonous orchids of civilization" that stand in contrast to the "instinctive life that derives from contact with African racial roots."[17] It is this "contact" or connection

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[14]Ibid., 48.
[15]McKay, *Banjo*, 272.
[16]Ibid., 200-201.
[17]Ibid., 56.

to an African past that will create balance and will be the saving grace for black people attempting to function and survive in the Western world.

This cultural dualism and eternal conflict between the primitive identity and Western civilization is given more depth McKay's third and last novel *Banana Bottom*. McKay is most successful in bringing this conflict to fruition in this 1933 work. The story is set in McKay's native Jamaica. This setting helps to develop a sense of folk culture and accentuates the clash between primitive and Western values.[18] Bita Plant, McKay's protagonist, has been adopted by a white missionary couple--the Craigs. Unlike Jake or Banjo, "Bita is able to move with some freedom between the Western world and her native home."[19] She has been educated in an English missionary school and returns to assist her adopted parents with their missionary work.

She soon becomes restless under the strict guidance of the mission. Eventually, there is a struggle: "On the one side is the Christ God, the Calvinist austerity, and the naive ethnocentrism of the Mission. On the other is the Obeah God, the primitive sexuality, and the simple values of the folk culture."[20] Bita responds by asserting her confidence in her identity and her heritage: "I thank God

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[18]Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 72.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Ibid.

that although I was brought up and educated among white people, I have never wanted to be anything but myself. I take pride in being coloured and different...I can't imagine anything more tragic than people torturing themselves to be different from their natural unchangeable selves."[21]

According to Amritji Singh, "Bita represents McKay's successful synthesis of 'instinct' and 'intellect.'"[22] The conclusion of the novel symbolically defines and describes the end of Bita's "journey" as she rejects numerous marriage proposals from light-skinned educated blacks and decides to marry the honest but uncouth Jubban, who is proud, sensitive to nature, and respectful of Bita's artistic and intellectual interests.

McKay's exploration of primitivism was one crucial facet of Harlem Renaissance ideology and theme. Other Harlem Renaissance novelists sought to dramatize the Americanness of the African-American experience. One of the most notable proponents of this approach was Jessie Fauset. Unlike McKay, Fauset wrote about "the better class of colored people." These middle-class black folks were central characters in four novels she produced during the Harlem Renaissance. Her third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree*, best exemplified the

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[21]McKay, ***Banana Bottom***, 169.
[22]Singh, ***The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance***, 54.

Americanness orientation, not necessarily in the story itself but in the intent of the novel and the world it created. Fauset's intention was to depict "something of the life of the colored American who is not being pressed too hard by the forces of Prejudice, Ignorance and Economic Injustice. And behold he is not vastly different from any other American, just distinctive."[23]

The story concerns two illegitimate girls and their efforts to "break through the barriers of the black community of Red Brook, New Jersey, in order to win happiness in love and marriage." This community is part of a larger world which drama critic Theophilus Lewis of the *Amsterdam News* described in 1924:

> It is a planet where all the women are lovely and the men handsome enough to illustrate collar ads. The highest virtue in that halcyon world is respectability. The most precious possession is an old Philadelphia ancestry, or next to that, an old Red Brook background. A finishing school o.k. is desired but not required of young ladies. Young men must present a college degree and no back talk. With those preliminary qualifications clutched tightly in their fists, the boys and girls are ready for action in a realm where love is the sweetest thing--and the greatest thing.[24]

Fauset's emphasis on the desire for respectability resonated with the Harlem Renaissance community. W.E.B. Du Bois was particularly impressed: "It is, therefore, not according to Hoyle that an interracial sexual lapse should

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[23]Ibid., 62.
[24]Theophilus Lewis, *Amsterdam News*, 5 May 1934.

fasten itself upon a little colored community like a pall and be worked out only in generations. Or that sexual looseness within the race should literally blast a household."[25]

Somewhere "in between Claude McKay's primitivism and Jessie Fauset's black bourgeoisie stands Jean Toomer's *Cane*."[26] Yet, as Amritjit Singh points out, *Cane* also "exists outside the matrix defined by the two authors."[27] Toomer's 1923 novel is generally recognized as the hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance. Toomer, like most Harlem Renaissance artists, looked to the African-American past for positive images. And like McKay, he "opposed the values of black folk to the increasing standardization of urban and industrial life."[28] Toomer "portrays blacks as having a firmer cultural foundation than whites due to the fact that they worked in the fields of the South and thus were closer to nature."[29] Unlike McKay, however, Toomer did not look to Africa in his search for the African-American cultural identity.

According to Toomer, this African-American identity lay firmly in the slave South. Slavery is at the center of Part

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[25]W.E.B. Du Bois, review of *The Chinaberry Tree*, In *The Crisis* (April 1932)
[26]Singh, *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, 64.
[27]Ibid.
[28]Ibid., 69.
[29]Ibid.

One of *Cane*. The book is a collection of poetry and prose. Part One is a series of portraits of women. These women are "primitives" who are shaped largely by their slave inheritance; "each in some way is incomplete and stultified."[30] The story of Fern aka Fernie May Rosen articulates the theme of Part One. Fern is a product of a Jewish father and black mother. Toomer speaks of her suffering by combining the cultural heritage of both: "at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish canter sing...as if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folksong."[31] Fern is painfully unsuccessful in her attempts to find fulfillment. Her eyes are central to the story. As the narrator points out, "they sought nothing--that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied."[32] There was nothing a man could give her. She desired nothing, or "she desired something so grand and so profound and so essential that it was, in fact, nothing."[33]

Part Two of *Cane* shifts to the city. In Washington D.C., the reader sees an enslavement and attachment of the people to the "entrapments" of civilization. Inorganic

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[30]Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 181.
[31]Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liverlight), 23.
[32]Ibid., 25.
[33]Ibid.

objects and property are powerful symbols as Toomer describes a kind of spiritual death. The human soul has been crushed by modern industrial society. Two stories, "Box Seat" and "Kabnis" realize Toomer's central theme. In "Box Seat," Dan Moore, a preacher, is in love with Muriel, a school teacher. Moore is a primitive who was born in a canefield and has been "touched by the hands of Jesus."[34] He describes a heavy black woman who sits beside him in the theater: "A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her roots sink down...and disappear in blood-lines that waver south."[35]

Muriel is also in the theater. She had come with her girlfriend in order to avoid Dave. She sits in the box seat to watch a brutal boxing match between two dwarfs. Her box seat is removed from the crowd; but she is visible to all. As Nathan Huggins observes, "Such is her social pretension and her enslavement to convention; she denies to herself free and honest human contact, for she is controlled by society's view of her."[36]

After the match is over, the victor presents to Muriel a blood splattered rose. Repulsed, she refuses then considers, and finally she accepts. But "she has recoiled from the dwarf, as she recoils from reality, from her

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[34]Ibid., 28.
[35]Ibid.,35.
[36]Huggins, ***Harlem Renaissance***, 185.

people, from her past."[37] Overcome with disgust for Muriel's hypocrisy, Dan rises to shout: "JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!" He then rushes from the theater and is finally free of his love for Muriel.

Following "Box Seat" is "Kabnis" which makes up the third and final section of the book. Toomer comes full circle and returns to rural Georgia to tell the story of Ralph Kabnis, a Northern school teacher who "cringes in the face of his tradition."[38]

He cannot embrace the suffering of the past, symbolized by slavery; "cannot master his pathological fear of being lynched."[39] Halsey, a blacksmith, has been absorbed by the southern community. He "belongs" in a way that Kabnis does not. He is an Uncle Tom figure who is compliant to the indignities of black life in the South. Beneath Halsey's shop lives Father John, an old black man. Father John is a former slave "who represents a link with the black ancestral past."[40] He has been hidden from view by the present generation because he is a symbol of an "unpleasant memory."[41] Ultimately, Kabnis refuses to accept or acknowledge Father John and goes so far as to claim that his ancestors were southern bluebloods. Toomer leaves the task

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[37]**Toomer, *Cane*, 71.**
[38]**Ibid., 101.**
[39]**Bone, *Negro Novel in America*, 87.**
[40]**Ibid., 88.**
[41]**Ibid.**

of embracing the past and moving foreword to the youth.

Toomer's answer to the quest for black identity is "to face the realities of the southern slave past and claim them as one's own."[42] It is to acknowledge and accept the slave experience in order to be completely connected to it. Nathan Huggins makes this insightful comment:

> Of all these efforts to define a Negro identity, Jean Toomer's seems the most profound and provocative. Attempts to find black models in convention and the Protestant Ethic were unsatisfactory because they had to ignore the reality of actual black people.[43]

Toomer's primitivism was rooted in the American past. His contemporaries such as Claude McKay sought a cultural identity through a connection with Africa although his actual knowledge of the continent was very limited. As Nathan Huggins points out,"whatever McKay's fantasy was, African tribal life in reality was very formal and obligatory to its members. Jake and Banjo could not survive, fornicating at their pleasure and serving no social function."[44] Huggins goes on to say this about Toomer:

> The real power of Jean Toomer's conception and its superiority to the romanticism of McKay and Cullen was that *Cane*, though symbolic and mystical, dealt with the past as a palpable reality. It faced the fact of the South and slavery. The final and perhaps supreme irony of the primitives was that they were, in their fancy of Timbuctoo and Alexander, forsaking their

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[42]**Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 186.**
[43]**Ibid., 187.**
[44]**Ibid., 188.**

actual past.[45]

Richard Wright's creative endeavors were similar to Toomer's in that they were firmly rooted in the realities of the black experience in America. Like Toomer, Wright also articulated the value(s) of embracing the southern folk past. But Wright was equally concerned with raising the social and political consciousness of black people. In his quest, he produced *Native Son*.

In Bigger Thomas, Wright created a nightmare personified. Bigger, according to Wright, was the product of a racist and oppressive society. His life and ghetto environment were the end result of an urbanization process which transformed the lives of millions of African-Americans. Bigger was definitely not a primitive. He was not the free-spirited vagabond that one sees in Claude McKay's Jake or Banjo. He was not a member of the black bourgeoisie fighting for respectability as seen in Jessie Fauset's world. Bigger Thomas was a monster. And he was very real.

Numerous critics have asserted that Bigger Thomas was Wright. Indeed there are the obvious similarities: "both are Mississippi-born blacks who migrated to Chicago; both live with their mothers in the worst slums of the Black Belt; both were motivated by fear; both were rebellious by temperament."[46] According to Wright in "How Bigger Was

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[45]**Ibid.**

Born," Bigger Thomas was a composite portrait of a number of individuals with whom Wright was familiar.

There were five Bigger prototypes he had known in the South. All rebelled in one way or another against Jim Crow and all of them suffered for their defiance: "They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken."[47] Wright found examples of the "Bigger Thomas type" in his work with the South Side Boys' Club in Chicago-- "fearful, restless, moody, frustrated, alienated, violent youths struggling for survival in the urban jungle."[48]

Critic Dan McCall makes this statement about Bigger Thomas: "In the figure of Bigger Thomas, Wright was trying to show the ultimate sense of horror: unpreparedness set loose in a metropolis."[49] He then goes on to say this:

> Anyone who has read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Manchild in the Promised Land* or Eldridge Cleaver's remarkable *Soul on Ice* can see Bigger in the characters he authors draw around them and explore, with considerable courage, themselves.[50]

Bigger Thomas was grounded in a certain reality that was

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[46]Keneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 119.
[47]Ibid.
[48]Ibid., 120.
[49]Dan McCall, "The Social Significance of Bigger Thomas," in *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook*, ed. Richard Abcarian (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1970), 183.
[50]Ibid., 184.

unseen in the Harlem Renaissance. This is not to say that Harlem Renaissance artists did not base their characters on real people. However, it is difficult to find a character similar to Bigger Thomas during the period.

Bigger's complexity signifies a departure from Harlem Renaissance characters. As Keneth Kinnamon observes, "Bigger's personality is comprised primarily of fear, shame, and hatred."[51] In Bigger Thomas Wright provided an exploration into the psychology of an oppressed mind. Part I is entitled "Fear." Throughout the section, "Bigger battles fear; a fear that stems from various sources: a large rat, a fight with Gus, and most significantly being found in white girl's room."[52] The last source of fear leads to a murder which "reveals Bigger's uncontrollable fear of whites."[53] As Kinnamon points out:

> Bigger's consciousness of the fear creates a sense of shame at his own inadequacy, equated by whites with his racial status. This combination of fear and shame produces hatred, both self-hatred and hatred for the inequities in his life and the whites responsible for these inequities.[54]

These inequities have forced Bigger to live on the margins of "civilization." Bigger is conscious of his isolation: "We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in

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[51]Kinnamon, ***The Emergence of Richard Wright***, 130.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid.

jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence."[55] In his isolation, Bigger sees a "white" world in which he could never exist. This world, albeit somewhat superficial, is presented to him in the film *The Gay Woman*, in which there are "scenes of cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels, a rich young white woman kept clandestine appointments with her lover while her millionaire husband was busy in the offices of a vast paper mill."[56]

Bigger is not only isolated from this glittery white world, he is also isolated from certain facets of the black community. Unlike Claude McKay's Jake, Bigger does not drown himself in a world of jazz clubs, speakeasies, and brothels. Wright does not make that world available to him. Bigger is trapped in a slum; trapped in a cycle of poverty, degradation and isolation.

However, Wright does provide Bigger with escape. The murder of Mary Dalton allows Bigger to break through the confines of his daily life. The murder is presented as an act of creation: "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal to them, like a man who had been somehow

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[55]Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), 17.
[56]Ibid., 26.

cheated, but had now evened the score. Bigger had murdered and created a new life for himself."[57]

This episode of the novel would have been inconceivable during the Harlem Renaissance. Primitives of the Harlem Renaissance rebelled through sex, music and a rejection of the modernization of the age. Bigger Thomas lashes out against racism through murder; the murder of a white girl no less. An act with such overt racial connotations was not seen during the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem Renaissance artists were more concerned with self-definition than with protest and such overt racial commentary. Artists of the Harlem Renaissance sought an identity. Primitivism was part of the process of exploring and defining that identity. Richard Wright was not concerned with black identity as much as making explicit social commentary. Bigger Thomas was both reality and symbol.

The reality of black existence in America was crucial to the novel. One aspect of that existence was a unique black folk culture. Wright makes this statement about the folk tradition in "Blueprint for Negro Writing":

> It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folktales recounted from mouth to mouth; work songs sung under blazing suns--all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.[58]

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[57]**Ibid., 100.**

However, this rich folk tradition was conspicuously absent from *Native Son*. Wright was making a clear statement about the loss of folk tradition in the city. As Dan McCall points out:

> Wright's point is not to deny the Negro's "folk culture." He was trying to show that for these urban slum dwellers the folk culture was swallowed in unbearable closeness. To create a "folk tradition" in the slum--that is, to create whole human beings in a brutally fragmented world--would not be to take that world seriously. Wright saw that if people do not have any chance to get culture it is rather unlikely that they will have its' blessings.[59]

There is no folk tradition for Bigger Thomas to embrace. There is no Southern soil to which he can return. This rural world does not exist for him.

In the absence of Southern soil, there are only the harsh realities of the ghetto. According to Wright, these realities have shaped Bigger. This argument is central to Part III of the novel as Bigger's defender in court, Max, makes his appeal. In attempting to explain "the meaning of Bigger Thomas" and his actions, Wright infuses Communist ideology into a work of fiction. There is a consensus among critics that Wright's "grafting" of Communist rhetoric in the final part of *Native Son* disrupted the structural flow of the novel and "cheated him of a classic."[60]

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[58]Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge* (Fall 1937): 53-65.
[59]McCall, "The Social Significance of Bigger Thomas," 188.
[60]Ibid., 189.

Although the inclusion of Communist ideology does not blend in well creatively, it does demonstrate a profound departure from the Harlem Renaissance. Claude McKay's primitives may have "gone against the grain" socially, but they lacked a certain socio-political consciousness. Wright provides Bigger with some awareness of the plight of poor blacks in Chicago:

> Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, the corner of the city tumbling down from rot. In a sullen way Bigger was conscious of this.[61]

However, Wright pulls back from making Bigger too sophisticated and uses Max as a spokesman. In one of the last scenes of the novel, "Max directs Bigger's attention to the skyscrapers of the city and states that they represent what killed him, the capitalist economy."[62]

Robert Bone makes these insightful observations about the failure of Communism in Bigger's life:

> To Bigger, Communism is a matter not of his ideology but of relatedness. Jan and Max are the flimsy base on which he tries to erect his shield of hope. The Communist party is simply not strong enough as a symbol of relatedness; Bigger's hatred, firmly anchored in his Negro nationalism, is hardly challenged. The contest is unequal, because there is nothing in Bigger's life that corresponds to "Communism."[63]

Ultimately, "Bigger rejects Communism as he rejects various

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[61]**Wright, *Native Son*, 155.**
[62]**Ibid.**
[63]**Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 150-151.**

forms of hope and salvation during the last days of his life: his family, race leaders and religion."[64]

Bone also points out that "Bigger's relation to Jan and Max cannot be understood apart from the context of Wright's experience in the Communist party."[65] Wright was a member of the party for twelve years(1932-1944). Although the party had "been like a mother to him," he gradually became disillusioned. He resented party control over what he wrote and how much time he could spend writing. He also began to observe that the party was exploiting black people and racial problems in America.[66]

Wright's involvement with the party and the inclusion of Communist ideology in *Native Son* speaks to the general shift of African-American socio-political thinking during the 1930's and 1940's. The Great Depression forced a new generation of artists and intellectuals to face the realities of class, economic exploitation and race. James O. Young makes this observation:

> The novelists who came on the scene during the later 1930's moved away from stereotypes. They attempted to explore the real lives of those ordinary black folk who lived in the tenements. Economic exploitation is present in most of their fiction, but it is generally peripheral. As these young writers probed deeper and deeper into the reality of black experience, the best of them

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[64]Ibid., 150-151.
[65]Ibid.,151.
[66]Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1944): 61-70.

> evoked a universality which escaped most of the [Harlem] Renaissance writers; instead of trying to romantically transcend reality, they immersed themselves in it.[67]

Richard Wright was a leader among this new generation of artists. With *Native Son*, Wright carved out a place for himself in American literary and cultural history. The 1940 novel was the centerpiece of a new black literary movement based in Chicago. Wright's voice and the symbolism of Bigger Thomas signified a shift in black writing and culture. Wright, as did most of his generation, moved beyond the middle-class values and aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance. More importantly, he also moved beyond the exotic-primitive of the period into a new phase of social consciousness and protest.

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[67]James O. Young, ***Black Writers of the Thirties*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 205.

CHAPTER FIVE

BIG MAT, BIGGER THOMAS, AND BRONZEVILLE: THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE COMMUNITY

In 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* forced open a door for a new generation of black artists. Although he certainly did not invent the social realism of the day, Wright was one of its more articulate practitioners. One year after *Native* Son was published, William Attaway, a Chicago native, published his second and final novel *Blood on the Forge*. Attaway along with Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Willard Motley and Arna Bontemps were the key figures of the Chicago Renaissance. A commitment to social realism and social protest tied this community together. More specifically, they wrote about black urbanization and its destructive consequences. They focused on the lives of the ordinary and the downtrodden. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* is a vividly detailed folk history of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to the urban North that took place toward the end of World War I. Attaway describes the transplanting of rural folk "from the familiar violence of Southern feudalism to the strange

and savage violence of industrial capitalism." [1] The most profound and powerful theme of the work is the disintegration of folk culture in a brutal urbanization process. The novel is divided into five parts, the first of which introduces the main characters in their natural environment. The Moss brothers are shackled to the soil on which they live by the sharecropping system. Farming is largely useless because most of the topsoil has been washed away over the course of the years. As Edward Margolies points out, "The erosion of the land suggests the erosion of their morale which, in a sense, washes them off the land."[2]

The Moss brothers "symbolically represent traditional aspects of the folk culture: Big Mat (Matthew), the religious; Chinatown, the pagan; and Melody, the artistic."[3] Big Mat is central to the novel. He has ambitions of becoming a preacher. An intensely religious man, Mat looks to the Bible to explain his suffering. His wife Hattie has had six miscarriages. Mat believes he has been cursed because he was conceived in sin. However, this does not necessarily explain the degradation suffered at the hands of southern racism.

It is this realism and degradation that permeate the

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[1]Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 133.
[2]Edward Margolies, *Native Sons* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), 54.
[3]Bone, *Negro Novel*, 133.

lives of the Moss brothers as Attaway presents a painfully realistic picture of the early twentieth century southern landscape. The South that Attaway presents is a stark contrast to Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Toomer's South was a "paradox of pain and beauty, a place of racial and cultural 'healing' for 'lost' black folks who had been swallowed by a modern industrial state."[4] Attaway does not "romanticize the virtues of the pastoral South but lays bare its brutal oppression."[5]

Big Mat's response to this oppression forces him and his brothers to flee their native Kentucky. After Big Mat beats a white overseer, the Moss brothers run North in order to escape the inevitable lynch mob. Their journey constitutes Part Two of the novel. The train ride to Pennsylvania is a horrid experience. Crouched and huddled in a dark boxcar with numerous other black "migrants," the Moss brothers are demoralized:

> Squatted on the straw-spread floor of a boxcar, bunched up like hogs headed for market, riding in the dark for what might have been years, knowing time only as dippers of warm water gulped whenever they were awake, helpless and dropping because they were headed into the unknown and there was no sun, they forgot even that they had eyes in their heads and crawled around in the boxcar, as though it were a solid thing of blackness.[6]

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[4]Margolies, *Native Sons*, 54.
[5]Ibid.
[6]William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York: Doybleday Doren and Company, Inc., 1941), 45.

Attaway goes on to describe the misery in the boxcar as a "mass experience" which evoked the journey of enslaved Africans on slave ships.[7] When they finally arrive at their destination, the Moss brothers are devastated and shaken physically, as well as psychologically:

> When the car finally stopped for a long time and some men unsealed and slid back the big door, they were blinded by the light of a cloudy day. In all their heads, the train wheels still clicked. their ears still heard the scream of steel on the curves. Their bodies were motionless, but inside they still jerked to the movement of a bouncing freight car.[8]

As Edward Waldron observes, the journey is a "cruel transplanting of rural people" to a new, hostile urban environment.[9]

This new environment is the setting of the remainder of the novel. In Part III, Attaway articulates the main themes. The Moss brothers ran from their native South to escape racism. However, when they enter Allegheny County, they discover racism in a new form. They are stoned by white steelworkers who have learned that black labor is imported from the South whenever there is talk of a strike in the mills.

In many ways, life in the steel mills proves to be more

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[7]**Margolies, *Native Sons*, 55.**
[8]**Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 49.**
[9]**Edward Waldron, "William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge:* The Death of the Blues" in *Negro American Literature Forum* (Summer 1976): 58-60.**

dehumanizing than the one they fled. The "green men" become "gray men" in their new sterile "gray" community.[10] They receive an education on how to survive in their dangerous work from their bunkhouse roommates. Most importantly, they discover the drudgery of the mill. During twelve-hour work days, "a clear warfare is waged between the steel and its captors."[11] Under these conditions, the Moss brothers struggle to maintain their self-esteem. There is no white overseer to beat them physically or mentally. Attaway replaces him with the overwhelming and brutal presence of the machines:

> 'Like spiral worms, all their egos had curled under pressure from the giants around them. Soon or later it came to all the green men: What do we count for against machines that lift tons easy as a guy takes a spoonful of gravy to his mouth.'[12]

There is a gradual disintegration of the Moss brothers' personalities as they attempt, unsuccessfully to adjust to their new reality.[13] Chinatown discovers that his gold tooth can not charm the residents of the gray steel community as it did in his native South. He longs for his Kentucky home: the out-of-doors, the feel of the earth beneath his bare feet, the sun and the warmth.[14] Melody loses his passion for music and gives up his guitar. Big Mat

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[10]Young, ***Black Writers of the Thirties***, 225-229.
[11]Attaway, ***Blood on the Forge***, 50.
[12]Ibid., 66.
[13]Bone, ***The Negro Novel in America***, 135.
[14]Margolies, ***Native Sons***, 56.

abandons his Bible, and with it any hope of sending to Kentucky for his wife.

This sense of erosion and loss is reinforced by Attaway's statement about the destructive nature of steel. A crippled steel worker named Smothers delivers a profound and prophetic soliloquy which implies that the violence in the mills is retribution for man's abuse of the land: "It's a sin to melt up the ground. . . . Steel bound to git ever'body 'cause 'o that sin. They say I crazy, but mills gone crazy cause men brin' trainloads of ground in here and meltin' it up."[15] As Edward Margolies observes, Smothers' diatribe re-emphasizes Attaway's contention that "the earth gives moral and spiritual sustenance to men, and that its destruction transgresses nature and denies men their potentialities."[16]

As the novel progresses through Part IV, there is sense of impending disaster. Smothers' words are clearly a foreshadow. He goes on to say this: "Everybody better be on the lookout. Steel liable to git somebody today. I got a deep feelin' in my bones."[17] He also tells the harrowing story of how he lost his legs in the mill and how afterward, "All the time in the hospital I kin hear that steel laughing an' talkin' till it fit to bust my head clean open. . . . I

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[15]**Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 178.**
[16]**Margolies, *Native Sons*, 57.**
[17]**Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 178.**

kin hear when cold steel whisper all the time and hot roll steel scream like hell. It's a sin to melt up the ground. . . . "[18]

Soon after Smothers' "prophecy" there is an explosion in the mill. There is a flash, followed by a blinding "a mushroom cloud, streaked with whirling red fire. . . ." [19] Several workers, Smothers included, are killed. Chinatown is blinded. As Edward Margolies points out, "Each of the Moss brothers has now been rendered impotent: Chinatown, who lives by outward symbols, can no longer see; Melody, who lives through his music, can no longer play guitar; and Mat has become a hulking shell of a man because Anna, a young prostitute he has fallen in love with, no longer loves him."[20]

The Moss brothers were destroyed psychologically and physically by the gray steel community. One brother, Big Mat, makes an attempt to regain his manhood by participating in the strike that divides Steeltown into two warring camps. Big Mat's exploits are the focus of the fifth and final section of the novel. After being "deputized" with a group of professional strike-breakers, Big Mat joins a raid on union headquarters. Although Big Mat is in the middle of serious labor issues, Attaway makes it clear that he is not

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[18]Ibid., 178.
[19]Ibid., 182.
[20]Margolies, *Native Sons*, 59.

aware of the social and political implications:

> Big Mat was not thinking about the labor trouble. Yet he knew that he would not join the union. For a man had so lately worked from dawn to dark in the fields twelve hours and the long shift were not killing. For a man who had ended each year in debt any wage at all was a wonderful thing. For a man who had known no personal liberties even the iron hand of the mills was an advancement. In his own way he thought these things. As yet he could not see beyond them.[21]

Not only is Big Mat "blind" to the larger realities surrounding his experience, he ultimately regains his manhood only through violence: "He had handled people, and they feared him. Their fear had made him whole."[22]

Ironically, it is in the midst of great violence that finally gains "vision." During the raid on the union headquarters, Mat is beaten to death by a union sympathizer. As he is dying, he has a provocative epiphany :

> It seemed to him that he had been through all of this once before. Only at that far time, his had been the arm strong with hate. Yes, once he had beaten down a riding boss. . . . Had that riding boss been as he was now? Big Mat went farther away and no longer could distinguish himself from these other figures. They were all one and the same. In that confusion he sees something true. Maybe somewhere in the mills a new owner was creating riding bosses, making a difference where none existed.[23]

It is obvious that Attaway is imposing his political views onto his central character as the novel concludes on a

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[21]Attaway, ***Blood on the Forge***, 203.
[22]James O. Young, ***Black Writers of the Thirties*** (Baton Rouge:Louisana State Univ. Press, 1973), 229.
[23]Attaway, ***Blood on the Forge***, 273-274.

didactic tone.[24] In spite of this aesthetic flaw, the conclusion, is quite powerful and provocative.

Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* and Wright's *Native Son* are companion pieces. Attaway describes the migration experience of African-Americans and its destructive consequences. Wright's work describes the experience of one "migrant" after the journey North had been completed. The two novels not only complement each other but in several aspects they are parallel.

Big Mat and Bigger Thomas are both victims of cruel circumstances according to their respective authors. Both characters were created, transformed, and ultimately destroyed by social and economic forces well beyond their control. For Bigger Thomas, there was the impersonal and inhumane city slum of the South Side of Chicago. Bigger would never be able to adequately provide for his family or move out or beyond the confines of the black ghetto and its kitchenettes. Fear of being discovered with a white girl led to a murder and Bigger's death.

For Big Mat, it was the harsh racism of his native Kentucky that shaped and defined his daily life. He faced permanent exploitation under a brutal and oppressive sharecropping system. When he lashed out against this system, he was forced to flee his native South and undertake

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[24]**Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 139-40.**

a harrowing journey to a new urban world. In this new world the steel mills robbed him of his self-esteem and identity. Political manipulation and exploitation placed him in a position where there was no escape. He too died a particularly brutal death that seemed inevitable.

In grappling with the social and economic issues, both Attaway and Wright broadened the scope of the portrait of the black experience in America. Race and class were crucial to both authors in shaping their socio-political thinking and their art. Both authors have been placed under the umbrella term "proletariat" writers of the Depression years. In this vain, both authors have been roundly criticized for imposing their political views on to their art. Wright was "strongly encouraged" by the Communist party to include the Marxist exposition in Part Three of *Native Son*.[25]

Attaway and Wright delved into the black experience with certain social consciousness. This social consciousness helped to produce works that were brutally honest and grounded in the social realism of the day. Gwendolyn Brooks shared this consciousness and sought to expose the world to Chicago's South Side which came to be known as "Bronzeville."

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[25]Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," in *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1944): 61-70.

Five years after the appearance of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Gwendolyn Brooks explored an unnamed street in Bronzeville. In her first collection of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks offered both social criticism and celebration of urban street life. Brooks "concentrated on unheroic commonplace South Siders."[26] She was able to address some of the major social issues of her time (racial injustice and the plight of women) indirectly by focusing on these dispossessed residents.[27]

Understanding the world in which the residents existed was essential in understanding their experiences. In Brooks' work, a sense of place was inextricably linked with identity.[28] She often made reference to real locations which evoked Chicago's South Side topography. Kenny J. Williams made this comment on the urban world that Brooks examined:

> This is not the Chicago of the elite, not the city of spectacular boulevards and buildings. This is a city of black streets and alleys, of Kitchenettes and vacant lots. The American dream no longer mattered to the people whose lives had so consistently been empty that they often were not aware of its nightmarish quality. Brooks' Bronzeville is symbolic of the impersonality of the overcrowded ghetto generally ignored by white Chicagoans caught in the daily activities of their own lives.[29]

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[26]Maria K. Mootry, "Down the Whirlwind of Good Rage: An Introduction to Gwendolyn Brooks," *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987) 3.
[27]Ibid., 4.
[28]Ibid., 5.
[29]Kenny J. Williams, "The World of Satin-Legs, Mrs. Sallies

Brooks' Bronzeville portrait speaks to the regionalism which shaped Chicago's literary history. This regionalism, along with race and social consciousness shaped Brooks' literary development. Maria Mootry describes the significance of region in Brooks' career:

> Thus as a regionalist, Brooks brought together a remarkable sense of black folk culture and American popular culture that affirmed black life and also critiqued indirectly those forces that limited black access to the American dream.[30]

The inhabitants of Brooks' Bronzeville "display the pathos and frustrations of modern life in a 'restricted' neighborhood." [31] One of the more notable figures is Satin-Legs Smith. Like many of his fellow residents, his life is barren and limited. He is confined to his South Side community and finds pleasure only in his Sunday rituals of selecting outfits from his collection of highly styled clothes, going to the movies and taking his girlfriend to dinner at "Joe's Eats."

One of Satin-Legs' greatest joys is his collection of flamboyant clothes in "the innards of his closet." Brooks describes the closet as a "vault":

> Whose glory is not diamonds, not pearls,
> Not silver plate with just enough dull shine.
> But wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,
> Sarcastic green and zebra-stripped cobalt.

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and the Blackstone Rangers: The Restricted Chicago of Gwendolyn Brooks." *A Life Distilled*, 55.
[30]Mootry, 6.
[31]Williams, 55.

> All drapes. With shoulder padding that is wide
> And cocky and determined as his pride;
> Ballooning pants that taper off to ends
> Scheduled to choke precisely.
> Here are hats
> Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties
> Like narrow banners for some gathering war.[32]

Like Wright's Jake Jackson, Satin-Legs' identity and self-esteem are partly based on his clothes, his material possessions.

Satin-Legs also receives gratification from movies where he can live vicariously through others. He joins in "boo[ing]/the hero's kiss, and . . . the heroine/whose ivory and yellow it is sin for his eye to eat of."[33] After the movie, there is Joe's Eats where "You get your fish or chicken on meat platters./With coleslaw, macaroni, candied sweets/coffee and apple pie. You go out full."[34] These moments of gratification seem to be central to Satin-Leg's existence. He seems unaware of his isolated community. As Maria Mootry observes, Satin-Legs' life is "the microcosmic dramatization of thousands of black men, uprooted for one reason or another from their southern origins, coping in the neosegragated ambiance of northern ghettos."[35]

Although Satin-Legs Smith receives a "mock-heroic-epic

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[32]**Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith", *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1945), 24-30.**
[33]**Ibid.**
[34]**Ibid.**
[35]**Mootry, 1-16.**

treatment" of his experiences, this does not mean that Brooks neglected women.[36] In fact, she described the impact of the urban experience on both males and females equally. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall points out, this was a significant departure from her male contemporaries.[37]

In spite of the conditions of their lives, Brooks' Bronzeville women are able to transcend, if only temporarily, the harsh realities. They are not completely consumed by the poverty that engulfs them. They find happiness in small, seemingly trivial things. Brooks' female characters are diverse enough to "reveal the many facets, complexities, and paradoxes of the urban black experience."[38] In poems such as "Sadie and Maude," Brooks portrays contrasting views of life held by two sisters. Sadie lived a very turbulent life and brought shame to her family by bearing two illegitimate children. However, she did live her life to the fullest capacity.

> Sadie scraped life
> With a fine-tooth comb.
>
> She didn't leave a tangle in.
> Her comb found every strand.
> Sadie was one of the livingest chits
> In all the land.[39]

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[36]Mootry, "Down the Whirlwind of Good Rage," 5.
[37]Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Women of Bronzeville", *A Life Distilled*, 153.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville*, 14.

Sadie has "triumphed" because she "squeezed" joy out of life in spite of her other resources.[40] Maud, on the other hand, took a more "conventional path" and went to college. However, at the end of the poem, she is alone and like a "thin brown mouse."[41]

As mentioned earlier, Brooks' Bronzeville women find pleasure in seemingly insignificant matters. In the poem "When you have forgotten Sunday: the love story," a woman experiences great satisfaction from sleeping in on Sundays and being with her mate. She remembers ordinary matters such as how he reacted to interruptions during their lovemaking, how long they stayed in bed, and what they had for dinner. She describes the Sunday dinner with a certain fondness:

> . . .we finally went in to Sunday
> dinner, That is to say, went across
> the front room floor to the ink-
> spotted table in the southwest corner
> To Sunday dinner, which was always
> chicken and noodles
> Or chicken and rice
> And salad and rye bread
> and tea
> And chocolate chip
> cookies[42]

The detail in the description reveals the pleasure of the female narrator.

Through her female characters, Brooks grapples quite effectively with intraracial strife; more specifically skin

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[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid., 18-20.

color and hair texture. In poems such as "The Ballad of Chocolate Mable" and "At the hairdresser's" Brooks dramatizes the plight of dark-skinned black women with "kinky" hair. Beauty parlors play a significant role in the Bronzeville world. As critic Arthur Davis points out:

> The worship of "good" hair naturally suggests the importance of beauty parlors in Bronzeville. They tend to become miracle-working shrines to which the dark girl goes in search of beauty. . . . They knew that it is tough to be "cut" from "chocolate" and to have "boisterous" hair "in a land where "white is right." To be black is to be rejected. . . .[43]

Brooks' perspective as a black woman helped to reveal certain facets of the black urban experience that were overlooked by her male counterparts. The diversity of female images illuminated the diversity and complexity of that experience. Beverly Guy-Sheftall makes this insightful comment on Brooks' Bronzeville women:

> Brooks' poems present a more realistic view of the diversity and complexity of black women than the stereotypes(matriarch, whore, bitch, for example)that have persisted in other literary works by black and white artists alike. The lack of uniformity in her portraits of black women would contradict the motion that there is a monolithic black woman.[44]

Brooks' Bronzeville portraits were defined by her social realism. This social realism defined the Chicago

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[43]Arthur Davis, "The Black-and-Tan Motif in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brook," *College Language Association* (Dec. 1962),
[44]Guy-Sheftall, 163.

Renaissance. This social realism articulated social protest. Like Wright and Attaway, Brooks illuminated the [specific] racial injustice and inequality as well as [general] social ills that plagued the nation as a whole; in particular, "the complexity of an industrialized age characterized by swift change, depersonalization, and war."[45]

Brooks does depart from Wright and Attaway in her protest. Her outlook is not as bleak as her male counterparts. As stated previously, Brooks presents glimmers of hope as her characters delight in the small pleasures of their lives. However, her protest is no less powerful or profound.

Margaret Walker shared Brooks' concern with giving her characters or "folk" a certain dignity. Walker sought to illustrate the enduring strength of common black folks and to call on them to take action in their own liberation. With her 1942 collection of poetry *For My People*, she spoke directly to the black community with a militancy that foreshadowed the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's and 1970's. The collection of poems uses history as a way of defining the uniqueness of black culture. The black community should draw strength from that history Walker maintained.

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[45]Houston A. Baker, "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks", *A Life Distilled*, 23.

In describing African-American history, Walker delves into folklore. She shared with Wright a passionate emphasis on the significance of black folklore. The folklore is part of a larger southern folk culture. In the opening lines of the title poem, Walker speaks to that culture:

> For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power.[46]

The poem goes on to become more militant with each stanza.

Walker speaks of the "needs" of black people:

> For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something--something all our own.[47]

Walker is describing the plight of the masses of black people. She is critical of the absence of the basic necessities (food, clothing) in their lives. Life should not be such a struggle for them. With the reference to land, Walker is addressing the need for black people to possess or own something of significant value; something that will give them control of their lives.

The absence of this control of one's destiny and plight

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[46]Walker, "For My People," Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 1572.
[47]Ibid., 1573.

is addressed in the next stanza:

> For my people walking blindly spreading joy,
> losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry,
> shouting when burdened, drinking when hopeless,
> tied and shackled and tangled among themselves by
> the unseen creatures who tower over us
> omnisciently and laugh. . . .[48]

Walker is speaking out against racism and its effects on the black community. Black people are "shackled and tangled" (overcrowded and trapped in segregated communities). The "unseen creatures" (disfranchisement, Jim Crow) are an oppressive presence that exists outside of the black community but exerts a great deal of power over the lives of black people.

Walker is also critical of those institutions within the community that supposedly foster unity, stability, and comfort:

> For my people blundering and groping and
> floundering in the dark of churches and schools
> and clubs and societies, associations and councils
> and committee and conventions, distressed and
> disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-
> hungry glory-craving leeches preyed on by facile
> force of state and fad and novelty, by false
> prophet and believer. . . .[49]

If black people are "blundering, groping and floundering" then these institutions have obviously failed them. They have also been severely exploited by political and religious leaders and their movements (perhaps Marcus Garvey, Father

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[48]Ibid.
[49]Ibid.

Divine or the Nation of Islam).

Finally, in the last stanza, Walker passionately exhorts her people to take action in order to bring about serious change:

> Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.[50]

If black people are ever to be free of the constraints and problems that plague their communities, they must "take control" of their lives and their destiny as a people. This militant call to freedom signified a dramatic shift from the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance generation as James Young points out:

> The harshness of Margaret Walker's words set her apart from any of her female predecessors. But Walker was of a generation of writers who came of age during bitter times, times which compelled them to grapple with reality.[51]

While Margaret Walker and other members of the Chicago Renaissance community grappled with the realities of race in the aftermath of the Great Depression, there was at least one artist/member who sought to transcend race. Willard Motley was one of a rare group of black writers who wrote

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[50]Ibid.,1573.
[51]Young, ***Black Writers of the Thirties***, 201.

"raceless" fiction. His 1947 novel *Knock on Any Door* is the story of Nick Romano, an Italian-American boy who is transformed by his environment into a criminal. The overlong work describes in sometimes painful detail, how society creates Nick and fosters his criminal activity. Motley indicts society in general as well as the criminal justice system and the city of Chicago. Motley's work belongs to the Chicago community because of its scathing realism. In spite of its initial critical acclaim in the 1940's, it has been roundly criticized for its likeness to Wright's *Native Son*. In fact, Robert Bone has stopped short of accusing Motley of plagiarism:

> The truth is that in its main outlines it leans so heavily on *Native Son* as to border on plagiarism. The chase, the speech of Nick's lawyer is simply *Native Son* stripped of racial implications. The difference is that where Wright's treatment is condensed and selective, Motley is detailed and exhaustive.[52]

The parallels between the novels are obvious. And aesthetically, Motley's work is a painfully monotonous read. However, Motley deserves attention because he explored the urbanization process and its destructive consequences. His use of naturalism and his social realism places his work within the Chicago Renaissance "orientation."

This Chicago Renaissance community was not exclusive to one generation of black writers. Arna Bontemps, a pivotal

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[52]**Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 178-80.**

figure of the Harlem Renaissance, occupied a unique position within this new, Chicago-based cultural outpouring. In 1935, Bontemps was attending graduate school at the University of Chicago. Soon after his arrival to the city, he met Richard Wright who was working on the Illinois Writers' Project. Wright introduced Bontemps to the South Side Writers' Group at one of their first meetings.[53]

Bontemps' introduction to and association with this new generation of black writers signified the transition from the Harlem Renaissance orientation (primitivism) to the Chicago Renaissance orientation (social realism). Robert Bone makes this insightful comment:

> Having spent some seven years in Harlem and as many in Chicago, he [Bontemps] was uniquely positioned to compare the focal points of Negro self-expression. He was a participant in both movements, and a living link between two generations of black writers.[54]

Indeed, Bontemps commented on both movements in a 1950 essay entitled "Famous WPA Authors": "Chicago was definitely the center of the second phase of Negro literary awakening . . . Harlem got its renaissance in the middle twenties, centering on the *Opportunity* contests and the Fifth Avenue Awards Dinners. Ten years later Chicago reenacted it on WPA without finger bowls but with increased power."[55]

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[53]Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* (Summer 1986): 446.
[54]Ibid., 447.
[55]Arna Bontemps, "Famous WPA Authors," *Negro Digest* (June

This "increased power" was demonstrated in Bontemps 1936 novel *Black Thunder*. The story is a vivid recount of an aborted slave revolt in Virginia in 1800. It is an account based on the historic event which involved a slave named Gabriel Prosser. Bontemps drew heavily from court records of the period.

This research helped to create the profound realism of Bontemps' portrait of the slave community. Indeed, critics across the board have praised the novel for capturing the language, attitudes, and dialogue of antebellum bondsmen and women. Critic Lawrence W. Mazzeno articulates this praise when he comments that

> Too often books such as this offer little more than political rhetoric disguised thinly as fiction, and characterization is subordinated to other aims. This is not the case in *Black Thunder;* the characters, especially the black people, appear to the reader in their own right, and Bontemps achieves a level of realism with his characters that is seldom reached in historical chronicles.[56]

And Richard Wright, in a 1936 review of the work, credited Bontemps with dealing directly with issues that had not been touched upon by previous African-American novels.[57]

One of the central issues that Wright was referring to

1950): 46-47.
[56]Lawrence W. Mazzeno, review of *Black Thunder* In *Masterpieces of African-American Literature* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 58-59.
[57]Wright, "A Tale of Folk Courage," *Partisan Review* (April 1936): 31.

was Bontemps' focus on the plight of the black downtrodden. At the center of the novel is a call to freedom. Bontemps implies throughout the work that although slavery had been outlawed, the racism and oppression that permeated the slave South still permeated 1936 America.[58]

Bontemps' scathing social criticism placed him firmly in league with his Chicago contemporaries. Because of his participation in the Harlem Renaissance, he could be seen as a "godfather" or "elder statesman" of the Chicago Renaissance(although he was only six years older than Richard Wright). Symbolically, *Black Thunder* was an anchor for the Chicago Renaissance. It was, as Wright pointed out, one of the first published works of the period which articulated the new wave of realism and social protest among black writers.

However pivotal *Black Thunder* was at this time, its publication does not take anything away from Wright's role as "chief spokesman" and leader of the Chicago Renaissance. In 1936, Wright was still formulating the main tenets of what would become "Blueprint for Negro Writing." However, he had completed his first novel *Lawd Today!* and he was organizing the South Side Writers' Group. And finally, Wright was much more prolific in the years to come than Bontemps. Wright proved to be the "guiding spirit" of the

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[58]**Mazzeno, 59.**

Chicago Renaissance community.[59]

This Chicago Renaissance community was part of a new generation of black writers who had experienced the Great Depression. This experience forced these writers to face the realities of their times. The experience also helped to shape a new orientation among these writers; an orientation which said that art should be used to express and raise social consciousness.

Langston Hughes was another transitional figure during this period. Although he was renowned as a Harlem Renaissance poet, Hughes did publish a novel of some significance. In 1930, *Not Without Laughter* became "the first major novel about the black experience in Chicago."[60] Hughes' story of a young Midwestern boy coming of age while working in a Chicago hotel was hailed by his contemporaries and future scholars for its "saving grace of realism." As James Young points out, *Not Without Laughter* was an important novel "because it was one of the first by a black writer in which the life of the common folk was examined on its own terms, not for its humor or propaganda value."[61]

Hughes had always celebrated the common folk in poetry. This celebration soon turned to protest during the 1930's.

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[59]Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," 462.
[60]Darlene Clark Hine, William Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey, Volume Two* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 2000), 454.
[61]James Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, 218-219.

During this period, Hughes, like many artists at the time, began to feel that art should express social and political consciousness. Hughes' poetry had always reflected this consciousness. In 1932, he visited Moscow and felt comfortable and appreciated. His politics moved sharply to the left although he never became a member of the Communist party. However, his poetry did reflect party ideology.

Hughes did not lose touch with the folk in poetry but there as a new emphasis on proletarian themes and heroes. The most vivid example of this new orientation was *Scottsboro Limited,* a poem-play dedicated to the black youths on trial during the infamous Scottsboro case. Throughout the poems, the boys are identified with revolutionary figures from the past including John Brown, Nat Turner, and Lenin.[62]

Hughes also addressed class conflict and exploitation in "Scottsboro Limited." The poem-play describes the persecution of poor whites and blacks alike by "de rich white folks." Towards the end of the work, Hughes "imposes the theme of Communist sympathy with the black victims and there is a triumphant unity with white workers as the boys escape their bonds."[63]

Ultimately, as Hughes assimilated Communist ideology,

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[62]Ibid.,174.
[63]Ibid., 175.

his work became stilted and superficial. Gradually, Hughes moved to the political center but never lost the social and political consciousness that shaped his work. Throughout the 1930's, "he concentrated almost exclusively on the theater."[64] His most notable work of the period was a miscegenation drama entitled *Mulatto*, produced in 1935.

Never afraid to tackle tough subject matter, Hughes was quite outspoken about what he felt black writers should be doing in their art. At the peak of the Harlem Renaissance in 1926, Hughes wrote what many considered a manifesto on the freedom of the black writer entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In many respects it was a precursor to Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing." The two essays are also companion pieces.

Hughes opens the essay by discussing what he calls the "mountain" which stands in the way of true black art--"this urge within the race toward whiteness."[65] Hughes is attacking the sentiment among black artists which denies racial identity and race consciousness in favor of assimilationist aspirations. The culprit in helping to develop this mentality, according to Hughes, is the black

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[64]Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 1253.
[65]Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, 1267.

middle-class. These "respectable members of the Baptist church" are engulfed in a white middle-class value system. They are materialistic and they embrace a "white culture" of integrated schools and white theaters and movies. By the same token, they reject and scorn virtually anything associated with black people.[66]

However, there are "the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority--may the Lord be praised."[67] They "live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else."[68] They are the key to helping the black artist gain a racial identity and consciousness. According to Hughes, they

> furnish a wealth of color, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.[69]

The masses of African-Americans retain the "essence" of black culture. Hughes then goes on to say that a truly uninhibited black artist would come from these masses. Once the artist emerges from this community, he or she would have a difficult journey in front of them:

> The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he

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[66]Ibid., 1268.
[67]Ibid.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Ibid.

> received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people.[70]

Hughes makes reference to Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar. He states that in spite of the quality and cultural relevance of their work, they were never taken seriously as artists. Racism clouded the minds of American society and as a result, these writers were seen as amusing oddities.

Hughes also makes reference to the Harlem Renaissance of which he is a major figure:

> The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor.[71]

Here, Hughes sees the Harlem Renaissance as a kind of a double-edged sword. Black artists are now receiving a great deal of attention but this is due largely to white interest in their work. Black culture, black art, and black people were now suddenly in vogue. Nevertheless, the black artist, according to Hughes, was now being noticed by his/her community.

Finally, Hughes makes clear the intent of his generation:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. We know we are beautiful. And ugly

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[70]Ibid., 1269.
[71]Ibid.

> too. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[72]

Acknowledgment of the whole of black culture and race consciousness will be the defining markers of this generation of black artists. Black artists should embrace their racial identity without reservation or fear of consequences. Once this is done, the black artist will conquer this racial mountain.

Hughes' essay and Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" are companion pieces in that both conduct a sometimes scathing self-examination of black cultural thinking and practices. There is also a call for a cultural self-reliance. Both men, in their attacks on the black middle-class and white patronage, implore black artists to think, speak, and write for themselves. There is also a certain militancy in both works that spoke to the political atmosphere of the respective periods. Hughes was going against the grain of the assimilationist/Americanness sentiment of the Harlem Renaissance but he was still in line with the post-World War I black militancy of the decade. Wright incorporated the Marxist/Communist ideology that helped to shape the 1930's.

The 1930's was a decade that witnessed a new wave of black political activism as more black thinkers and

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[72]**Ibid., 1271.**

activists aligned themselves with the labor movement. During this period there were some five hundred civil rights organizations with various ideologies and methods. In 1936, these organizations were brought together for the National Negro Congress. During the same year, Hughes traveled to Chicago to conduct research for a historical novel. He was invited, along with Arna Bontemps and Richard Wright, to speak on black history and culture at the final session of the Congress. Faith Berry describes the meeting between Wright, Bontemps, and Hughes in her biography of Hughes:

> In Chicago, Hughes made the acquaintance of Richard Wright, a young Mississippi-born black writer, who had been secretary of the local John Reed Club. He had impressed Hughes with "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite,"a piece on the psychological impact of Joe Louis's victory over a German former world heavyweight champion Max Schmelling. Wright had lectured on Hughes to the John Reed Club, but the two writers had missed meeting the year before in New York at the first American Writers Congress; Wright had attended, but Hughes had been unable to make the trip from Mexico. In Chicago, mutual friends, including Arna Bontemps, introduced them.[73]

Wright, like many young black writers of the time, regarded Hughes as a hero, a giant in the creative community. Hughes socialized with Wright and his WPA comrades during his visits to Chicago. Like Bontemps, Hughes was excited about this new generation of black writers.

Hughes often worked very closely with this new

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[73]**Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (New York: Citadel Press, 1983), 245.**

generation. For Gwendolyn Brooks(among others), he served as a mentor, reviewer, and close friend.[74] Brooks was a protege of Hughes. He read and reviewed the poems that would make up her 1945 collection *A Street in Bronzeville*.[75] Hughes, like Arna Bontemps, belonged to both the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance. Although he was the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, his social, political, and cultural thinking belonged to the Chicago Renaissance. His work always exemplified social realism and protest.

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[74]Ibid., 322.
[75]Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

When Richard Wright left America for Paris, France in 1947, it was an attempt to further distance himself from his Mississippi past. This past was quite painful given its racism and degradation. As he grew older and migrated to Chicago and then New York, Wright found a different form of racism. Lynching and Jim Crow were replaced by police brutality and a neosegregation which designated African-Americans to slum areas. Wright began to feel that America's racism was too deeply rooted for him to ever be truly free as a black man and an artist.

However painful the past may have been, it helped to shape and define him as an artist and intellectual. During the Chicago Renaissance years Richard Wright "emerged," developed and transformed from a struggling proletarian poet to one of America's premier authors with international acclaim.[1] During this period, Wright also moved beyond the confines of strict literary activity and combined his

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[1]The term "emergence" as used by Keneth Kinnamon in his *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

interest in folklore and sociology to produce *Twelve Million Black Voices*(1941). Four years later, he produced *Black Boy*(1945) which many hailed as a masterpiece in autobiography. And in the midst of this activity, he officially broke with the Communist party.

It is important to note that Wright was living and working in New York during this period. This raises an interesting query. How can a writer who left Chicago for New York in 1937 be the central figure of a Chicago Renaissance that took place roughly between 1935 and 1950? Robert Bone provides this answer:

> A partial answer lies in the fact to Chicago for extended periods to visit family and friends, and to do research for books and articles. And again in the fact that his presence in New York represented an outpost of Chicago values. Shaped in Chicago where he spent his young manhood, Wright's artistic imagination clung to its shaping-place long after he moved to New York.[2]

While in New York, Wright retained a certain "Chicago consciousness." Chicago's rich social, cultural, and literary history no doubt helped to shape that consciousness.

Another facet of Wright's consciousness was Communist ideology. During the Chicago Renaissance years, Wright grew increasingly disillusioned and dissatisfied with the Communist party until his departure in 1944. However, he

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[2]Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* (Summer 1986): 449.

held on to Marxism. Wright postulated quite forcefully that race and class were inextricably linked.

As Wright held on to Marxism, he also began to experiment with existentialism as evident in the short story "The Man Who Lived Underground." Wright had always been concerned with examining the human condition. He attempted to move beyond race as he wrote about alienation and the "outsider." Although he certainly broadened his themes and techniques, Wright never abandoned race. Perhaps this was Wright's concrete attempt to do what he implored black writers to do in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" with regards to black nationalism--embracing and understanding it in order to transcend it.

The 1937 essay was part of Wright's emergence as artist/intellectual. According to Keneth Kinnamon, this emergence "was complete with the publication and favorable reception of *Native Son*."[3] Shortly following this emergence, Wright entered a new phase of his career. He began to broaden his thinking and the scope of his writing. With the publication of *Twelve Million Black Voices* in 1941, Wright effectively assimilated elements which shaped and defined his writing up to that point: folklore, Marxism, and sociology. The book was a collection of photographs designed to detail "The Folk History of the American Negro."

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[3]**Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, 153.**

Wright provided the prose for the work.

The text is divided into four parts. Part One, entitled Our Strange Birth, sketches the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the early years of black enslavement in America. Wright eloquently describes the effects of the slave trade on the lives of Africans who would become Americans:

> Captivity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each one of us and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in an effort to live. Our folkways and folk tales, which had once given meaning and sanction to our actions, faded from consciousness. Our gods were dead and answered us no more. The trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ship--all these hollowed us out, numbed us, stripped us, and left only physiological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue.[4]

Wright effectively sets the tone for the work with a lyrical rendition of historical facts. Wright's style makes the history of African-Americans organic.

Wright continues his prose in the second section entitled Inheritors of Slavery. The section opens with a provocative comment on the term "Negro":

> The word "Negro," the term by which, orally or in print, we black folk in the United States are usually designated, is not really a name at all nor a description, but a psychological island

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[4]Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 15.

> whose objective form is the most unanimous fiat in all American history; a fiat which artificially and arbitrarily defines, regulates, and limits in scope of meaning the vital contours of our lives, and the lives of our children and our children's children.[5]

Wright provides a sociological analysis of the term "Negro." As mentioned earlier, his poetic style gives the analysis a certain depth and emotionalism that engages the reader. The reader hopefully understands the power of the word in the lives of black people.

Language is not the only element that affects the lives of black people in the United States. There is a distinctive class structure which shapes and controls almost every facet of black life:

> In general there are three classes of men above us: the Lords of the Land--operators of the plantations; the Bosses of the Buildings--the owners of industry; and the vast numbers of poor white workers--our immediate competitors in the daily struggle for bread. The Lords of the Land hold sway over the plantations and over us; the Bosses of the Buildings lend money and issue orders to the Lords of the Land.

Wright's Marxist analysis illuminates the racial hierarchy as well as the class struggle which defines the social position of blacks in American society. Wright makes it clear that regardless of what region(the industrial North or the agrarian South) blacks existed in, their daily lives and their destiny were always in the hands of those outside

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[5]**Ibid., 30.**

their community. And Wright elaborates even more in the following pages as he points out that "the economic and political power of the South is not held in our hands; we do not own banks, iron and steel mills, railroads, office buildings, ships, wharves, or power plants."

Wright shifts from a Marxist analysis to a serious sociological treatment of the migration and urbanization process in Part Three which is entitled Death on the City Pavements. On the second page of the section, Wright presents seemingly cold facts:

> In 1890 there were 1,500,000 of us black men and women in the cities of the nation, both north and south. In 1900 there were 2,000,000 of us. In 1920 there were 3,500,000 of us in cities of the nation and we were still going, still leaving the land.

However, in the next paragraph Wright returns to an evocative emotionalism:

> We, who were landless upon the land; we, who needed the ritual and guidance of institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose; we, who had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery and had been turned loose to shift for ourselves--we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were, that threw us into the scales of competition to weigh our mettle.

Wright then describes the end of the journey as the "landless upon the land" adjusting to a new reality. There are problems with employment as "the gigantic American companies will not employ our daughters in their offices as clerks, bookkeepers, or stenographers" and "the engineering,

aviation, mechanical, and chemical schools close their doors to our sons; the Bosses of the Buildings decree that we must be maids, porters, janitors, cooks, and general servants."

Perhaps the most provocative and disturbing imagery is Wright's description of the new physical environment which envelops the new migrants:

> The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks. The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies.
>
> The kitchenette scatters death so widely among us that our death rate exceeds our birth rate, and if it were not for the trains and autos bringing us daily into the city from the plantations, we black folks who dwell in northern cities would die out entirely over the course of a few years.

Although hailed as the "Promised Land," the urban north proves to be just as destructive as, if not more destructive than, the agrarian Jim Crow south. Wright's description is graphic and angry as he weaves together statistical data and harsh reality.

It is this synthesis of sociology, history, Marxism, and prose that gives *12 Million Black Voices* its power. This synthesis also demonstrates Wright's continued growth as artist/intellectual. In the foreword to the work, Wright speaks of the influence of numerous disciplines in the making of the text with this statement: "The majority of the

concepts and interpretations upon which I have relied most heavily in assembling and writing of this text came from *The Negro Family in the United States* by E. Franklin Frazier; *History of the American Negro People, 1619-1918* by Elizabeth Lawson; "Urbanism as a Way of Life" from the *American Journal of Sociology* Volume XLIV, Number 1, July 1938 by Louis Wirth; and *Black Workers and the New Unions* by Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell."

Wright's exploration of the black experience was part of a larger exploration of the American experience and ultimately the human condition itself. Between the publication of *12 Million Black Voices* and his pivotal 1945 autobiography *Black Boy*, "Wright wrote three significant pieces: "The Man Who Lived Underground," "I Tried to be a Communist," and the introduction to *Black Metropolis*."[6]

In the short story "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright was attempting to move beyond race-specific themes. It began as a 150 page manuscript about Fred Daniels, a black servant. Like *Native Son*, it was a novel divided into three sections. In the first section, Daniels is falsely accused of murder and subsequently interrogated and beaten by the police. In the second section, Daniels escapes from the police and slips into a manhole. Daniels' experience in the manhole comprises the third section of the novel.

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[6]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 173.**

When Wright submitted the novel to Harper, "it was rejected for reasons that have not been made clear."[7] The third section was eventually converted into a short story and published in 1944 in an anthology entitled *Cross Section*. The action takes place in a surreal, subterranean world where Fred "sees, not reality in reverse, but the reverse of reality."[8] He also became a "spectator freed from himself and invisible."[9]

Wright derived his concept of the underground man from Dostoevski's *Notes From Underground*. Margaret Walker makes these insightful comments:

> Wright's underground man is the marginal man, considered by society as a zero, a nothing. For Wright, the marginal man is the black man, and his story is of a man in flight from the police, who accidentally finds an underground world.
>
> Psychologically and philosophically the underground man has deep implications for modern man especially for the black man, the marginal man in society. More than anything else, "The Man Who Lived Underground" links *Native Son* to *Black Boy* and helps to establish Wright as a fiction writer of ideas.[10]

As Walker points out, Wright was ever expanding, growing, and developing as an artist/intellectual. The influence of Dostoevski and existentialism speaks to Wright's constant, almost obsessive absorption of knowledge from a wide array

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[7]**Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), 232.**
[8]**Ibid., 239-241.**
[9]**Ibid.**
[10]**Walker, *Daemonic Genius*, 174-175.**

of sources.

Another important piece of Wright's is his very public announcement of his withdrawal from the Communist party "I Tried to be a Communist." In his diatribe against the party, Wright contends that the party was fervently anti-intellectual. They were suspicious of intellectuals. Intellectuals were considered elitist. Wright also protested the party's strict control over writers and their art. The party believed that art should be used to advance the party line. They often used and exploited racial situations to their own ends.[11] Margaret Walker makes this provocative statement:

> Perhaps his greatest difference with the party was in ideology. Wright believed that Trotsky and Lenin were the grand old men of the Russian Revolution, not the nationalist Stalin, who was really a party functionary and bureaucrat. Wright joined the Communist Party because he believed in world revolution, particularly as the correct solution for the American black man, and he left when he felt that the revolution was not forthcoming.[12]

Wright maintained that, in general, the party "ceased to be an agent of social change" and they were intolerant of new ideas and often self-promoting.[13]

Although disillusioned with the Communist Party, Wright was not deeply distracted. He remained prolific. With

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[11]Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1944): 61-70.
[12]Walker, 177.
[13]Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," 61-70.

the success and notoriety he achieved with *Native Son*, Wright "became one of the most sought after authors in the country."[14] Indeed he wrote numerous introductions to books by fellow writers including J. Saunders Redding and Nelson Algren.[15]

Wright's collaboration with Drake and Cayton was an outgrowth of his relationship with Cayton and the Chicago School of Urban Sociology. Cayton's research served as the theoretical introduction for Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*. Wrights's introduction to *Black Metropolis* demonstrates his prowess as a scholar. Although it was an introduction to a longer work, it was an entity unto itself. It contains quotations of poetry from Wright's personal favorites: Shakespeare, Phillis Wheatly, Claude McKay and Vachel Lindsay.

Wright also "successfully lectures the reader on how he/she should read this book, what it means in urban sociology, and its significance for black people and urban culture."[16] He acknowledges the impact of Cayton's research on *12 Million Black Voices*, *Native Son*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and *Black Boy*. Most importantly, this introduction reveals Wright's "intense and avid interest in reading books of social science and literature, his

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[14]**Walker, 180.**
[15]**Ibid.**
[16]**Ibid., 186.**

scholarly ambitions, his tremendous interest in knowledge, his pride in being a self-educated man, and his fundamental-mental nature as a intellectual."[17]

After this pivotal introduction and years of looking outward, Wright turned inward and began to assess the significance of his life.[18] In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright examines his formative years in the Jim Crow south. It has been argued that most of Wright's fiction was autobiographical in one form or another. However, this was a more "open" attempt to describe his life experience.

Written in the form of a novel, the work describes the ordeal of being black in a white-dominated south. The crux of the work is Wright's struggle for self-esteem, identity and his quest to discover how to "live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything."[19] This quest was hindered by a dysfunctional family and a searing racism that permeated his environment.

In Chapter Five Wright describes his home life which helped to shape his views on religion (among other things):

> There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute, a fact which I used to hint gently to Granny and which did my course

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[17]Ibid., 187.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Wright, Black *Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper, 1945), 144.

> no good. Granny bore the standard for God, but she was always fighting. I, too, fought; but I fought because I felt I had to keep from being crushed, to fend off continuous attack. But Granny and Aunt Addie quarreled and fought not only with me, but with each other over minor points of religious doctrine, or over some imagined infraction of what they chose to call their moral code. Whenever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God.[20]

The strife that Wright witnesses teaches him that religion and religious doctrine are tools of manipulation and help to create hostility instead of creating "The peace that passes understanding."

In addition to religion, Wright also discovers the meaning of "place" in his life. He discusses the significance of his southern environment during the fallout over his first short story "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre":

> In the end I was so angry that I returned to talk about the story. From no quarter, with the exception of the Negro newspaper editor, had there come a single encouraging word. Had I been conscious of the full extent to which I was pushing against the current of my environment, I would have been frightened altogether out of my attempts at writing.

Wright further states:

> I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept alive in me.[21]

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[20]Ibid., 119.
[21]Ibid., 147.

Wright learns that his attempt at creativity is dangerous for him socially in his southern home. He also came to understand the power of the written word. This written word could elicit profoundly strong emotions from everyone within his community. The principal (among others) wanted to know why he had used the word "hell." Wright felt the "he had committed a crime." Wright observes quite accurately that he "lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked off."[22] The North seemed to be his salvation. It was, at least symbolically, a place where virtually anything was possible.

Wright continues his discussion of "place" with this statement:

> I was building up in me a dream in which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted to and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that he southern senators in the nation's capital had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo.[23]

Here, Wright is describing the development of his sense of self and the fact that he could be and do more than his environment would allow. He has aspirations that could

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[22]Ibid., 148
[23]Ibid.

take him out of the south. Equally important is the development of Wright's social consciousness. He is acutely aware of the forces around him that affect his life and black folks around him.

This new social consciousness allows him to "see" how other black southern boys are affected by the harshness of the south:

> I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them. Most of them were not conscious of living a special, separate, stunted way of life. Yet I knew that in some period of their growing up there had been developed in them a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all the white race had said was taboo.[24]

Wright's consciousness creates a distance between him and his peers as well as his experiences. He is an observer. He is able to analyze these experiences with a certain depth.

The distance just mentioned became more pronounced as Wright grew older. Finally, at the age of seventeen, Wright has an epiphany after recalling an altercation with his uncle:

> It was a flash of insight which revealed to me the true nature of my relations with my family, an insight which altered the entire course of my life. I was now definitely decided upon leaving my home. My life was falling to pieces and I was acutely aware of it. I was poised for flight, but I was waiting for some event, some word,

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[24]Ibid., 172.

> some act, some circumstance to furnish the impetus.[25]

Wright grew more and more alienated from his family and his peers and he did leave his Mississippi home. The work ends in the year 1925, with a seventeen-year-old Wright bound for Chicago by way of Memphis, Tennessee.

Black Boy has often been compared to Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* because it followed the stock pattern of the self-made man. Wright did educate himself and fled from an oppressive environment. *Black Boy* is also a distinct coming-of-age story. Margaret Walker makes this comment:

> It is a Bildungs-roman. It is in the great American tradition of Mark Twain's Huck Finn or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and like the contemporary stories *Catcher in the Rye* and *Lord of the Flies* it is also a story of adolescent evil and initiation. Instead of sexual initiation into manhood or puberty, however, all Wright's boys are initiated into manhood through racial violence.[26]

The reader comes to understand how Wright was shaped emotionally, psychologically, socially and culturally. His childhood and adolescent development were, as mentioned earlier, permeated with various forms of oppression.

Racial oppression us at the heart of Wright's story. When Wright described his personal experience, he was describing the collective experience of black southerners.

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[25]**Ibid., 152.**
[26]**Walker, 188-89.**

As critic Thomas Becknell points out, "he strove for an objectivity that would show the environmental forces determining the black experience in the South."[27] In this sense, *Black Boy* can be seen as a work of sociological significance.[28]

The sociological significance of *Black Boy* can be seen in the majority of Wright's work. Throughout his career, Wright wore many hats: poet, propagandist, short story writer, novelist, essayist, newspaper writer. The diversity and prolific nature of Wright's endeavors spoke to his never-ending "quest" of liberating social consciousness.[29]

The Chicago Renaissance years witnessed the early stages and full development of his quest. Between the publication of "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in 1937 and his self-imposed exile to Paris in 1946, Wright produced the most profound and provocative work of his career. Indeed, critics generally agree that "Wright's career as a serious artist effectively ended in 1946."[30] Although he remained prolific during the Paris years, critics contend that his work lost its power and resonance as it became increasingly

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[27]**Thomas Becknell, *Masterpieces of African-American Literature* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 54-56.**
[28]**Ibid.**
[29]**Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, xviii.**
[30]**Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., The *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 1379.**

abstract.[31]

Wright's creative prowess may have taken a "downward spiral," but the driving force behind his writing was his activism. He was constantly drawing attention to the issues of race, class, and the human condition. During the Chicago Renaissance, Wright sought to transform the nature of black writing; to make it an instrument of social consciousness and social change.

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[31]Ibid.

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