

Exchanging Ghosts: Haunting, History, and Communism in *Native Son*

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RICHARD WRIGHT MIGHT NEVER HAVE SAID that a spectre is haunting Communism in the United States. Yet his novel *Native Son* (1940) is strangely like a ghost, fictionally visiting and revisiting a particular history of the Party's attempts to understand race in terms functionally equivalent to those of class. Wright's novel is shaped in part by his own experiences with the Communist Party of the United States, first in Chicago and then in Harlem. But the commitment to Communism Wright may have felt early in the 1930s is tempered at the end of the decade by his portrayal of the nightmare of Bigger Thomas's life. For in writing *Native Son* Wright imagines a Communism in the United States that quite capably reproduces processes of social dehumanization that exile Bigger into the shadowy role of what Wright once ironically referred to as "the Negro's uncertain position in America" ("Bigger" xxviii). Occupying a position that is scarcely uncertain in 1930s Chicago, Bigger is tried for the rape and murder of Mary Dalton, the white daughter of his employer. While Bigger's conviction was perhaps already assured by the combined historical weight of such charges and contemporary practices of legal-lynching, Wright assigns a significant degree of importance to his trial. In this remarkable episode of Bigger's narrative, Wright's Communist defence lawyer Boris Max offers

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an impassioned and complexly rendered portrayal of racial discrimination in the United States. Max examines the ways in which charges of rape policed and sanctioned violence against African Americans. The “hunt for Bigger Thomas,” he notes, “served as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of Communists, to raid labour union headquarters and workers’ organizations” (356). These remarks very rapidly specify a particular example of this impossibly overdetermined charge against a black male and the tendency of the United States legal system to ratify what Max calls the “hate and impatience” of “the mob congregated upon the streets beyond that window” (357). Wright refers here to another trial in which the Communist Party of the United States defended several black men who barely survived the “lynch barbarism” of a “mob who surrounded the Scottsboro jail with rope and kerosene” after their initial convictions (Maxwell 132). While Wright himself acknowledges the Robert Nixon case in Chicago (1938–39) as an influence on his representation of Bigger’s crime, the legal defence of Bigger, on the other hand, recalls the political prominence of the trial of nine young black men accused of rape in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931 and the Communist theories of race publicized by the Party during this first significant attempt legally to represent African Americans. Restaging and interrogating the terms of this trial, Wright develops a rhetoric of haunting that conjures up ghosts of a complex history of lynching suppressed by the substantial and compelling Communist hermeneutic of race put forward at Scottsboro. The histories of lynching that *Native Son* finds palpably absent in an understanding of race put forward by American Communists in the 1930s, moreover, is powerfully marked by the gendered violence perpetrated against the bodies and spirits of black women during slavery and Reconstruction. In revisiting Scottsboro in *Native Son* Wright summons a form of white violence that is hauntingly absent from the text’s narrative of lynching and Bigger’s defence. This counter-intuitive possibility that the gendered violence of *Native Son* may actually constitute a critique of Communism arises in part as a function of a rhetoric concerned with seeing what may not be there.

Wright’s discussion of these two trials is marked by a language of ghosts. In the summation to his defence of Bigger, Max attempts to understand those “disembodied spirits” like Bigger Thomas and Bessie Mears (368) by employing a rhetoric of ghosts that also marks Wright’s earlier narration of Bigger’s interactions with the young Communist Jan Erlone. Read together, these two scenes powerfully develop a notion of haunting that punctuates the place of the then recent trial of the “Scottsboro

boys” in Wright’s fictionalization of a Communist understanding of race within *Native Son*. Indeed, placing Bigger among the “wailing ghosts” of Chicago’s South Side during the Depression (366), Wright’s Communists imagine the life of Bigger Thomas to be nothing less spectacular than the life of a “corpse” (361). But it is as a corpse, Wright intones, Bigger will potentially always “return” to haunt “our souls in the deep of the black night” (361). Max’s words form an impassioned rhetoric that is as severe an indictment of racism in America as it is a complicated performance of such strategies of dehumanization by the Communist Party in the United States. Max’s other-worldly rhetoric of corpses and ghosts renders Bigger strangely and complexly present and absent at the same time, seemingly hovering between two worlds unable to be either fully visible or invisible. While Ralph Ellison would, several years later, write of an invisible man, Wright develops here a narrative marked by a spectral “presence.” Spectres, or what Derrida calls the “unknown of that which must remain to come” (Derrida xviii), mark as inexhaustible a reserve of meaning within something called Scottsboro and its relationship to a Communist understanding of race formulated in terms of class discrimination and affiliation.¹ And if such genealogies of race in the United States will always contain such unseen branches and roots, with more yet to come, Wright’s novel would seem to recognize that some of these limbs may just be phantom. Indeed, *Native Son* grafts onto itself the phantomalization of a particularly painful history of violence against black women. Translating Elizabeth Grosz’s insight that “the absence of a limb is as physically invested as its presence” (41) into the terms of Wright’s project here, *Native Son* would seem to be a novel structured by the inexorable ghosts that substantially mark the text’s critique of American Communism. In this sense Houston Baker’s comment that *Native Son* “discounts women’s history (or herstory) in order to project an alliance between black and white male industrial workers” (109) needs to be carefully calibrated for the unaccountable ways in which *Native Son* performs an analysis it may embody only in spirit. For Baker, the violent misogyny of *Native Son* stems from “the lure of a peculiarly materialist historiography” (101). Baker’s analysis of Wright’s “preferred

1 Derrida’s comments in *Specters of Marx* respond in part to Francis Fukuyama’s buoyant declaration of the end of history, as well as to the interminable work of mourning more generally. Fukuyama’s declaration is a curious example of the impossibility of a purely declarative speech act. At the very least the stated end of history has brought about a vigorous re-conception by the humanities of what “history” entails, the most recent expression of which may be a special issue of *PMLA* dedicated to the topic. For more on this see Rajan.

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historiographical strategies of scientific socialism” (102), moreover, offers another target for the misogyny of the novel. Baker casts Communism in the role of an alluring temptress aggressively distracting Wright from his ostensibly proper attraction to the black women of the novel. What if, however, the misogyny of the novel is itself indicative of a Communist hermeneutic of race that *Native Son* compellingly transforms? Paying attention then to those moments in which the novel repudiates Communism for precisely the misogyny that the novel itself best exemplifies, it may be possible to glimpse how a painful history of gendered violence hauntingly “structures and unstructures” Wright’s recollection of a Communist attempt to mark race in terms of class (Guttman 180).²

The performativity of *Native Son* has recently been insisted upon by Sondra Guttman in her reading of the ways in which Wright’s text initiates an analysis it does not necessary declare. Anthony Dawahare has similarly suggested that the failure of Wright’s novel to represent an “alternative” to the perhaps damning portrait of Communism and Bigger “represents the working through” of psychoanalytically-inflected “nationalist fantasies rather than an exemplary image of a black communist” (Dawahare 130). By emphasizing an implicit analysis running throughout *Native Son*, Dawahare builds upon Guttman’s suggestion that the novel may be a performative text capable of articulating the necessity of a politics it does not depict explicitly. For this reason, however, Guttman’s assessment that Wright’s *Native Son* “is a proletarian novel” (170) may require qualification precisely because what Wright’s novel *is* cannot be punctually delimited. Such careful attention to the performative possibilities of Wright’s text are relatively recent and must, I think, be insisted upon thoroughly.

In the controversial article “I tried to be a Communist” published first in 1944 by the *Atlantic Monthly* and then again as part of his autobiography *American Hunger* (1977), Wright recalls his disillusionment with Communism that he locates then in May of 1936, four years before the publication of *Native Son* and some six years before he would formally sever his ties to the Party:

2 For a recent account of the reading strategy I further develop here by attending to the workings and unworkings of Wright’s spectral language, see Guttman’s attention to the ways in which Wright’s *Native Son* may be read against the traditional reception of it as a misogynist narrative by focussing upon those moments in which Wright “means to show—but not condone—the dire consequences for white women of displaying sexual and (therefore) political desire” and the possible consequences for black women of such expressions of desire (Guttman 180).

I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honour and glory to the Communist Party and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I would never be able to write that way again, would never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, would never again express such passionate hope, would never again make so total a commitment of faith. (*American Hunger* 133)³

In this rather romantic assessment of his involvement with Communism, Wright imagines a break with the Party and his faith in it that seems to be borne out by *Native Son* in only the most complicated ways. If by 1936 Wright has lost faith in Communism, the publication of *Native Son* would seem to imply that by the end of the decade he has not rejected it. For Communism is perhaps complexly repudiated but not abandoned by Wright in this novel, making these remarks a telling example of how conflicted Wright was about his work with the Party. Wright, moreover, claims to understand his relationship with Communism through his writing, through the stories he wrote down “in black and white.” But his work summons a Communism that may be in excess of what he writes down on the page in black and white. That is to say, understanding Wright’s relationship with Communism in *Native Son* demands a practice of reading capable of conjuring up what the novel does not depict. Wright comments in a brief article from 1945 on the role of such reading: “It made me remember how Negroes in the South, crowded into their Black Belts, vented their hostility upon one another, forgetting that their lives were conditioned by the whites above them. To me reading was a kind of remembering” (“Reading” 81). Reading and a mode of reading called writing are for Wright a way of articulating the insistent difference of the past in the present. Toni Morrison speaks of “rememory” in very similar terms in her novel *Beloved* (1987). For Morrison, “rememory” signifies the complicated ways in which Americans must always negotiate the persistent haunting of the histories of slavery. How *Native Son* marks such an uncertain recollection of white violence and particularly the violence of

3 The version from which I quote is published as the final chapter of *American Hunger*, the posthumously published second half of Wright’s autobiographical *Black Boy*. This particular passage bears no textual variations from its original publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*. For an analysis of the variations among these texts see Christopher Z. Hobson, “Richard Wright’s Communisms: Textual Variance, Intentionality, and Socialization in *American Hunger*, ‘I tried to be a Communist,’ and *The God that Failed*,” *Text* 6 (1994): 307–344.

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slavery and its legacies, however, is not nearly so schematic as Wright’s staged scene of recollection.

Writing at the end of a decade in which the world watched Alabama imprison nine young men for rape despite appeals and pleas by the convicted that effectively drew attention to a biased legal system, the simple sharpness that Wright attributes to his writings on Communism is blurred in *Native Son*. Max, or “the mouthpiece of Wright’s political understanding of Bigger” (Dawahare 122), eschews the stark and self-assured concreteness Wright associates with his short stories in favour of the uncertainty of shadowy ghosts. Wright deploys this rhetoric of ghosts to at least two ends in his novel. First, he assigns a dehumanizing language to his figures of official Communism. And second, Wright finds within this language the possibility to signal a curious afterlife to the trial at Scottsboro. Wright’s repudiation of the interest in the perhaps unrealized possibilities of Communism he evinces in *Native Son* contains another history, indeed, even multiple histories. Phrased as a critical practice, Wright’s refusal of Communism must not be left unread—if reading is a complicated act of remembering. But this reading and remembering will also always neglect other histories that preceded Wright’s powerful revision of himself and his commitment to Communism.

Wright’s understanding of Communism did not begin or end with the words he wrote in *Native Son*, even if the import of those words could finally be stabilized. A generation earlier, a similar combination of wariness and appreciation characterized the work of W. E. B. Du Bois on the subject of Communism. In a 1919 article published in the *Crisis* Du Bois responded “ambivalently” (Dawahare 25) to the “vision of the great dreamers” of Russia whose revolution would mandate “that only those who work shall vote and rule” (Du Bois 234). Despite the dream of a racially undivided proletarian government, Du Bois agreed, however complexly, with the priority Marcus Garvey’s West Indian nationalism assigned to “a common racial identity ... over class identity and interests” (Dawahare 27). To be sure, Du Bois had reason to be suspicious of irreducible class difference as a member of the “numerically small black bourgeoisie” who “came up from the ranks of the working class” (27) and whose cross-class sympathies with a black working class trumped interracial interests with a white bourgeoisie. African-American experience demonstrated another model, in other words, and in his writings on Communism throughout the 1920s Du Bois imagined that racial affiliation could lead to a more democratic society via the production of a black “bourgeoisie and finance capitalists” (27). While the cultural expression of such African-American

“national resources” flourished in Harlem, this dialectically-organized politics of race and class remained vague and unfinished by the end of the 1920s. Indeed, if Communism was inseparably linked to questions of black nationalism for thinkers such as Du Bois and Claude McKay, both of whom visited the Soviet Union (Dawahare 67), after more than a decade of Communist rhetoric on race in the United States Wright faced a differently composed debate surrounding the relative utility of Communism for African Americans.⁴ If nationalism had codified a certain thinking on the subject of race particularly during the Harlem Renaissance, the question of the colour-line increasingly became a question of the relationship of race to class, or at least that is how it would have seemed to Wright as a Chicago-based Marxist.

When Wright does describe black nationalism in his introduction to *Native Son*, he has as his subject a West Indian nationalism that sought to radicalize the very same African Americans the Communist Party of the United States hoped to attract. And while it would certainly be possible to conceptualize these competing ideologies in terms of nationalism, Wright does not do so. Instead he notes, in one of his most doctrinal comments from “How ‘Bigger’ was Born,” that African Americans are faced with a choice between Marcus Garvey, a “gaudy, hysterical leader who will promise rashly to fill the void” among dispossessed African Americans, and the potential of Communism to bring Bigger and those like him into “an understanding with the millions of his kindred fellow workers under trade-union or revolutionary guidance” (xx). Interracial class solidarity trumps black nationalism according to Wright at this moment, in the introduction to *Native Son*.⁵ Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* best expressed and stabilized the conceptual opposition of racial nationalism and Communism conceived as competing ideologies. Ellison’s Brotherhood is memorably set against the black nationalism of Ras the Exhorter. In *The*

4 Dawahare emphasizes “the virtual inescapability of nationalist thinking” in McKay’s writings while he was a communist (64).

5 Wright’s perspective on interracial solidarity is particularly of this moment in time. He will go on to articulate a compelling argument for black nationalism in the 1950s in texts such as *Black Power* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958). The conventional eschatological narrative of Wright’s development—one which Wright helped to craft—suggests that he became disillusioned with Communism and turned finally to Black nationalism in the 1950s. Yet perhaps this dialectical narrative of Wright’s “shift” from one ideology to another risks knowing his critique of Communism (or his stance on Black power) too readily. That is to say, this eschatological narrative evokes a Communism that is not as self-divided as Wright insists it is in *Native Son*.

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Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (1967) Harold Cruse similarly opposes Communism to forms of black nationalism. Communism, he notes, failed to provide Wright with “all the ingredients of nationalism; to create values and mould concepts by which his race was to ‘struggle, live and die’” (188). But Wright’s focus on Communism in *Native Son* is markedly less dialectical in its elaboration. Or rather, to be more precise, Communism is measured by Wright against its potential to be other than itself—rather than against a black nationalism.

Eschewing a conceptual opposition of West Indian nationalism and Communism, Wright examines with care the interracial affiliations that characterize the Communist milieu in which his literary career first flourished. The 1930s saw Wright engaged in “self-making on the literary left” of Chicago with his friend and fellow writer Nelson Algren. Both men were members of the local John Reed Club, a Communist Party society “open to younger artists” (Maxwell 180) who sought according to their “Draft Manifesto” to support the “revolutionary labour movement” and oppose “all forms of Negro discrimination” (qtd. in Maxwell 180). Such declarative programmes were indebted to earlier discursive attempts by the Communists in the United States to clarify the Party’s position on racial oppression. The expression—and critique—in *Native Son* of the potential of a Communist view of race subsumed by class solidarity is enmeshed in the terms of precisely these articulations of the Party’s position on race.

An editorial in *The Daily Worker* from February 26, 1929, which appeared only weeks after the paper’s publication of the 1929 International Resolution in which the Party advocated equal rights for African Americans, nicely captures the potential this emergent Communist perspective on race held for black America:

The Communist Party is the advocate of full racial, social and political equality for the Negro race, and pledges itself to fight for the right of self-determination for the Negroes in the South. But the Negro masses must understand that their racial and economic liberation can be achieved only in alliance with the working class—whites and blacks alike—and as a product of the victorious proletarian revolution. (Foner and Allen 200)⁶

6 In 1929, the American Communist Party adopted an International Resolution pledging the Party to “fight for the full equal rights of the oppressed Negroes and for their right to self-determination, and against all forms of chauvinism, especially among the workers of the oppressing nationality” (Foner and Allen 194). As Barbara Foley points out, this resolution draws upon:

For Communism in the United States, discrimination on the basis of race could be thought of as symptomatic of broader structures of class division. This meant race, if there is such a thing, would be marked first by an identification of class, white and black allied under the banner of the proletariat. Sally Miller notes that Communism identified the African American “as a worker” but failed to see what Miller calls the “peculiar difficulties imposed by the existing semi-caste system” upon a black worker (34). Calls such as this one for an alliance among workers instilled a process of black self-identification that assimilates so-called racial peculiarities to an understanding of class. While this is only one possible reading of American Communism’s understanding of race during the Depression, this notion that race marks the transitional phase to the black individual’s becoming proletarian, becoming just like the white worker, is powerfully recalled by *Native Son*.

Wright’s novel re-inscribes this intriguing notion of “becoming” that the editorial in the *Daily Worker* bestowed upon black America. While he certainly does not idealize a black proletariat in *Native Son*, Wright nonetheless revisits or perhaps is visited by what I am here calling a logic of becoming, an investment in the politics and possibilities of spectrality in his novel. Even if Wright does not find in the Communist Party’s advocacy for racial equality a program that he endorses, he nonetheless finds lurking there a logic that will enable him to illuminate the dark recesses and invisible figures dwelling within a Communist view of race understood in terms of class. In the penultimate scene of *Native Son* Max spectacularly remarks that Bigger is a “corpse,” but a corpse that possesses curious claims to the motions of life, thus marking such an other-worldly being as compellingly vigorous. Max cries out to the jury, “the corpse is not dead! *It* still lives! *It* has made itself a home in the wild forest of our great cities, amid the rank and choking vegetation of slums” (361–362). Max’s sum-

both Lenin’s and Stalin’s writings on the ‘national question.’ The formulation theorized American blacks as an oppressed ‘nation,’ comparable to the national minorities that comprised the different ‘republics’ of the USSR. Setting the struggle for black liberation in the context of anti-imperialism, this position called for both multi-racial workers’ solidarity *and* self-determination in the so-called black belt. (Foley 174)

For a tracing of the CPUSA’s positions in relation to black self-determination in the South see also Gerald Horne, “The Red and the Black: The Communist Party and African Americans in Historical Perspective,” *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, eds. Michael E. Brown et al., New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993.

mation speech is, like the editorial in the *Daily Worker*, predicated upon a notion of the hardy black worker who will emerge from the “wild forests” of racially segregated slums to become part of “our great cities.” For in speaking about Bigger as something undead, Max insists on imagining the possibility that Bigger can be changed, altered, or become someone real. But Max’s rhetoric, on the other hand, seems incapable of change. From Max’s perspective African Americans like Bigger Thomas “glide through our complex civilization like wailing ghosts; they spin like fiery planets lost from their orbits” (366). Shifting from a corpse to a ghost to some sort of extraterrestrial life form, Max’s tropes are themselves haunted by the ways in which race forms an irrepressible concern for Communism in the United States in the 1930s.

Vastly reducing the complexity of something called “our complex civilization,” Max speaks of spectrality here to suggest a particularly powerful form of alienation among African Americans.⁷ For Max, Communism might just be able to bring African Americans back into their proper revolutions. But for Wright, what such orbits might properly, or improperly, become is a question left unanswered at this moment. Indeed, as I shall take up later, the promises of a Communist revolution may, under certain circumstances, actually dematerialize Bigger instead of making him somehow more present. But here, during Max’s courtroom flourish, such a rhetoric implies a sense of something coming into being that seems more to describe the project of Wright’s novel than it does Bigger Thomas, who will never finally emerge as an idealized worker in Max’s speech.

In refusing at this moment to designate Bigger a “worker,” Wright draws attention to a schism in thinking about race highlighted by the 1929 International Resolution. In pledging to “fight for the full equal rights of the oppressed Negroes and for their right to self-determination, and against all forms of chauvinism, especially among the workers of the oppressing nationality,” the Communist Party insisted the dialectical subsumption of race into class be marked by the irreducible difference of African Americans and (implicitly white) workers, even if each might finally be marked by a common oppression (Foner and Allen 194). Recalling the chauvinism of white workers who saw African Americans as a labour pool traditionally used to break strikes, Communism cultivated a sense that

7 For a reading of the ways in which Wright uses a rhetoric of foreignness to describe the black women in the novel, a rhetoric which would arguably include the aliens I am here noting, see Trudier Harris, “Native Sons and Foreign Daughters,” *New Essays on Native Son*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon, New York: Cambridge UP, 1990, 63–84.

African Americans would become workers (Shapiro 217–218). In refusing to designate Bigger a worker, to cast him in terms that call attention to the demand African Americans become something—suggesting African Americans are somehow not yet what they ought to be—Wright begins to unfold an extended and running critique of the terms of the Communist defence at Scottsboro. And what Wright scrutinizes most in restaging the terms of Scottsboro are the complicated ways in which histories of lynching disappeared as the accused became workers.

There is no more emphatic hearing of the promises Communism held for African Americans than the trial in Scottsboro that ran through the 1930s. The very public trial and initial conviction of nine young black men in 1931 for the rape of two white women on a freight train near Scottsboro, Alabama, saw the Communist Party develop a persuasive understanding of racial discrimination that relied precisely on a notion of class affiliation among black and white workers. Following the initial trial and convictions, the International Labour Defense (ILD) assumed control of the appeals, making the “Scottsboro boys,” as the teens were called, the focus of a test case of a Communist policy on race in America. The ILD, a Chicago-based Communist organization that served both white and black workers, assumed control of the defence only after intense competition from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which also sought to defend the teens.⁸ While it may be impossible to know which organization might have most effectively led the appeals by the young men, “we can have no doubt,” writes Herbert Shapiro, “the Communists waged an unprecedented publicity campaign in connection with the Scottsboro case” (211). I want to focus on just two particularly evocative and widely circulated pleas that anchored this publicity campaign. These pleas document a Communist perspective on race voiced principally by those who were being discriminated against: the “Scottsboro boys” and their mothers. While the details of the trial are stunning in their own right—ostensibly featuring female accusers who might have been prostitutes or alternately might have been cross-dressers; thirteen year-old sexual predators; and the predictable calls for lynching—the young men were persistently depicted by newspaper accounts as typical youths who hopped a freight train to look for work and who had been surreptitiously convicted by a racist legal system of a crime they did not commit. This perspective was afforded in part by the pleas that the young men and their mothers crafted. The “Scottsboro

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8 For more on this vociferous debate between Communism and the NAACP see Shapiro 210–211.

boys,” and curiously their mothers as well, became the exemplary African Americans the Communist Party sought to help and at the same time to radicalize as public voices for their own defence. As Max would say later in *Native Son*, “the complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol” (Wright 354). The test symbols of Scottsboro failed to have their convictions overturned, however.

Losing the appeals was a significant blow to Communist aspirations to challenge institutional racism, and a much greater blow to the seven convicted, many of whom would be imprisoned for years. But for Wright, why the defence failed to overturn their clients’ convictions is not a significant concern. Incorporating Scottsboro into his narrative, Wright explores instead the contours of a Communist perspective on race put forward by the ILD. That the young men stood accused of the crime of raping two white women meant this test case featured the most powerfully over-determined charge possible against black men in the United States. Lynching in the United States described the white reprisals for black offenses “more often imagined than real” (Wiegman 93). Functioning as a disciplinary mechanism by which to regulate newly emancipated African Americans in the latter half of the nineteenth century, over time lynching assumed the form of an “ideological narrative ... of the mythically endowed rapist, the flower of civilization (the white woman) he intended to pluck, and the heroic interceptor (the white male)” (93). Wiegman’s description of this scene highlights the way in which this script codes racial difference as the “heightened sexual perversity” (83) of the male rapist, a figure whose blackness—so the story goes—is always already known. Similarly, in 1909, Ida B. Wells-Barnett acknowledges that the logic of lynching follows a sexualized script, but she also places emphasis upon lynching as a discourse of nation. “First,” she stated, “Lynching is color-line murder. Second: Crimes against women is the excuse, not the cause. Third: It is a national crime and requires a national remedy” (qtd. in Shapiro 120).

Yet the Communist defence most palpably understood the charge of rape and the threat of lynching implied by it to be motivated by an ideology of class discrimination. The public avowals of innocence made by the young men and by their mothers, moreover, reproduce this notion of class discrimination. And this possible reduction of the complex history of lynching to a practice of class-oppression in the United States seems to haunt *Native Son* as something it cannot see but seemingly senses is there. Thus it is not enough to say that the ILD failed in its appeals. For in restaging a Communist defence of a young black man charged with rape Wright suggests the defence exemplified by Scottsboro is strangely unfin-

ished. Wright's novel is something like a further appeal, perhaps in another district, of the verdicts reached after Scottsboro. In other words, Wright retains a sense in his novel that Communism may still hold promise for black America. But, at the same time, Wright's fictionalization of Scottsboro is not a return to *something* at all but rather a return to a moment in which something might be given space to come into being. For Wright, what is missing in the appeals of the "Scottsboro boys" is a complex history of the discursive shifts in power-relations marked by the movement from slavery to Reconstruction.⁹ But this seeming determination in advance of what is absent recapitulates what already exists in Scottsboro.

Following the initial conviction of the "boys," two separate yet very similar popular appeals were issued, both of which are surprising for their near total disavowal of lynching as an informing context. The first, appearing in the *Daily Worker* and titled "Appeal of Scottsboro Mothers," calls upon "all working class mothers to help us save our boys from being killed" (Foner and Shapiro 288). The mothers declare that all their sons did was look for work during the Depression, something any "working class mother's boy" might have done (288):

And now here they is in Kilby Prison waiting for the electric chair. For something they ain't never done. They was put in jail at Scottsboro on frame-up. Everybody knows they never did commit that rape the boss-men down here charge them with. They was framed-up only because they are working class boys, and because they are negroes. That is all. Nothing else. (288)

9 In considering the limitations of using the nexus of concerns named "miscegenation" to model a black subjectivity, Frantz Fanon comments in *Black Skin White Masks* that "[e]very experience, especially if it turns out to be sterile has to become a component of reality and thus play a part in the restructuring of reality" (48). Fanon's metaphor of sterile experiences recalls the phantasm of interracial heterosexual coupling that produces sterile children. And this curious but powerfully informing notion of miscegenation would seem to be tellingly absent from *Native Son*. Where, for instance, does Wright stage a discussion of reproduction in thinking about the politics of rape and lynching? What would it mean for Bigger or Bessie or Mary to fail to reproduce or "restructure" the conditions of production? What sort of productive resistance could be marked by sterility? In what sense are the Scottsboro "boys" the children of this book? Do these young men tell the story of Bigger's next generation, imprisoned, in some cases escaping prison only to find death, in other cases being pardoned but too late for it to be much of a pardon at all? These questions mark yet another legacy that Wright would seem to avoid but which nonetheless compelling returns to haunt his novel.

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their sons.

In a phrase that became synonymous with Scottsboro, the mothers refer to the conviction of their sons as a “frame-up.” But in this appeal the “boys” are framed once again, this time as “working class boys.” The appeal is marked, then, by a commitment to a Communist logic in which the working class refers to “whites and blacks alike.” But to extrapolate this logic and understand the mothers who signed this appeal to be workers is perhaps to misread the labour of this document. The appeal works because the mothers do not actively fold themselves into it. The mothers are present as signatories to this appeal but not as figures narrating a history of violence against African Americans. Indeed, rather than discuss lynching and the politics of interracial rape, what the mothers focus upon instead is “the boss-men down here.” They suggest a detail that is at once familiar (“down here”) and provocative (“the boss-men”). And most surprising of all, particularly to Southern readers of this appeal who would well know what men are lynched for “down here,” the mothers assert that their boys were “framed-up only because they are working class boys,” and then as if it were an afterthought, “and because they are negroes.” But by disavowing the gendered violence of lynching, the appeal by the mothers of the “Scottsboro boys” positions a history of lynching all the more surely at the core of their efforts to defend their sons. For if Scottsboro haunts *Native Son*, what “Scottsboro” means in this context is itself haunted by what it does not address. But perhaps not every absence is a ghost, or not just one ghost. It is due to the very particular regulatory function of lynch law that the unstated history of white supremacy in the South haunts the appeal of the mothers. The violent policing of African Americans functions to obscure the relations of power at a time when the boss-men had seemingly become the new masters and the juridical powers of the state the new overseers (Wiegman 93). These positions of power were not simply renamed but phantasmatically transposed precisely in order to manage the shift from a slave economy to one of sharecropping and train-hopping particularly as work became scarce. This New Deal for the South had been functionally segregating society at least since the latter decades of the nineteenth century. But if in many respects this deal was the same as the old one, it was also different in crucial ways. The enslaved black woman who had been key to the reproduction of relations of production for a slave economy is here replaced by the function of lynch law itself. Despite being the objects of lynching, along with their families and male partners, and still subject to rape, black women were absent from the “cultural scripting of the rape mythos” (102). By the 1930s the relations of production no longer relied upon the “reproductive value” of black female bodies but were maintained

instead by the political technology of lynching and the imagined threat to white women posed by black men (102). In other words, the appeal issued by these black women marks the political unconscious of relations in the South in which continued assaults against black women are now marked as assaults by black men; powerful southern gentlemen are replaced by vulnerable white women. This re-coding of power-relations functions to maintain a culture of white supremacy in the guise of protecting white women. But if this history of gendered violence informs this appeal, indeed threatens to make its very utterance illegitimate, it is not the only or even the most significant history to do so. For the appeal by the mothers, and indeed the appeal issued by the young men, also exist within a counter-memory of African-American speech-acts and literacy.¹⁰

In “Scottsboro Boys Appeal from the Death Cells to the Toilers of the World,” the young men reproduce this narrative of class prejudice. In unadorned language they remark, “[u]s poor boys been sentenced to burn up on the electric chair for the reason that we is workers—and the color of our skin is black” (Foner and Shapiro 292). Refusing to account for any of the myriad alleged events that took place, the boys say only that their “kinfolk was starving for food. We wanted to help them out. So we hopped a freight—just like any of you workers might have done—to go down to Mobile to hunt for work. We was taken off the train by a mob and framed up on rape charges” (293). This appeal powerfully reiterates a plausible narrative of idealized workers further persecuted during a time of mass unemployment, a narrative that might effectively counter another in which black men are imagined to be predators.¹¹ The published appeals of the mothers and the convicted young men capture, moreover, a black vernacular that for Shapiro captures “a moving genuineness ... that illustrates how in this case the defendants themselves played an active role on their

10 The appeals by the mothers and the young men might further be considered in the context of the contemporary efforts to collect and record Slave Narratives by the Federal Writers Project. These recording practices authorized and valued a certain mode of public intervention for African Americans in the 1930s, to name but just one other context arguably haunting these appeals.

11 Wright himself champions this African-American-as-worker figure years later. In a 1938 article in the *New York Amsterdam News* Wright remarks (quoted in Foley 190): “I have found in the Negro worker the real symbol of the working class in America.” Bigger Thomas, however, is hardly the worker Wright has in mind. While Bigger comes closer to representing the stereotype that the white South imagined when it convicted nine young men of rape, the “Scottsboro boys” appear to have been the type of people to whom—and for whom—the Communist Party could speak.

own behalf” (Shapiro 207). Indeed, if the young men and their mothers actively speak for themselves in these appeals, as Shapiro notes, how they speak comes to define the place of these texts in an archive of an American Communist hermeneutic of race. The apparent genuineness of the appeals naturalizes the position from which the “boys” and their “mothers” speak. Their class identity appears fully formed and plainly evident in their manner of writing. Just as the mothers appealed to other working class mothers, the young men turn to address “[w]orking class boys” directly and offer the following plea for class solidarity: “we asks you to save us from being burnt on the electric chair. We’s only poor working class boys whose skin is black. We shouldn’t die for that” (Foner and Shapiro 293). These appeals mark a curious “African-Americanization” of a Communist Party perspective on race, in the sense that they are not reducible to the Communist perspective on race that underwrites them. As William Maxwell has noted, these appeals mark an important contribution by black women to Communist discourses of race that were increasingly characterized by their “indifference” to “the sexual racisms of lived ‘social equality’” for African American women (149). For if young black men could become the symbol of racial prejudice in the United States, the black women who just as easily could have been “dragged before judge lynch” do not emerge as the desired objects of Communist discourse and defence (148). But the significance of the appeals of the mothers to this debate does not lie in their ability to overthrow “Communism’s tendency to masculinize the very prospect of interracial radicalism during the 1930s” (10). Rather, these black women express a history in excess of a Communist perspective on race but such insight is routed through the defile of an identity that is defined by class first, and race second. Indeed, as Maxwell himself notes, it is as the “hard-working mothers of the Scottsboro defendants” that these women are to be remembered (150). But perhaps these women and their teenage children are more than just hard workers.

For instance, these appeals recall the work of writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson as well as Phillis Wheatley. For these writers, their talents to craft language indelibly marked them as human beings and demonstrated to the American public the remarkable literary abilities of African Americans. While speaking as workers, then, the mothers and the young men are also much more than workers. Their appeals may embody a Communist hermeneutic of race and indeed naturalize it in black vernacular. But their appeals also performatively renounce dehumanizing strategies of racial discrimination. The most significant work of these appeals is not their particular politics, but rather, their ability to exceed

the identities that would seem to have produced them. Indeed, haunting Wright's portrayal of Scottsboro is a similar investment in a complicatedly "uncertain" ("Bigger" xxviii) subjectivity irreducible to a Communist identification that imagined Bigger to be a worker.

In *Native Son* Wright revisits Scottsboro explicitly in a scene in which Jan Erlone and Mary Dalton compel Bigger to show them life on the South Side of Chicago. In this narrative he offers something of a reflexive meditation on the ways in which his novel may, like the appeals of Scottsboro, articulate something that is not, and perhaps cannot be, assimilated into the text. Maxwell is right to suggest, moreover, that critical attention to Wright's Marxism in *Native Son* needs to note the way in which his "concluding acid test for white radicals gains bite from the novel's earlier play with the kind of interracial triangles seen in early Party Scottsboro discourse" (184). Yet the subject positions within such triangulated desire must be read as capaciously as possible so this schema does not begin to prescribe stable subjectivities where none exist. For what Wright's recollection of Scottsboro accomplishes and dramatizes so successfully are the instabilities that characterize Bigger's identity.

In the scene among Mary and Jan and Bigger, Wright reorients a focus on the figure of the African-American worker that was so central to the appeals of the young men and their mothers into broader questions of culture. For Wright, how one speaks, lives, and eats may be that which most irreducibly separates white communists from their black comrades. Thus, this scene of ostensible cultural exchange marks a significant contribution to Wright's interest in the possible limitations of interracial class affiliations. But again, Wright's remarks do not abandon Communism, developed as they are within a narrative in which negotiations of identity are framed by a Marxist analysis of the commodity, or the dominant definition of African Americans during slavery.

Travelling with Jan, the exemplary young white Communist agitator of *Native Son*, Mary Dalton wistfully imagines partaking in the culture of Bigger's Chicago. Settling upon Ernie's Kitchen Shack, the three proceed to share a meal in one of Bigger's local haunts. In this brief but evocative scene, dense for the implications it holds for a Communist idealization of African-American workers, Mary attempts to see ghosts, or more pointedly, attempts to see material figures as somehow visibly spectral. For Mary, this meal becomes an opportunity to see for herself if African Americans do live as she lives:

The most significant work of these appeals is not their particular politics, but rather, their ability to exceed the identities that would seem to have produced them.

‘We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They’re *human*.... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us.’ (Wright 70; emphasis and ellipses in original)

More than just an opportunity to observe with Mary what she verges on recognizing as an alternative form of life, the meal becomes an opportunity for the reader to confirm that African Americans are indeed human. This avowal would of course need no confirmation if it did not contain within itself the possibility of disavowing that humanity—“they *must* live like we live.” The category “humanity” is italicized, moreover, suggesting a compelling uncertainty about just what it designates. Whether Bigger is imagined by Communism to be a living corpse, a ghost, or a worker, the question remains, is he human? Mary can ask that question, and perhaps even answer it, but being able to do so does not secure her humanity. For humanity here names an axis of similarity along which the apparent differences of Mary, Jan, and Bigger will each be potentially exchanged in an experience of culture. Humanity, if there is such a thing, a thing which Mary would seem to possess unproblematically, comes into being in this process of exchange with Bigger. But Mary imagines a trade in humanity that ignores the possibility that humanity might here designate a relationship between Bigger and Mary that would resist such economizing impulses. Mary does not desire to bestow a benevolent gift, even supposing for a moment such a gift would not also be structured like a demand, upon those who might not be human. Rather she desires to have her own sympathetic humanity confirmed by the humanity *she sees* in African Americans. But the complexity of Mary’s desires cannot be articulated solely by their own intensity. Functioning alongside and in intimate discussion with her desires are Bigger’s complex yearnings to find a workable way out of what is for him quickly becoming an unliveable situation.

Perhaps remembering the table that supports Marx’s discussion of the commodity in *Capital*, Wright carefully notes the disastrous effects for Bigger of sitting at a table with Mary and Jan. In a gesture that secures for the reader the meanings within Mary’s assurances of the humanity of African Americans, Bigger feels anything but human in this scenario. The narrator remarks that Bigger “had a wild impulse to turn around and walk away. He felt ensnared in a tangle of deep shadows, shadows as black as the night that stretched above his head” (72). Unable to leave the table, Bigger is ensnared, animal-like, by a sense of conflicting duties arising from his

position as an African-American worker. Bigger is caught in a scenario in which he is forcibly compelled by normative expectations of segregation in 1930s Chicago and by expectations of obedience to Mary. He does not wish to be seen taking white people into South Side Chicago any more than he desires to disobey Mary's instructions.

Bigger would perhaps retreat into a less than promising ghost-world with shadows "as black as the night." But the narrative resolutely refuses to turn here toward body-snatchers that might idealize Bigger into something other than flesh and blood. He is, rather, all too embodied, unable to escape as a ghost, or a spirit, might. Bigger is "ensnared" by the night in which all the ghosts are black. Wright's turn on the table, then, his attempt to rethink the linked concepts of labour and the commodity, a relationship which arguably forms yet another political history of race in the United States, is constituted by the all too human predicament in which Bigger finds himself as a worker. By providing the reader with a glimpse of Bigger's life as a worker and its psychically devastating effects upon him, Wright emphasizes a mode of labour that forms not useful and exchangeable tables but an unhappy consciousness for Bigger. Bigger is preoccupied by an impossible and interminable labour of negotiating his conflicted obligations. This labour re-inscribes Bigger Thomas as nothing less than a body "constituted in and as transformative activity" (Butler, *Bodies* 250).¹² With this passage Wright marks another expression of a logic of becoming that Communist discourse in the United States deployed as a device with which to manage the integration of African Americans into a revolutionary proletariat. More than the possibility of African Americans becoming something called workers, Wright insists that transformation describes in part the ongoing state of being for Bigger and for Mary as well.

If Bigger is scarcely human, Mary seems so excessively human she imagines she can bestow humanity upon others. But Mary's desire to have her own perhaps anxiously uncertain humanity confirmed by witnessing the lives of African Americans like Bigger will always require further gratification. Mary's desire, in other words, assumes the contours of a mode of longing. As such, Mary's intense desire to see if "they live like we live"

12 Butler's comments come in a footnote in which she glimpses in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* a materialism that understands objects constituted in and through praxis. In this formulation, remarks Butler, "the object is not only transformed, but in some significant sense, the object is transformative activity itself" (250). Butler finds lurking within Marxism something analogous to her counter-intuitive theorization of bodies produced and policed by processes of normative regulation.

actively renounces Bigger's humanity by locating it in a system of trade. She imagines humanity to be contingent upon gestures of reciprocation. Failing to take into account the differential codes of normative behaviour marked by race, however, such gestures of seeming equality literally animalize Bigger. Struggling against an irremovable conflict produced by such demands, Bigger ferociously consumes himself to the point where he no longer recognizes "the very organic functions of his body" (Wright, *NS* 73). Such self-sacrifice, or sacrificing the self as a gesture of the self, marks Bigger's failed attempts to reply to Mary's humanitarian treatment. Rather than exposing the humanity at the core of the so-called commodity, Wright notes the ways in which humanity is economized into the inevitably over-determined interaction between Mary and Bigger. But it is much more difficult to ascertain whether or not Wright reduces a discussion of humanity to the terms associated with narratives of lynching—young black men and white women—because that is the overriding discourse in which to think about humanity in the 1930s in the United States (bringing with it the histories of the commodity in Marxism and the commodification of African Americans under slavery), or because such a discourse needs to be exposed as so strikingly inadequate to theorize humanity in all its complexity. Posing the question in this way is to begin to ask, teasing out the further implications of this scene of exchange, in what ways are Wright's critical attempts to renounce a Communist hermeneutic of race also traversed by expressions of desire?

Further dissecting the figure of the African-American worker, Wright luridly anatomizes before the reader's eyes the implications of the Communist defence of the "Scottsboro boys" in a way that the appeals at Scottsboro did not. Indeed, in preparing the way for his brief discussion of Scottsboro, Wright offers this strange scene in which a Communist perspective on African Americans is itself tried. But for Bigger the trial of Communism seems perhaps as psychically damaging as his own trial for murder will be. For while Wright marks the political labour carried out in the name of the "African-American worker," the unhappy prospect remains that the crucial differences between white and black workers imagined by Communism—differences which sustain Mary's confidence about whom she speaks when she imagines "they *must* live like we live"—are also lived as psychic antagonisms within each worker. But these internal divisions are much more damaging for some workers than for others, as Wright's novel so spectacularly displays. As Max notes of Bigger, every "desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal is a plot or a conspiracy" (367). This comment speaks to the ways in which every "physiological and psy-

chological reaction” of Bigger Thomas is “an unconscious protest” against what Max insists on calling “our society” (367). Yet the idea that desire might amount to something like a conspiracy against Bigger structures Bigger’s psychical conflicts as a worker in a society built upon his labour.

Renouncing a Communism for the histories of lynching it ignored in capitalizing upon African-American dispossession, Wright also voices in *Native Son* a desire for the perhaps impossible (and impossibly desirous) renunciation of desire. This obviously insufficient response to the normalizing terrors of lynching informs in part the text’s distressingly brutal expressions of desire. Framing *Native Son* as a text that responds directly to the history of gendered violence disavowed by the Communist defence in Scottsboro, Wright nonetheless ends up writing a narrative that repeats much of this violence. Yet it may be possible to glimpse another response in Wright’s work, one structured by what Tilottama Rajan has called the “unassimilable alterity” of history, of a “history as the condition for an internal distancing” (428). Such an understanding of history creates a space within the text in which the text is not itself. Giving Scottsboro a seemingly insubstantial presence in the book, Wright concludes the scene at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack with Jan briefly questioning Bigger about “the Scottsboro boys.... Don’t you think we did a good job in helping to keep ’em from killing those boys?” (75). The passage is almost not there at all, just a glimmer of something, and yet forms a nexus of the many concerns of *Native Son*. And indeed Wright’s very pointed but seemingly offhand mention of Scottsboro in this frequently-cited scene is marked by an intense critical neglect of how this reference to Scottsboro may orient the novel’s curious meditation on the politics of spectrality.

Jan’s terse assessment of Scottsboro carefully highlights the strategic processes of abjection that in many senses characterize the affective bond a reader might have had with the young men tried in Scottsboro. While some were nearly children, the appellation of “boys” seems aimed at generating sympathy for the seemingly vulnerable and innocent young men. And yet this highly-charged label “boy” has for several centuries in the United States marked and produced the notion of a diminished masculinity and intellectual capacity among African-American men. Wright seems to note here that the pathos of the appeals of the “Scottsboro boys” and their mothers relies, at least in part, upon the abjection of the young men as a defence. The suggestion of boys, who by their very boyishness pose “no sexual threat” (Wiegman 97), might have further eroded the legitimacy of the charge of rape. But the costs associated with such a sympathetic identity are, for Wright, too high.

Indeed, in preparing the way for his brief discussion of Scottsboro, Wright offers this strange scene in which a Communist perspective on African Americans is itself tried.

For Wright had experience with narratives that could lose their political import in pathos. Indeed, the comparatively fierce masculinity of Bigger Thomas marks a refusal by Wright to generate a similarly affecting portrait of an African-American male. Building upon his declaration that *Native Son* would not be a book that “bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about” as his earlier collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* had been, Wright unsparingly casts Bigger as a character for whom no one could feel sympathy (“Bigger” xxvii). Wright comments here of a banker’s daughter, offering an almost perfectly epigrammatic figure of the problems *Native Son* tries and perhaps fails to negotiate. Yoking together gender and class and implicitly race, if we imagine Wright could be thinking here only of a young white woman, Wright introduces his text with a nexus of concerns figured precisely around the question of reception or the properly unimaginable effects of *Native Son*. Holding no illusions about the uncontrollable afterlife of *Native Son*, or what Wright calls “its unrealized potentialities” (“Bigger” xxxiii), Wright nonetheless works to craft a text that will unsettle the contemporary reader. Wright’s analysis is similarly unsettling, but perhaps not straightforwardly so. Paul Gilroy notes that Wright’s decision to cast his “ideal misreader as a white woman raises the complicated issue of his misogyny” (154). Read, moreover, in the context of Wright’s novelistic trial of a Communism expressed at Scottsboro, this misogyny is indeed complicated. In seizing upon bankers’ daughters as his privileged readers whose sentimental reception of *Native Son* he would like to make impossible, Wright imagines an antagonistic relationship between a young black man and a young white woman that re-inscribes the gendered positions solidified by the normative political functioning of interracial “rape” (“Bigger” xxviii). Wright is careful perhaps not to reduce rape only to its political and social investments by writing here of rape in quotation marks. But he does nonetheless understand rape most discernibly as “a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (“Bigger” xxviii). Thus while Wright does not occlude the painful histories of rape for black women nor does he acknowledge them. As Sondra Guttman notes, furthermore, “had Wright wished to demonstrate that ‘rape’ was nothing more than a word used to suppress black resistance, there would be no rape in *Native Son*, only false accusations of rape” (170). Yet Wright insists on speaking of the terrors surrounding charges of rape, terrors which were themselves compellingly real. The threats of lynching associated with charges of rape, threats that always risk reducing rape to a governmental mechanism, might cause a family to flee “the Black Belt and its terrors” and head to Chicago (“Bigger” xxix), as Wright himself

did. Wright's potential reduction of charges of rape to their capacity to inflame or incite violence against a black population must be read, I think, alongside his immediately preceding reflections on young female readers.¹³ For Wright does not speak about young women or even girls when he imagines an unsettled reader. No, his chosen designation here is "daughters" and specifically the daughters of bankers, a modification that needs to be parsed for its class connotations but equally for its suggestions of fathers. If the Communist discourses of Scottsboro feature mothers and sons, Wright's preface in turn evokes fathers and daughters. Indeed, read together this correspondence compellingly recalls a history of lynching marked by black mothers, powerful southern gentlemen, aggressive black men, and innocent white daughters. While perhaps unnamed by the text, such a history of "rape," implicitly a history of black women who may have been forced to birth a banker's daughter, inexorably inhabits *Native Son* at its core. *Native Son*, in other words, dialectically insists upon what Communism failed to address at Scottsboro: the significance of a narrative of rape and lynching for any radical understanding of black consciousness.

But the histories that haunt *Native Son*—and Scottsboro is (not) just one—are incalculable. In recalling a trial that failed to reduce a complex history of lynching to a perhaps too programmatic understanding of class prejudice, then, Wright dredges up a rather messy archive that only appears well-contained. That is to say, Scottsboro opens up within the text the possibility that a history of lynching may haunt attempts by the Communist Party in the United States to think through race in terms of class, but also that it may not be the only way in which to consider such matters.

Writing in a register that starkly denies the rich other-worldly phantasms Wright emphasizes in *Native Son*, Houston Baker succinctly captures this labour of disappearance and appearance in Wright's novel in

13 Pérez argues that despite the fantasies of sexual freedom promulgated by the newsreels they watch, Bigger and Jack are always aware of the consequences of miscegenation. The threat of lynching, writes Pérez, "mediates Bigger and Jack's reading of the newsreel inasmuch as they are cognizant of the limitations placed on Blacks under Jim Crow" (156). But such a focus on the consolidation of lynching as a mechanism of social control must, I think, be re-framed in light of Wright's earlier attention to imagined female readers. For Bigger and Jack are not the only consumers of mass media Wright imagines in this novel. Rather, they are tellingly placed alongside white women readers suggesting lynching and notions of "rape" function to police, however uncertainly and unevenly, distinctions between white and black but also between masculine and feminine subjects.

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a manner both determined and determinative. The African-American worker, writes Baker, is “born in mechanical glory from the womb of the machine,” and significantly, this “[a]sexual birth from the machine displaces a painful history of rape and relegates its victims to an historical void” (108). The Scottsboro mothers and their mothers before them are exiled to this historical void by denying what everyone knows: while rape was structural to the economy of slavery, antebellum narratives of rape assign value only to white femininity. As Wiegman puts it, the “negation and devaluation” of African American women that continued during Reconstruction “made possible the narrative casting of white women as both prize and pawn” in the lynching script (102). But if the Scottsboro mothers cannot speak what everyone knows, Wright does speak of this painful history, but he does so as a ghost might, not apparently speaking at all. As powerful as Wright’s development of a logic of haunting may be, surely laying the issue bare as Baker does here better delineates the history of violence that Wright inherits and communicates in *Native Son*. For if these historically sedimented meanings of rape unstopably shape and condition the events of Wright’s novel, why does Wright tell a story in which Bessie Mears is attacked and murdered by Bigger Thomas? Does *Native Son* in some sense perform the importance—and indeed insufficiency—of a history of lynching to its narrative critique of Communism even if does not significantly declare it as an abiding concern?

The answers to these questions may dwell within Wright’s own complicated refusal to materialize the meanings implicit in charges of interracial rape in a Depression-era United States. The Communist response to Scottsboro must not be dismissed, *Native Son* would seem to say, because it seizes upon the category of rape as key to understanding racism but too readily desires to have done with this painful history. Wright’s text performs the absence of this history, then, in an effort to transform a Communist trajectory of responding to racial discrimination. For Wright does not simply renounce Communism in this text. Max’s speech dehumanizes Bigger. But it also marks a passionate expression of desire in Wright’s novel to end racial discrimination in the United States. Wright’s own renunciation of Communism in *Native Son*, very different perhaps than the renunciation he will offer years later, takes place in and through the text’s very desire for an adequate Communist response to racial discrimination and segregation, which is to say, “the desire is *never* renounced, but becomes preserved and reasserted in the very structure of renunciation” (Butler, *Psychic* 56). Unpacking the ways in which this desire for an other response is articulated in and through Wright’s performative

text, I turn finally to the uncertain task of reading in *Native Son* and the incalculable potentialities it offers, by way of conclusion.

Near the end of the novel, Bigger confesses in a scene that forms a curious meditation on the spectrality of authorship, recalling as it does Wright's own preface "How Bigger was Born." Bigger's legal confession marks him at once as a full agent and strangely unauthorized to speak for himself and provides a fictional expression of the inability of Wright's own declaration of authorship to delimit the possible meanings and ostensible project of the text. In a gesture of signing, powerful for the indeterminacy of authorship it establishes, Wright imagines Bigger in terms reminiscent of Max's ghosts. Upon confessing his crimes Bigger feels himself vanish:

Listlessly, he talked. He traced his every action. He paused at each question Buckley asked and wondered how he could link up his bare actions with what he had felt; but his words came out flat and dull. White men were looking at him, waiting for his words, and all the feelings of his body vanished, just as they had when he was in the car between Jan and Mary. When he was through, he felt more lost and undone than when he was captured. Buckley stood up; the other white man rose and held out the papers for him to sign. He took the pen in hand. Well, why shouldn't he sign? He was guilty. He was lost. They were going to kill him. Nobody could help him. They were standing in front of him, bending over him, looking at him, waiting. His hand shook. He signed. (Wright, *NS* 287)

The narrative of Bigger's confession is animated by a series of substitutions. When he wants to describe what he feels, Bigger only describes his "bare actions." Having confessed, he feels no lightening of the burden of guilt, only "more lost and undone than when he was captured." The performance of his hands seems indistinguishable: "His hands shook. He signed." Anxiety and authority, it would seem, go hand in hand. Speaking himself into being is an utter failure for Bigger Thomas. His speech is inadequate to his experience, constantly patching in events when he means to be speaking of his state of mind, the excitement of life he feels. Bigger's signature attains the status of something like a forgery: its very shakiness confirms he is not simply or only Bigger Thomas. Indeed, in his failure to confirm his own punctual existence in language Bigger suggests language may do more than it seems to say. Barbara Johnson points out that "what the communist lawyer, Max, cannot hear is precisely Bigger's 'I am,' his ascension to the status of a speaking subject" (Johnson 146). But in authorizing himself as a subject here, Bigger does not attain the status of a subject. Rather, he

becomes a ghost hovering in the darkness. If Bigger's authority is spectrally uncertain, present and absent simultaneously, such a rhetoric of ghosts marks Wright's authority over his written text as similarly equivocal. The very uncertainty of what one does when one is doing things with words in some sense names the text's negotiations with the irreducible alterity that history represents for it. The men surrounding Bigger Thomas are not the only ones waiting. The reader waits here too, for an immanent critique of a Communism that narratively reproduces the very exclusions for which it would criticize a Communist understanding of race. While Bigger loses the feeling in his body, the reader is left waiting for the return of that other body, the body that marks Bigger finally as a haunting ghost and not a corpse in the eyes of Communism in the United States.

For as abject and ghostly a figure as Bigger Thomas surely is in *Native Son*, he never seems to rise above his body, viewing it from below. The only body Wright's text makes available in this fashion is the corpse of Bessie Mears. Max declares "Bessie is dead" (Wright, *NS* 366). Her body is reduced by Max to the artifactual proof of Bigger having lived, "only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live" (366). Giving a face to the neglect of African-American women Wright saw in a Communist understanding of race developed at least in part at Scottsboro, the novel also fails to offer a counter-narrative to this understanding of race. In a doubled gesture, the text repudiates and re-inscribes a misogynist neglect of a painful history of black women. In part, the return of Bessie Mears signals to the reader the absence of a final elaboration of a critique that has been building throughout the narrative. But in marking as absent a full and explicit critique of a Communist hermeneutic of race so spectacularly, Wright's analysis is overwhelmed by the undeniable presence of the corpse of Bessie. If Wright's performative repudiation of Communism for its neglect of the histories of rape at Scottsboro is functioning at this moment, Bessie should appear as the repetition and representation of forms of violence against African-American women. But the narrative does not return to histories of lynching and rape. Instead, Wright depicts a scene in which the full horror of Bigger Thomas's actions are given a space that displaces histories of violence against black women. The effect of "expelling the feminine in this way" (Wiegman 103) is in part to unsettle the reader and mitigate any feelings of sympathy he or she might at this moment be tempted to have for Bigger. If attention is paid to a reader's ability to read and remember, as Wright described the dialectical work of reading, it may be possible to understand Wright's treatment of Bessie Mears as more than the byproduct of a desire to cast Bigger in particular as the "universalized

emblem of black oppression” (103). But in what sense could the priority Wright assigns to unsettling the reader finally reconstruct his critique of a Communist hermeneutic of race, for perhaps expecting this scene to culminate in a full elaboration of the critique is antithetical to the spirit in which Wright has been conducting it to this point?

In other words, the eschatological narrative fails at this moment to adequately represent the mode of critique Wright’s novel performs. If Wright’s reading and rereading of a Communist history of race in the United States does not fully announce itself here at one of the most crucial moments of the novel, it is in part because Wright develops his critique within a progressive dialectical narrative that cannot adequately perform the sort of recursive history that he calls remembering. As R. Clifton Spargo has noted in his reading of ghosts in *Beloved*, “progressive narratives of history” in which one might logically reach the end of history as Frances Fukuyama so triumphantly imagined, are themselves visited by “a ghost of rationality, that which announces a history haunting the very possibility of history” (114). Irrationally believing in ghosts, Wright finds himself unable to arrive at the position toward which his sub-narrative of Communism in the United States has been leading in *Native Son*. With so many signs pointing to what plainly and finally is not there, *Native Son* affirms its reading practice but asks that the dialectical completion of the analysis must always be deferred to another, to the many others within and without the narrative. Spectrality, then, opens up a place of ethics within history, an “empty place” left for that which may still arrive (Derrida 65). Extending to *Native Son* a “hospitality without reserve” (65), or a finally unrefusable practice of being hospitable to the possibilities that may always dwell in reserve, involves a practice of what Wright called remembering, remembering a text that may always be yet to come.

By 1944 Wright would seem to have thoroughly disavowed his past with the Communist Party. And perhaps Wright only passed through Communism during his time in Chicago and Harlem. As Wright travelled to Europe after World War II he continued to develop a perspective on socially-constructed race that bears the imprint of his growing fascination with the existentialism of Sartre. Yet the seeds of Wright’s sense that “blackness and the relational ideologies of race and racism which support it” were not “fixed and stable historical identities” (Gilroy 160) are already evident in his complex rendering of Communism’s response to race in the United States in *Native Son*. Perhaps Wright’s 1960 assessment that Communism offered a “transitory makeshift pending a more accurate diagnosis” comes closest to faithfully describing the Communism

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he imagines in *Native Son* (qtd. in Gilroy 167). Wright could never quite break with Communism despite his best assertions to the contrary.¹⁴ But if for Wright Communism was a temporary stage on the way to becoming someone and something other than a Communist, then perhaps he could pass through Communism only because it is like a ghost. In this sense Communism names a desire in *Native Son*: a desire to promise a future of potentialities. Communism marks for Wright a future that cannot be known and cannot be exchanged, except as the possibility of change. What Wright's narrative of a Communist understanding of race might still do is something that cannot be anticipated and, as Toni Morrison would evocatively remark almost fifty years later in reference to perhaps similar spectres, such a haunting inheritance for the future is not something to "pass on" (275).

- 14 Gilroy notes the continuation of a "residual debt to the intellectual architecture of economic Marxism" in Wright's later writings after his supposed break with the Communist Party (168–169). Perhaps it is time to give more thought to the way in which this phantasmatic break with a heterogeneous and even *unreal* Communism (to come) structures much of the critical understandings of Wright's life into the time he spent as a communist, on one hand, and his life after Communism, on the other.

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