

IDEOLOGIES OF RACE?: THE LESSONS OF COMMUNISM AND
EXISTENTIALISM IN THE LITERATURE OF RICHARD WRIGHT

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Abstract

Marxism and Existentialism are the two major ideologies that inform Richard Wright's work in the period framed by two novels, *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953). The purpose of this thesis is (a) to briefly illuminate the history and circumstances of both black Marxism and Existentialism in relation to Wright in his American context; (b) to analyse Wright's Marxist-Existentialist progression in literature, focusing mainly on *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945), and *The Outsider* (1953), in order to (c) answer – among others – the following key questions: What is the relationship of Communism and Existentialism in Wright's literature? What did the ideologies of Marxism/Communism and Existentialism illuminate or influence regarding the racial issues that are at the centre of all of Wright's work?

In Wright's case, the conventional critical view is that he progresses from Marxism to Existentialism, culminating in *The Outsider*, which is often called "the first American existentialist novel." However, I argue that the principles of Existentialism were ingrained in Wright from well before his departure from the Communist Party; like Albert Camus' Meursault, *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas (created years before Wright left the Party) is a kind of existential hero, while Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, constructs his childhood within an existentialist narrative. My textual analysis will demonstrate how existential concepts are "tested" by Wright, notably in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, against Communism. I shall also argue that *The Outsider* is not properly an existentialist novel in that its protagonist, Cross Damon, consciously faces the failure of all ideology, including Communism and Existentialism. I shall demonstrate that Wright's existential development did not deter his Marxist perspective, and explain his unique insight into the problematic reality (and non-realities) of black Communism. Finally, I shall demonstrate that both Communism and Existentialism were, although engaged by Wright for reasons of non-racial intellectualism, failed ideologies with which to view "modern man" from a non-racial perspective.

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Ideologies of Race? : The Lessons of Communism and Existentialism in the Literature of Richard Wright

Introduction

Richard Wright became a Communist Party member in 1934. His 1937 story “Fire and Cloud” concludes with a Southern black leader marching defiantly amidst a group of Communists, seeing “the sea of black and white faces,” while singing “*Freedom belongs t the strong!*” (UTC 161). Three years later, the psychology of Wright’s most famous protagonist, Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* (1940), develops in such a way that he is misunderstood by the Marxist lawyer who tries to help him in his last days alive. After Wright left the Communist party, immersed himself in Existentialist literature, moved to Paris, and befriended Parisians like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, he produced 1953’s *The Outsider*, wherein his most complex protagonist – the intellectual, educated, and self-consciously existential Cross Damon – picks up an oaken table leg and brutally murders a Communist leader.

Marxism and Existentialism are the two major ideologies that inform Richard Wright’s work in the period framed by two novels, *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953). In the years in between, Wright wrote a highly existential story, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942; 1944), formally left the Communist party (in 1942), published his autobiography, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*¹ (1945), and permanently relocated to Paris with his family, in 1947. The purpose of this thesis then is (a) to briefly illuminate the history and

¹ The first title of Wright’s 1945 autobiography is *Black Boy*, after his suggested title, *American Hunger*, was rejected by his publishers. The entire Chicago portion of the autobiography, including the Communist-related passages that largely concern this Thesis, were completely expurgated from all prints of *Black Boy* until published separately as *American Hunger* in 1977. In the 1990s, the Library of America united the two texts under the title *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. This thesis refers to the same text alternately as *Black Boy*, or *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.

circumstances of both black Marxism and Existentialism in relation to Wright in his American context; (b) to analyse Wright's Marxist-Existentialist progression in literature, focusing mainly on *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945), and *The Outsider* (1953), in order to (c) answer the following key questions: Why did Wright become a Marxist/Communist? Why did he later leave the Communist Party? To what extent, why, and how, is his work existentialist? Does Existentialism serve him in a way that Communism did not? The most significant questions to be addressed are: What is the relationship of Communism and Existentialism in Wright's literature? What did the ideologies of Marxism/Communism and Existentialism illuminate or influence regarding the racial issues that are at the centre of all of Wright's work?

It is not unusual, of course, to see Marxism and Existentialism aligned in the postwar school of Western Marxism. In Wright's case, the conventional critical view is that he progresses from Marxism to Existentialism; or rather, that he relinquishes the Communist Party and engages (or indulges, depending on your perspective) the intellectual trend of Existentialism, culminating in *The Outsider*, which is often called "the first American existentialist novel." However, I will argue that the principles of Existentialism were ingrained in Wright from well before his departure from the Communist Party; like Albert Camus' Meursault, *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas (created years before Wright left the Party) is a kind of existential hero, while Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, constructs his childhood within an existentialist narrative. My textual analysis will demonstrate how existential concepts are "tested" by Wright, notably in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, against Communism. This is first evident in the failure of Marxism and Existentialism to reconcile each other in the exchanges of Bigger Thomas and Boris Max in *Native Son*, and becomes more

pronounced after Wright leaves the Party and becomes intellectually cognizant of the epistemological qualities of Existentialism. I shall also argue that *The Outsider* is not properly an existentialist novel in that its protagonist Cross Damon – unlike Camus' Meursault – consciously faces the failure of all ideology, including Communism and Existentialism. I shall demonstrate that Wright's existential development did not deter his Marxist perspective; he had what Cedric Robinson calls "a unique penetration" into the problematic reality (and non-realities) of black Communism. Indeed, the unique nature of being a black Marxist in America is a large part of what differentiates Wright's Marxist-Existentialist literary representations from that of Europeans (such as Wright's friend Sartre) or white Americans. Finally, I shall demonstrate that both Communism and Existentialism were, although engaged by Wright for reasons of non-racial intellectualism, failed ideologies with which to view "modern man" from a non-racial perspective. *The Outsider* will be discussed as the ultimate expression of this ironic contradiction; its protagonist Cross Damon is in fact a failed Existentialist, much as Wright in *Black Boy* (and in life) is (was) a failed Communist.

Chapter 1 – Communism and Richard Wright

This chapter outlines the historical situation of African Americans, and Richard Wright specifically, with respect to Communist circles. Wright found his greatest sense of Communist party accomplishment in the possibility of peoples of all colours coexisting on equal terms, and not in the Communist-supported concept of Black Nationalism that was approved by the Party in the early 1930s. I will later suggest that the impracticability of absolving oneself from the issue of Black Nationalism – as Wright preferred – challenged his ability to function as a Communist. The struggle between the ideal of Marxist philosophy and the harsher reality of

Communist Party membership as a black American led Wright to explore Existentialism (the second ideology of influence that concerns this thesis).

To begin with some history: the duration of Marxist influence on Black America is as long as the duration of Communism itself. At the time of the First International in 1848 (the year Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* was published), newspapers and German immigrants brought Karl Marx's ideas to America. In 1872, the First International collapsed, and the newly formed Socialist Labour Party (SLP) decided to organize black workers in order to solve the problem of competition. Rather than specifically address the "Negro Question," the position of the SLP and its 1901 replacement, The Socialist Party of America, took the position that there was in essence no specifically racial problem in the United States, and that once the socialist revolution came, all racial problems would disappear. However, the "proletarians of Europe and America traded in their red flags for the flags of their respective nations" (Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* 44) in the Great War, and thus African Americans came home to face bigotry and oppression as before. The notable exception to this wartime nationalism was of course members of the peasantry in Russia, who launched the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (see Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* 39-46).

Thus began the Third International, or the 'Comintern,' headed by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Partly due to the great divisions of ethnicity and nationality existing in Russia (thereafter the 'USSR'), Lenin had a particular interest in minority groups and was the political initiator of Black recruitment in the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), particularly when he raised the "Negro Question" at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920. Lenin and M. N. Roy's "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" specifically identified African Americans as a people that should receive direct support from the

Comintern, in effect recognizing that Black Nationalism of a sort was a prerequisite to America achieving the desired socialist revolution (Robinson 309; K. Baldwin 36). In 1921, Lenin wrote to the CPUSA expressing his surprise that Negroes, the most oppressed group in American society, had not theretofore been recognized as strategically important.

Immediately, the CPUSA began actively recruiting Black members, initially focusing on radical intellectuals and nationalist organizers, many of whom were former members of either Cyril Briggs' African Blood Brotherhood (ABB)² or the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)³, and thereby contributing to the influence of Black Nationalism in the Party (Robinson 301-303). In theoretical disagreement with Marx and Engels, Stalin supported Black Americans as a nation within a nation in his influential "Marxism and the National Question" (Robinson 309-310). To this point, Black Nationalism and racial pride had been very actively and pointedly opposed by non-Black American socialists and Communists, whose success theoretically depended upon a non-racial solidarity of the working classes. In 1928, the Comintern, in its "resolution on the Negro Question," formally recognized American Blacks of the South as an "oppressed nation," equivalent to the Socialist Republics of the USSR that were ostensibly free to secede from the Union if they so desired (Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 39-56; Robinson 421). Thus, Black Leftist leaders of the 1920s adopted a new and revolutionary position on race and revolution in America – that the struggle for Black rights was in itself inherently revolutionary; that the revolution in America could never occur until racial problems were dealt with, simply because African Americans were, after centuries of oppression,

² Although later influenced by socialism, The African Blood Brotherhood, founded in 1919, began as a revolutionary nationalist organization (see Robinson, *Black Marxism* 298-300).

³ The Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey, favoured the development of a strong Black nation with a moderately capitalist structure. The years of its peak development were 1928-1933 (see Robinson 295-298).

incapable of seeing the American environment from a non-racial perspective. Between the 1928 resolution and the Scottsboro trials⁴ beginning in 1931 (mentioned by Jan Erlone in *Native Son*), Party work among Blacks intensified (Robinson 421).

Black participation in Communism had been a slowly developing phenomenon. The Great Migration of 1916 to the end of the 1920s, in which a million and a half rural Southerners become Northern urbanites, was a time in which few African Americans even belonged to workers' unions. The American Communist Party, prior to the 1928 Comintern initiative, had attracted few black members, and those who had joined were mainly intellectuals interested in its anti-colonial and anti-racist agendas. A. Philip Randolph is quoted as saying that the number of black Communists in 1920s Harlem was small enough to meet in a phone booth (Kelley, Lewis 405). However, Marx and Engels' call to insurrection of the proletariat in *The Communist Manifesto* gained appeal for many Americans following the 1929 Stock Market crash, only a year after the Comintern initiative on black membership. Thereafter, Party membership had particularly strong support amongst the black populations of major urban centres New York and Chicago (the latter being the Northern destination of Richard Wright in 1927).⁵

In 1932, Communist intellectuals expanded a leftist literary/artistic club in the hope of inspiring radical young people. Adopting the name 'John Reed,' after the militant American

⁴ In 1931, near Scottsboro, Alabama, a group of young white and black travellers on a train were caught and removed by authorities. Fearing arrest, two white women falsely accused nine young black men of rape at knife point. Shortly thereafter, an all-white jury sentenced all but the youngest of the men to death in the electric chair. The Communist party took up the highly publicized case, eventually freeing all nine defendants, though the last spent some fifteen years in jail before his acquittal (Kelley, Lewis 421-422).

⁵ Exactly how many African Americans were actual Party members is unclear: according to William Maxwell, in the second half of the 1930s over two thousand black Harlemites alone spent time as Communist Party members (125); Wright biographer Hazel Rowley claims that by 1937, when Wright was beginning to plan *Native Son*, there were "almost one thousand party members" in Harlem, with new recruits signing up every day (128).

who wrote *Ten Days That Shook the World*, the clubs soon numbered over thirty in large cities. Three John Reed clubs were established in Chicago in 1932. In June of 1933 the club began publishing *Left Front*, a leftist literary journal catering to beginning writers. Young intellectuals and writers were drawn to the club, which became a venue to reach an audience; not surprisingly, writers participated more in literary than political activities (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 95-96). It was in Chicago's *Left Front* circles that Richard Wright first encountered the Communist Party. He was to work for years as writer and officer in the John Reed Club, and by 1937 he was considered by some "the Party's most illustrious proletarian author" (Robinson 421). At the time he officially joined the Party, Wright had not studied Marxist theory (though he was familiar with its economic analysis), and he admits, in *Black Boy*, to being unaware of the latest issues occurring in the Soviet Union. As biographer Michel Fabre states, "Human problems interested [Wright] more than subtleties of doctrine" (*Unfinished Quest* 106-107).

In 1933, after being invited by his friend and fellow amateur writer Abraham Aaron to attend a meeting of the John Reed Club, Wright quickly grew sympathetic to the cause. Clearly, what impressed him most was the apparent Party reality of racial fraternity, of whites and blacks working, as well as marrying and living, together. Wright began to believe that oppressed people could actually live as he had always wanted to – in non-racial terms. Michel Fabre believes that

[Wright] came to see in Marxism an organized search for truth about the life of oppressed peoples, and this convinced him that the Communists were sincere. Wright had long yearned to participate in American intellectual life, to become part of the Western culture in which he lived, but the strangeness and hostility of the white world

had discouraged him. Now he concretely realized that the oppressed classes of all colors were united by a common suffering. (*Unfinished Quest* 97)

The intellectual appeal of Communism, for Wright, was most clearly expressed in Joseph Stalin's *The National and Colonial Question*, which concerned the rights and dignity of minority groups (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 106). Wright explains why in *Black Boy*:

Stalin's book showed me how diverse minorities could be welded into unity, and I regarded it as a most politically sensitive volume that revealed a new way of looking upon lost and beaten peoples. Of all the developments in the Soviet Union, the method by which scores of backward peoples had been led to unity on a national scale was what had enthralled me.... how different this was from the way in which Negroes were sneered at in America. (394-395)

This response is quite natural, given Wright's personal history. His upbringing in spheres of poverty in the South had distanced him from the white majority for the entire formative period of his life, not a unique situation in the "Jim Crow" South. In *Black Boy*, Wright describes his childhood perspective of whites as a "threat that might come upon me at any time" (86), and that the "hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived" (87). Wright was extremely aware of the unique qualities of his own era. Immediately before narrating his first encounter with the John Reed club in *Black Boy*, he describes his hopes and insecurities. Wright "wanted a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others... in which collective hope reflected a national future" (328). He maintains that, at the time he first encountered Communists, he felt "that no such thing was possible in my environment" (328).

“Oneness with others” may be read here as a fraternity of races, something completely unimaginable to Wright until his Communist experiences in Chicago.

Left Front and other publications were soon publishing Wright’s early proletarian poetry; only one of these poems (“I Have Seen Black Hands”) deals explicitly with racial issues (*Unfinished Quest* 98-99). Despite his early enthusiasm and his sympathy for Marxist ideology (within two months of encountering the John Reed Club he had, by racially motivated reasons, been elected executive secretary), Wright struggled with the limitation that a monolithic authority inevitably places on artists. Involvement in a relatively small political group at the height of the Depression meant that funds were extremely limited, and Wright, along with other young writers, was forced into the position of trying to defend *Left Front* from extinction when the Party decided it was costing and demanding too much: “I was informed that if I wanted to continue as secretary of the club, I should have to join the Communist Party” (*Black Boy* 381). Wright officially joined the Chicago branch of the Communist Party in 1934, and, accordingly, his wish for a policy supporting writers and artists was accepted (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 103).

What the John Reed Club and the Communist Party clearly offered Wright, besides a literary forum for his early work, was an interracial environment which supported and encouraged his ideas. As Fabre says, “It was perhaps the first time that Wright had felt needed” (Fabre *Unfinished Quest* 97); certainly it was the first time he had felt needed by whites. For non-educated black intellectuals and writers, leftist involvement was the only conceivable forum for meeting other (white) intellectuals, writers, and artists, and there is no doubt that

Wright's work eventually benefited from this exposure.⁶ Referring to writers and artists, Wright lists the many languages that Communist-published pieces were translated into and asks, "Who had ever... offered to young writers an audience so vast?" (*Black Boy* 406). Wright admits, of course, that such literary opportunities were a motivating factor to entice him and other writers into the John Reed Club, and eventually the Party. He also suggests that the Party responded to a pre-existing need in Black Americans when, in *Black Boy*, Wright asks (on the reader's behalf) why writers did not simply organize themselves, apart from political groups. He answers: "We simply did not know how. Totally at odds with our culture, we wanted nothing less than to make anew.... it was but natural for us to respond to the Communist party, which said: 'Your rebellion is right. Come with us and we will support your vision'" (406).

The "Horror and the Glory" section of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is particularly interesting in how Wright first constructs his distrust of, and then life-changing immersion in, the Communist Party. Wright's feelings toward an isolated fraternity of Black Communists (and by extension Black Nationalism in general) are evident in his overwhelmingly negative first impressions of them. By the time of *Black Boy's* composition in 1943, Wright had left the Party formally, and the bitterness of it shows in "The Horror and the Glory." Perhaps Wright wished to retrospectively assert his long-term knowledge of the Party's failings; perhaps he wished to create a contrast between his initial reluctance and eventual enthusiasm. Whatever the reason, *Black Boy's* narrative finds the young Wright wandering in Washington Park and seeing black Marxists apparently impersonating Lenin and Stalin, deluded in the belief that they

⁶ In 1935, for example, Wright travelled to New York for the first time to attend the first American Writers' Congress where, though he had no significant publications, he was able to meet and speak in front of his own favourite writers such as Dreiser and Dos Passos (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 118).

are influencing minds and not realizing that in fact they are “practicing magic” (*Black Boy* 346-347). Wright unequivocally states that “a day’s observation of their activities was sufficient to reveal all their thought processes” (348), and implies that more discerning (“sensitive”) Negroes had, until then, refused to join the Party “because of the shabby quality of those Negroes whom the Communists had already admitted to membership” (347). Even after his eyes are opened to the better qualities of Communism, he reflects that Negro Communists “just did not know anything and did not want to learn anything” (389). In this key section of *Black Boy*, Wright constructs the events of his Chicago days in such a way as to suggest that he knew immediately of the spiritual and intellectual deprivation that the Party would engender. In particular reference to the Negro Communists that he first encounters, Wright recalls that their minds were “sealed against new ideas, new facts, new feelings, new attitudes, new hints at ways to live,” and that Communism had “frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met [it]” (348). Black Marxists in and of themselves – in isolation from whites – simply do not inspire Wright.

Yet all it takes, in Wright’s narrative construction of his life’s events, is a visit to a relief station where he sees the racially mixed multitudes of the oppressed (which he had no doubt observed daily for years prior) to awaken his Marxist sympathies. The scarce times of the Depression lead an embarrassed Wright to the Chicago relief station, where, amidst crowds of the dispossessed of all colours, he suddenly begins to “comprehend the meaning of [his] environment,” and feel that “I was not alone in my loneliness, society had cast millions of others with me” (354). Even his cynicism begins to leave him as he begins to feel something too powerful for expression. But this world of possibility only opens to Wright *after* he imagines the racial equality that a union of the working classes makes possible. It is clear that

interracial suffering was more significant in Wright's support of Communism than the isolated plight of the Black Belt he knew so well.

While the black Marxists' public displays in the park did not impress Wright, the union of black and white did. The day after his first John Reed Club meeting, Wright describes returning to his work at the Post Office, where he suddenly detects "a change in the attitudes of the whites I met; their privations were making them regard Negroes with new eyes, and for the first time I was invited to their homes" (356). This is a construction of his own feelings, and no doubt an oversimplification of the events that led to his sympathy for Communism, but it is clear that the fraternity of races is the deciding factor in Wright's change of heart. Wright, in fact, states the point clearly:

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by...the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. (374)

The "uniting" of people was the promise of Communism. The reality (to be discussed in Chapter Four) was somewhat different.

Chapter 2 – Existentialism and Marxist-Existentialism

Richard Wright was in many ways predisposed to engage Existentialism. After his departure from Communism he would learn, as James Campbell puts it, "that existentialism was all about him" (9). Indeed, prior to engaging the term "existentialism," Wright had already experienced many of the familiar struggles that the philosophy concerns. An atheist who developed a sense of self reliance from an early age, Wright had always felt the

Existentialist's alienation, not only as a minority in the American South, but also amongst his own people. Wright recollected that after first arriving in Memphis as a teen, he "learned the full degree to which my life at home had cut me off, not only from white people but from Negroes as well" (*Black Boy* 252).

In Sartre and Wright's era, Existentialism became a perspective through which some intellectuals viewed Marxism. It is a problematic term due to its overuse and loosely defined status. Existentialism is a philosophy of existence, beginning from an individual's subjectivity, claiming that this very subjectivity is the only objective fact in existence (Odajnyk 9-10). As Jean-Paul Sartre puts the matter in *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. . . . Man simply is" (quoted in Odajnyk 9). The *Columbia Encyclopedia* places the beginnings of existentialism (albeit much prior to the actual term) with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who bitterly attacked Hegelian abstract metaphysics and the complacency of the Lutheran church in the mid-nineteenth century. Kierkegaard's fundamental insight was recognition of the ethical and religious demands confronting individuals, which he believed must be met by each individual's subjective commitment; this analysis provides the central theme of existentialism. Later, Martin Heidegger and Sartre were major figures connected with this movement (both were influenced by the work of Edmund Husserl). Sartre was eventually, though not initially, the only self-declared existentialist among these figures (Columbia; Solomon 3). The term "existentialism" was most probably coined by French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s, intending to identify the emerging ideas of Sartre and his partner Simone de Beauvoir (Cooper 1). Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, among others, were retroactively given the "existentialist" application in light of their consideration

of existence in itself (as have been numerous writers and philosophers, including Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka and many more). The label was later applied to Sartre and Wright's contemporary Albert Camus, whose *L'etranger* [*The Outsider*] (1942) shares its title, in translation, with Richard Wright's 1953 novel, and in many ways compares with Wright's *Native Son*.

The turmoil of economics and politics in 1930s and 1940s Europe encouraged Existentialism to make a strong impression, particularly in France. The first half of the 1930s saw a number of continental writers and philosophers attempting to ascertain this new way of thinking, stemming from a profound and widespread sense of alienation in what was both a post-war and pre-war world. Crises in European culture wrought by the Great War and its fallout engendered a series of issues that crossed over into the psychology and intellectual milieu of the era (Macdonald 3). Perhaps most fundamental amongst these was the sense of failure in the Cartesian enlightenment project (more of which below), although Descartes' edict of "I think therefore I am" (cogito ergo sum) is taken up, in a manner of speaking, and made unique in Existentialism (Odajnyk 9).

Broadly speaking, there are at least six major concepts belonging to Existentialism that are distinctive to works clearly associated with the term. These are, briefly, as follows:

1) Existence belongs only to human beings, and not to animals or inanimate objects. An oft-cited phrase in this vein: "human being is the only Being for whom Being is an issue" (Lehan 14). In Existentialism, a human being is not the subject of his /her circumstances, or an example of a particular essence, but is in him/herself a manner of existence (MacDonald 3).

2) There are various ways in which humans live and exist in relation to the radical contingency in the root of existence. That is, the essence of a human being is never at a preordained state of development by which everyone may be measured according to a standard. (This is a point in definite disagreement with Marxism, which views society in a dialectical state eventually ending in classlessness.)

3) The “essence” of an individual is not fixed in advance of that individual (beyond indisputable physicality such as genetic makeup). One’s active choices determine one’s essence, or as Sartre famously phrased it, “Existence precedes essence.” This third concept is significant in that it most clearly challenges the long-established Cartesian divide between mind and body established in the seventeenth century. For Descartes, this divide necessitated a reconciliation of the principles of mental thought and physical events, wherein the natural world is determined by God, and human “nature” is achieved by living in accord with physical laws (such as hunger and thirst) – in other words, wherein essence comes first and existence is determined against it. Existentialists leave God out of the equation. Sartre believed that the world is irrational and without plan, and that believing in God’s will is a rationalization that can lead to acceptance of human evil as foreordained (Lehan 14). In this, Sartre believed something that Wright wanted to believe – that every man is responsible for what he is, that his destiny is within himself, and that responsibility is accepted individually, not communally. Like the 1940s Wright, Sartre in later life would struggle to reconcile this precise edict with his latent belief in Marxism as the preferable societal system (Lehan 16-17; Odajnyk xi-xix).

4) Individuals are capable of falling away from the choices that make their existence and into the “herd” mentality. Persons of such mentality are said to be in “bad faith” by the Sartre-school of existentialists. Thus, communal motivation (and by extension, Marxism) is considered unauthentic and was seen by Sartre as a means of sanctioning moral atrocities (Lehan 17). When people do not face the reality of ambiguity, choosing to resolve situations by ignoring some of the poles between which one’s existence stands, they are said to be in “bad faith” (Cooper 119). Sartre, for example, maintained that Freud’s theories of the unconscious’ influence on behaviour were in bad faith, in that they encouraged an unauthentic life and displaced free will (Lehan 17).

5) Human beings are in the continuous process of “becoming.” We are always oriented towards the future (MacDonald 5-8; Rius 58). As Lehan says, the existential man is a “man in motion” (2).

6) “The absurd” must, of necessity, be engaged. According to Lehan, the absurd occurs when man admits that his reason is limited, and that it is incapable of supplying answers to metaphysical and personal questions (for example: accidents, suffering, and death all invoke the absurd by challenging what we know with what we do not know). Meaning is overwhelmed by the unexpected and the unknown, and it is the existentialist who will face this unknown unflinchingly (Lehan xiv).

The influence of Sartre on Richard Wright is significant. Richard Lehan actually calls Wright Sartre’s “disciple.” Ironically, Sartre had initially disowned the term “existentialist” as a label for himself, famously stating, “I don’t even know what existentialism is” (Solomon 3).

Yet Sartre also initiated the popularization of the term when he wrote and read publicly his *Existentialism and Humanism* (later part of *Being and Nothingness*) in Paris in 1945 (Cooper 1). Shortly after Sartre first delivered this essay, he and Simone de Beauvoir published Richard Wright's story "Fire and Cloud" (from *Uncle Tom's Children*) in a new journal, *Les Temps Modernes* (Rowley 326). The August-September 1946 issue was devoted to American writing and featured Wright prominently. One of the reasons Jean-Paul Sartre admired the work of Richard Wright was Sartre's call for writers with not only philosophical sensibilities but also a sense of history. To Sartre as for Wright, literature would have a moral dimension wherein the morals were not determined by society, but were determined honestly by each individual. As a black man coming from the Jim Crow South and into the Communist Party between world wars, Wright was extremely aware of his own historical context and the unique African American position in this place and time. According to Wright-biographer Hazel Rowley, existentialists such as Sartre and de Beauvoir saw Wright as an exemplar of the "committed literature" they advocated in a post-war world:

Wright was concerned with questions of freedom, oppression, individual choice. Like [Sartre and de Beauvoir], he was interested in the interface of literature, psychoanalysis, and sociology. As de Beauvoir would write in the *New York Times*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* was about an "individual consciousness and an individual liberty.... The struggle of a man against the resistance of the world is depicted. And it is just this which today in France appears to us to be the true mission of the writer." (335)

A year before his permanent move to Paris, Wright began studying the derivations of existentialism (Rowley 326). He met Sartre in March 1946 in New York City; in January of

1947 Simone de Beauvoir visited New York for three weeks, spending much of her time with Ellen and Richard Wright⁷ (Rowley 326-327; 351). Wright questioned Sartre about the relativity of an individual's "choice." Wright argued that, in the case of a black American, choosing a path that happened to go against society could lead to lynching and death, and that therefore the Negro was never fundamentally free, regardless of his spirit of rebellion or submission (Campbell 10).

Aside from specific matters of ideology, the popular "cult" of Existentialism travelled across the Atlantic Ocean to America just prior to Wright's permanent move to France. According to Paul MacDonald, "the counter-cultural vogue for existentialist poseurs gave rise to the world-weary pseud, brooding on anxiety, absurdity and alienation, reading Kafka and Beckett, and dressed all in black" (5). Hazel Rowley suggests that Wright was "excited about the new philosophy of freedom emerging from France, which had become the new rage in the Western world" (326). Wright told his friend Gertrude Stein that "New York is buzzing over existentialism" (Rowley 326). French journalist Maria le Hardouin came to Wright's Greenwich Village home to interview him for the French newspaper *Combat* in the summer of 1947. According to Le Hardouin, Wright's talk jumped from topic to topic until he suddenly asked, "What about Existentialism?" (Rowley 352-353). When Le Hardouin explained that she was uncertain that she alone had chosen the person she had become, and therefore that she was unconvinced of Existentialism's merits, Wright responded, "I'm personally convinced of it. It is impossible that certain desires, which come to us in our

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir wrote to Sartre that she liked Wright best of all the people she had met in New York (Rowley 351).

childhood with an irresistible force, are not already the result of a choice that we struggled with and made before we were even conscious of it” (Rowley 353).

In the same year that he met Sartre and de Beauvoir, Wright was introduced to Albert Camus in New York. Camus had apparently aided the French publication of *Black Boy* on Wright’s behalf.⁸ In autumn of 1947, shortly after arriving in Paris, Wright read Camus’ *L’etranger*, in English, for the first time. He read it slowly and carefully, admiring Camus’ use of fiction to express a philosophy, but found the work “devoid of passion” (Rowley 357-363). Lehan (and others) note that Sartre and Camus are really of differing schools of thought regarding Existentialism. According to Lehan:

The difference, in fact, between Sartre and Camus was [that]...Camus was concerned with the nature of creation, man’s fate, and the justification of existence. Sartre is concerned with the nature of the mind’s operation and perception, its relationship with others, and the character of one’s existence.

Sartre’s emphasis [is] freedom and Camus’s emphasis [is] rebellion. (33)

Camus is thus not as much of a misanthropist as Sartre; his characters are bound more by love and compassion than hate and intellectual cognition (Lehan 20). In particular regard to both *Native Son* and *The Outsider* (if for its title alone), it is hard to dismiss Camus’ influence on Wright (though I believe the influence may have also gone the other way). Sartre believed that a writer should bring a reader through the fictional world created so that the reader will experience delight in recreating the fictional universe; Albert Camus believed that the novel was an ideal medium for philosophers because in a novel “abstract thought at last returns to

⁸ When Wright expressed his desire to settle in France, Camus was cordial but said that he hoped Wright would not stay permanently. Camus thought that blacks should “stay in America and fight” (Rowley 327).

its prop of flesh” (Lehan 13). Wright would not have disagreed with either position. In any case, it can be settled that although specific differences arise, both Sartre and Camus represent a world without centre beyond conventional morality – the crux of Existentialism – and that, with each other as with Wright, they share the common denominator of attempting to reconcile modern “man” with his uprooted surroundings, in order to formulate a philosophy of self and (albeit more in fiction than by epistemology for Camus and Wright) construct a secular ethic (Lehan 16, 34).

There is another way in which Wright parallels Sartre, and that is in the struggle to reconcile Existentialism with Marxism, when the two ideologies sit uncomfortably together (Camus denounced Marxism completely). Sartre would devote much of his later writings to the attempt of resolving this problem. While Sartre believed, philosophically, that Existentialism provided the true interpretation of man and reality, practically he conceded that Existentialism lacked social theory and therefore had little influence on politics and social matters. In fact, there is no logical reason why Existentialists should favour the working classes – Heidegger supported fascism, Camus democracy, and Sartre Communism (Odajnyk xii). Yet Sartre believed Existentialism had much to offer Marxism, and he eventually shifted to prioritize the principles of Marxism over Existentialism from the 1950s onward (Odajnyk xii). In the 1957 essay “Question de Methode,” Sartre made a clear commitment to Marxism, to which Existentialism was but an appendage. In the 1960s, Walter Odajnyk wrote that

[Sartre] wishes to apply a dose of Existentialism in order to cure [mid-twentieth century] Marxism of its lethargy and ossification. He claims that the aims of Marxism and his type of Existentialism are the same, but that Marxism has

absorbed man and therefore lost him, and that Existentialism once more can lead Marxism to the man in the street, to the individual that Marxism has lost, yet whom it needs for the success of its cause.” (xiv)

Sartre’s *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (1961) is an attempt at successfully merging Existentialism with Marxism. According to Odajnyk, this merger “failed” because the two philosophies have a “radically opposed conception of the individual” (171).

What is the essential disagreement between Marxism and Existentialism? According to Odajnyk, “Marxism claim[s] that the individual is a direct product of social relations, bound in his consciousness, thoughts, and actions to his society; and Existentialism den[ies] that any deterministic elements operate on the individual, who by its definition is absolutely free” (17). Marxism is at essence a materialistic philosophy; that is, it subscribes to the belief that consciousness and will are entirely due to material agency. According to the theories of Marx, matter is the basis of all being, and all matter can be known by the mind (Odajnyk 3). As previously stated, Marxism sees history as an unfolding process guided by material and social laws. These fixed laws serve as the basis of its interpretation of historical progression and of its attempts to forecast immediate future development. This is in clear disagreement with French Existentialism. Existentialism sees history and society as a chaotic mass to which the individual must supply order and coherence; however, as previously noted, it finds no natural progression. Therefore, at all times the Existentialist faces the same problem: the recognition of his freedom and of his life in that freedom (Odajnyk 18).

In *Search for a Method* (1963), Sartre again struggled to find an alliance between Existentialism and Marxism. By now, his understanding of the essential humanistic flaw in Marxism reflects Wright’s experience within the Communist Party (to be discussed). Sartre:

It is precisely [the] expulsion of man, his exclusion from Marxist knowledge, which resulted in the renascence of existentialist thought outside the historical totalization of Knowledge. . . . Marxism will degenerate into a non-human anthropology if it does not reintegrate man into itself as its foundation. (quoted in Solomon 244-245)

As Wright suggested to Sartre, there is a unique perspective that the African American may bring to this nexus, particularly one as self-consciously at odds with his upbringing as Wright. Wright recalls the soul searching of his adolescent self in *Black Boy*:

It was inconceivable to me that one should surrender to what seemed wrong, and most of the people I had met seemed wrong. Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and traditions meant everything? There were no answers. (194)

The “no answers” conclusion will increasingly dominate Wright’s expressed thinking in literature as the 1940s progress. We shall see that although Communism/Marxism and Existentialism are very much opposed, they result in a similar failure for Richard Wright and his characters.

Chapter 3 – Communism/Existentialism in *Native Son*, “The Man Who Lived Underground,” *Black Boy*, and *The Outsider*

Richard Wright’s fictional characters exist in struggle with the crises that Wright himself encountered. Very explicitly in Wright’s work, these characters “test” the meanings

that Wright had given to his own experiences (Robinson 421). Long didactic passages of self-conscious and highly articulated thought, as well as monologues of political or social intent (most famously Boris Max's speeches in *Native Son*), occur with regularity in Wright's work. The more successful texts, from a critical perspective, justify Wright's formulated "meanings" by producing convincing characters and fictional representations. Prior to *Native Son* (1940), Wright was, for my purposes, a proletarian writer, and therefore less inclined to test his formulated meanings against the Party line. The Communist Party had actually advocated a formula for its black fiction writers: "The villains should be the southern planters and the Wall Street bankers. The plots should be simple and clear... [they] should conclude on a note of triumph, the victory of the black proletarian over his white oppressors" (McCall 28).

Prior to the breakthrough of *Native Son*, "vision, fraternity, and task" had been the complex of motives driving Wright's mid-1930s work, notably the *Uncle Tom's Children* collection of stories (Robinson 424). Because these stories were written very much under the Communist aegis, the success or failure of Wright's self-described task of "tell[ing] common people of the self-sacrifice of the Communists" is perhaps as interesting as the stories themselves (*Black Boy* 337). Although these early stories follow the Party mandate for proletarian literature, they reveal important facets of Wright's personal perspectives. As previously noted, the Comintern had resolved in 1928 that Black Americans constituted an "oppressed nation." The Comintern's thesis on self-determination did not directly encourage artistic expression of black self-determination, but it "did not hurt the production of the kind of rebellious, nationalist sentiment implicit in the notion of self-determination" (Kelley, *Race* 120-121). Yet even Wright's 1930s proletarian work does not depend on the moral support

of Black Nationalism. In fact, as Frederick T. Griffiths (2001) argues, the final story of the original *Uncle Tom's Children* collection, "Fire and Cloud," first demonstrates nationalism in a way understandable to white readers, and then presents the Party as a non-violent and preferable alternative. According to Cedric Robinson, the crisis that led to Wright's creation of Bigger Thomas was his realization that the ceaseless dogmatism of black Communists was a symptom of their "desperate and collective need for each other" (425). Wright sincerely supported Communism's capacity, despite the 1928 resolution, to forestall Black Nationalist movements and unite diverse peoples.

Existentialism as herein defined exists in *Native Son*, a novel written in 1938. For my purposes, the significance of Bigger Thomas is in his development of self-awareness existentially. I not believe (as has often been suggested) that Bigger develops any significant appreciation of Marxism. Further, I will argue that Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is an existentialist autobiography; the Communist/Marxist immersion described in it has been outlined in Chapter Two, and the falling away from it will be discussed in Chapter Four. *The Outsider* is clearly an existentialist novel in its scope and themes, but its protagonist, Cross Damon, fails to resolve his own life existentially as Bigger Thomas, in less technical terms, clearly does. Instead, *The Outsider* reveals the total failure of ideology for Wright, including Communism, which at this point is less a unitary philosophy than a monolith to be "blotted out." I will argue that the novel's protagonist, Cross Damon, is a kind of existential failure.

Native Son

For Cedric Robinson, *Native Son*⁹ is Wright's revision of American Marxism and an expression of what the practices of American Communists really are, as well as the presentation of a more precise and authentic picture of the proletariat to which the Party had committed itself (425). Robinson further argues that Bigger's "odyssey of...development of consciousness...is deliberate and purposive," and is Wright's address of the problematic "abstraction and romanticization of the proletariat" that was evident in Western Communist ideology of the time (425). Indeed, this follows Wright's stated purpose for writing, which included telling Communists "how common people felt" (*Black Boy* 377). Bigger's vague consciousness of his position in the Marxist analysis functions not only as a proletarian articulation but also as a critique of Party intervention. While Bigger redeems his actions and resolves his life existentially, his redemption is misunderstood and feared by the Marxist proselytizer (the lawyer Boris Max). Existential elements of *Native Son*, mainly in the novel's last section, include Bigger Thomas' encounter with the absurd, his developing sense of his own essence as changeable, and the final redemption where existence defines essence.

In *Native Son*, Wright allows us to experience the Bigger Thomas character through our immersion within his consciousness, in a third person narrative. Bigger, along with siblings and single mother, has arrived in Chicago of the early 1930s from Mississippi. Living in the Black Belt of the South Side ghetto, he can only imagine the reality of the white world surrounding him. Symbols of this white world – airplanes flying overhead, film clips, shopkeepers from whom to steal – taunt and irritate Bigger's psyche in the novel's opening

⁹ Nelson Algren's Marxist novel *Somebody in Boots* (1935) was the source for Wright's title "Native Son" (Maxwell 187).

sections. His internal fear of the unknown world surrounding him sees violent expression directed at his friends, while his manhood is attacked by his mother for his perennial failure to secure work in support of the poverty-stricken Thomas family. Intuitively, Bigger feels that “something awful’s going to happen to me” (22). When a job opportunity arises in the wealthy, white, Dalton household, Bigger reluctantly accepts. Wright makes clear Bigger’s inner anxiety regarding whites in the early South Side scenes; still, there is no suggestion that his foreboding will unleash anything dangerous in the safe, Dalton family environment. This will change, amidst escalating psychic intensity, when Mary Dalton and her Communist boyfriend Jan Erlone approach Bigger in a frighteningly intimate fashion. The eminence of “whiteness” in Bigger’s sphere of awareness forces him into extreme self-consciousness, something he fears and finds averse to his own nature. The evening ends in horrific fashion, with Bigger accidentally suffocating Mary Dalton in her bedroom and burning her body in the Dalton’s basement furnace.

The death of Mary Dalton at Bigger’s frightened hands is the key moment that sets into action his dynamic development of self-consciousness that is the core of *Native Son*. Richard Lehan describes Mary Dalton’s murder as “the gratuitous act that we often find in novels more expressly existential than *Native Son*” (97). Indeed, two years after *Native Son*, Albert Camus’ *The Outsider [L’etranger]* follows a vaguely similar plot, also detailing an early crisis of confusion with fatal results when the Algerian Meursault shoots an Arab man dead on a beach. Like Bigger, Meursault ponders the significance of his murder and his life while awaiting a harsh penalty in prison. Meursault, however, is expressly existential in outlook from before his “gratuitous act” occurs. Until the immediate aftermath of his first murder, Bigger Thomas is a primal and impulsive thinker, with no greater philosophical awareness

than is expressed in his outward actions. However, we perceive the changes within Bigger immediately following the murder. Returning home to the South Side, and shocked into self awareness, Bigger begins to form questions that he would not have seriously considered a day before: "Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they ever done?" (105). In this very basic articulation of self-consciousness, Bigger is already aware that his murder has established "the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (105), and also that, symbolically, "he had killed many times before" (106). Bigger finds himself in a "strange land" where he is able for the first time to look at himself and the forces that shape him from a position greatly elevated from that of the symbolic rat that he hunted in the novel's first scene. The improbability of Bigger's four returns to the Dalton home after the murder can only be understood psychologically. These scenes are considered by Lehan to lead to Bigger's realization of the "absurd," wherein Bigger experiences "a kind of existential moment" (98):

He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. (*Native Son* 190)

As the newly self-aware Bigger competes with Jan for acceptance of their differing accounts of the night of Mary's murder, we may read Wright "testing" the radical alienation of Bigger against Communism, with Communism apparently not winning. In *Native Son*, the Jan Erlone character is the result of Wright appeasing the Party in principle but complicating expectations in practice. Although Jan is, on the one hand, underestimated by Bigger ("He had encountered in Jan a much stronger determination than he had thought would be there"

[172]), he also appears incredibly naïve and foolish in racial matters (“You like fried chicken?” [72]), and it is hard even for outraged readers to accept, either realistically or intellectually, Jan’s forgiving Bigger for the murder of Mary Dalton. Bigger finally flees the Dalton home when Mary’s body is discovered, still revelling in the radical freedom he is beginning to embrace. The rat metaphor from the story’s first scene is fully realized when Bigger finally succumbs to the inevitable and is incarcerated. Yet a third of the novel still remains. The final section (“Fate”) details a transformation within Bigger, and introduces a Marxist representative in Bigger’s lawyer, Boris Max (differentiated from the Communist, Jan Erlone). Herein lie, symbolically, the “meanings” that Wright will test in *Native Son*’s final section – Existentialism and Marxism.

The “Fate” section is problematic for many readers, with much of the blame directed at the lengthy speeches of Boris Max (Wright’s tendency to lecture in fiction becomes even more stylistically awkward in *The Outsider*). Max’s warning is very clearly made: failure to address racial inequality in a meaningful and intelligent manner by those, like Mr. Dalton, in a position of influence, will eventually erupt in violence from oppressed minorities, who may be morally innocent of their crimes. Amidst Max’s dominance of speech, it is easy to lose track of Bigger Thomas’ internal development, but this is essential to understanding Existentialism in *Native Son*. Many critics have seemingly fixed the essence of Bigger as the non-contemplative murderer of the novel’s first section. James Baldwin, for example, believed that Bigger kills only for himself and for hate of himself, and that Bigger as “monster” (apparently, Wright’s intended effect) is compromised when “Bigger must at the last be redeemed” (32). By “redemption” however, Baldwin refers not to an existential crisis but to Jan’s forgiveness for Mary’s murder. In his famous essay, “Many Thousands Gone,”

Baldwin confuses Bigger's courtroom and early prison scenes with the finality of his self-awareness. Baldwin criticizes the psychology of Bigger in these scenes as a symbolic failure on the part of Wright.¹⁰ In a contemporary book review, Andrew Delbanco posited Bigger as "the projection of the white imagination, a figure whose closest precursors in American fiction come not from previous black writers, but from racist white writers" (142). However, it is essential to recognize, as Delbanco and Baldwin seemingly do not, that Bigger's identity is in a constant, dynamic state of change, and that it continues developing until his final moments awaiting the electric chair. At the beginning of the "Fate" section, for example, Bigger had rejected the offers of others, and in his immediate fear after being captured did not yet project self-belief:

"Forget me," [Bigger] mumbled.

"I can't," Jan said.

"It's over for me," Bigger said.

"Don't you believe in yourself?"

"Naw," Bigger whispered tensely. (290)

In desperation, Bigger thinks abstractly of ending his pain by death in these first pages of "Fate," but this radically changes as the novel winds to its end. Despite the arguments of Baldwin and others, Bigger Thomas does not want to die by the end of the novel. Before his parting words to Max, within his existential crisis, Bigger ponders, "if this were all, then why could not he die without hesitancy?", showing his reluctance to submit to oblivion; and

¹⁰ Baldwin suggests in "Many Thousands Gone" that the metaphor of Bigger's rat-killing should have been carried through more fully, that the novel would have been more successful had Wright not "attempted to redeem a symbolical monster in social terms" (26-27), and that Bigger's plight would have been more tragic had he been more representative of Negro roles, i.e.: more in touch with the kinship of the Negro community. Baldwin all but states that Boris Max alone symbolizes the argument of Wright.

further, “Was this the all, the meaning, the end?” (420). Two murders, and to a lesser degree conversation with Max, have brought Bigger very near to what we may understand as an existential awareness.

Max and Jan’s Marxist vision is not entirely lost on Bigger, but Wright’s frustrations with Communism are evident in Bigger’s refusal to plainly accept Boris Max’s lessons. Although Max tells Bigger that all men “want to live” and that the winner of the class struggle will be the side that “feels life most” (428), it is not a Marxist lesson that Bigger internalizes in his final hours. What Max’s words successfully (if indirectly) supply Bigger with is a psychological – not a societal or dialectical – enlightenment:

Did those who hated him have in them the same thing Max had seen in him, the thing that had made Max ask him those questions? And what motive could Max have in helping? Why would Max risk that white tide of hate to help him?... If that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan—then he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel. (360-361)

Bigger is thus concerned with “people” more than ideologies. Could the “looming (white) mountain,” the very thing that has terrorized him through his life, actually produce a perspective – and people – to rescue him? Wright suggests, if not explicitly, that if grounded in Communism the answer is no. Although Bigger respects “Mr. Max,” he comes to realize that the Communists can not reach his individuality, and that his individuality must in itself be the very thing of significance. So desperate is Bigger to cling to whatever existential meaning he has discovered that his last moments conversant with another human being – his

last words to Max hours before his execution – are to insist that what he killed for “must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something” (429). This understandably fills Max with terror. His goal was to enlighten Bigger with an understanding of the forces of class struggle and hope in dialectical materialism. However, Bigger’s final attempt at achieving purpose is to justify his murders in the wake of his newly aroused self-consciousness.

This last conversation between Max and Bigger highlights a number of very important things that affect our interpretation of Wright’s juxtaposition of Marxism with Existentialism. Most significantly, although Max knows precisely the *social forces* that oppress Bigger, he never truly understands Bigger. Bigger’s two attempts to explain himself to Max are failures, and Max’s final reaction to Bigger’s self-awareness is to “plead despairingly”: “No; no; no....Bigger, not that....” (429). Max’s effort to illuminate Bigger on the structure of dialectics that moulds society into restrictive classes falls on deaf ears, at least according to his intentions. Max tells Bigger, “you’re going to die. And if you die, die free. You’re trying to believe in yourself. And every time you try to find a way to live, your own mind stands in the way” (427). The lesson concludes, “That’s why... y-you’ve got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger....” (428). William Maxwell (author of *New Negro, Old Left*) maintains that in the final scenes between Bigger and Boris Max, Bigger “will not situate his faith within a... rivalry between ‘rich people’ and ‘men who work.’” (184). Maxwell (whose project is to reclaim some of the benefit that Party participation gave black writers) suggests that

in 1940 the ante was upped by Wright, now himself a Harlem-based Marxist: white radical friends must look squarely at his native son’s elastic definition of self-defense and imperative violence, as well as the possibility that the meaning discovered there will not fulfill Marxist forecasts. (184)

Indeed, were there significant degrees of Communist apologia in *Native Son*, we might expect a response of accordance from Bigger when Max begs him to “believe in yourself.” Instead, Max’s head jerks in shocked surprise when Bigger begins laughing. “Aw, I reckon I believe in myself” (428), says Bigger. Echoing Sartre’s edict that “Man simply is” (quoted in Odajnyk 9), Bigger’s next words are, “I ain’t got nothing else...” (428). Bigger is sympathetic to Jan and Max, knowing that they are honest and that their perspective is accurate, but he also learns that putting his faith in their ideological system will not redeem him. Bigger’s existence now precedes his essence, to again use Sartre’s definition, and Sartre’s terminology.

Thus, despite the lengthy speeches in *Native Son*, Wright in a sense denied the applicability of Marxism in presenting the more complex truth that he had experienced. He was criticized by Leftist parties for not revealing class struggle as a more clear cause of racism (*Unfinished Quest* 185-187). *American Mercury* reviewer Burton Rascoe (for whom it was “impossible to conceive of a novel’s being worse”) griped that the message of *Native Son* was confused in the discord between Bigger’s perceptions and Wright’s politics. He believed that because Bigger could never have conceived of the social forces at work as he does, and because Bigger’s responses to events differ from what the author’s would be, the balance in Wright’s narrative was therefore highly flawed (*Unfinished Quest* 186-187). However, as I have suggested, Bigger does not so much conceive of any social forces as much as he is simply told about them by Boris Max. His emergent conception is not of social forces but of the significance of himself. Wright handles the novel’s third section awkwardly, but appreciation of it necessitates looking beyond fixed ideologies and classifiable politics and at the changes in Bigger’s self-awareness. More accurately, Robert Butler states that what begins as a “naturalistic novel depicting a small central character caught in massive environmental forces

he can neither understand nor control finally becomes an existential novel focusing on the character's achieving an understanding of and a psychological control over that environment" (Butler, *Native Son* 56). In an unusually perceptive contemporary review, Sterling A. Brown addressed comparisons of Wright to Dreiser, and suggested that Wright was "seeking truth to a reality beyond naturalism" (Brown, *Critical Response* 54), though in fact if we substitute "Marxism" for "naturalism" in his statement we are closer to the truth.

Yet, this is a work of great complexity. William Maxwell (1999) argues that the common consensus of *Native Son* as a "thickly symbolic, brilliantly dramatic, anti-Communist screed" (187) is wrong, partly because Wright remained a party member (in New York) until 1942, at least three years after *Native Son* was completed. Certainly, Wright did not abandon his belief in the Marxist social order of human society; indeed, he never would entirely. Alan M. Wald (2002) determines that Wright remained a writer in the "Black Marxist tradition" well after *Native Son*. Wald refers to the format of the "murder mystery and detective thriller" that Wright legitimized for proletarian purposes with his most famous novel (295-296). However, what Wright realized in the planning of *Native Son* demonstrates his awareness of the uniqueness of the times in which he lived. Wright understood that a new type of African-American, characterized by urban alienation (in most cases, including Wright's own, after a Northern Migration to industrial cities), would be attracted to neither rural tradition nor interracial Communism. Alan M. Ward:

From the point of view of classical Black Marxism, Wright presented the rather terrifying vision that traditional Black culture cannot reach the Bigger Thomases, and that potential Euro-American working-class allies, symbolized by Jan, the Communist boyfriend of the murdered Mary Dalton, are simply part of a reified

natural world of snowstorms and mountains against which Bigger must struggle to survive. (296)

Wright himself answers the question of why Bigger revolted in his lecture/essay “How Bigger Was Born,” and his emphasis is on two components of Bigger’s psychological character. By “circumstance,” says Wright, Bigger “had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race” (439).¹¹ The second component is that Bigger reacts to the “glitter” of the “dominant civilization, which he can never share” (439). Wright describes the urban landscape of the “fabulous city” that is Bigger’s [Chicago] – it is “huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal” (453). Wright of course had lived this experience, and he makes clear in “How Bigger Was Born” that he himself could easily have been one of the many “Biggers” on the streets of the United States. What Wright describes here is simply Bigger’s total alienation, his encounter with the aforementioned “absurd.” But this encounter is not simply between black and white, for Bigger is as alienated from his own family and friends as from the white working class.

In *Native Son*, Wright works out the failure of Communism as he had experienced it, namely the failure to deal with individuals of the working class *as individuals*; further, that urban, ghetto black Americans – doubly alienated by being both black and cut off from their

¹¹ William J. Maxwell also suggests in *New Negro, Old Left* (1999) that Richard Wright was much more sympathetic to the importance of the Southern folk culture during his Communist “decades” (i.e.: the 1930s) than has been commonly recognized, despite the Communist derived disinclination for the value of southern culture. Zora Neale Hurston criticized Wright’s values on the supposition that his black boys and women seek Northern flight as the only redemption of their Southern oppression. In truth, that could only apply to “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the first story in the *Uncle Tom’s Children* Collection. In fact the last story in the original edition, “Fire and Cloud,” sees a revolutionary march down the streets of a small, southern community, while another, “Long Black Song,” clearly posits the urban materialistic northern white man as the aggressor in the dissipation of Southern folk values. In Maxwell’s view, Wright successfully used Party ideology to redeem rural black Southerners in the 1930s.

own roots – are prone to violent revolution, and not at the call of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Cedric Robinson:

Wright was attempting to come to terms with the psychological consequence of an historical condition of which the leadership in the Communist movement was only vaguely aware. Wright was insisting on the necessity for understanding the working class in its own terms. He was concerned with the ability of proletarian masses to reproduce themselves spiritually and culturally. If they could no longer recreate the social ideologies which had sustained them, it would not be possible for them to fulfill the historical role that Marxian theory assigned them. . . . He realized that no political movement which, for ideological reasons, presumed the progressive character of the working class would succeed. (426)

Bigger, then, is not simply a member of the lumpenproletariat who happens to be black, but is a potential revolutionary who will not be bound by ideology. Even sympathetic Marxists fail to see this, as when Max tells Bigger that “this thing’s bigger than you, son. In a certain sense, every Negro in America’s on trial out there today” (368). Rather than acknowledge the symbolic position that Max has thrust on him, Bigger responds, “They going to kill *me* anyhow” [my emphasis] (368).

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas’ encounter with the white world, and his act of accidental murder, force him into engagement with the condition of modern man – “the absurd.” Initially fearing any action or thought that brings him into close analysis of himself, Bigger, in captivity and facing sure death, learns to accept his own life for what it is, and on his own terms. Lehan states that “Bigger moves through fear, hate, murder, flight, and despair to hope, even though the source of hope – the Communist Party – will not convince

Wright himself for long” (99). As I have argued, however, from Bigger Thomas’ perspective hope in the Party is minimal; we also see that from Party perspective Bigger’s is not the kind of hope it would want to propagate. Boris Max analyses Bigger’s existence but misses his essence. The “hope” Lehan refers to would more accurately describe the existential justification of self that engages fear and the absurd, which is Bigger’s condition at *Native Son*’s conclusion.

“The Man Who Lived Underground”

Wright’s story (or novella) “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942; 1944) merits a brief analysis due to its existentialism and its unique situation in the important period between *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Wright scholar Michel Fabre describes the story, completed mere days before America’s entry into the second World War, as the initiator of Wright’s “sudden veering toward an existential and metaphysical philosophy” (*Unfinished Quest* 243). This is an overstatement, as I judge it, on the evidence I have given regarding *Native Son*, but clearly “The Man Who Lived Underground” is a turning point in Wright’s work.¹² The story is a fascinating demonstration of the complexities Wright found himself grappling with in 1941, less than a year before he effectively withdrew from all Communist Party activities, and months after the Party crisis following Germany’s breaking the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact. The Communists, whom Wright had never completely trusted with his artistic freedom, had encouraged him to reverse all his planned activities and projects arguing against the war in Europe, thereby further confusing the conviction of his loyalties

¹² In addition to leaving the Party around this time, an entire completed novel, *Black Hope* (which featured a female protagonist) was entirely abandoned by Wright in the period in which he completed “The Man Who Lived Underground” (*Unfinished Quest* 239-243). It has never been published.

(Rowley 252-254). Hereafter, what biographer Rowley calls an “irreversible gulf” emerged between Wright and the CPUSA, and the gulf would grow in the coming years. Wright officially left the Party in 1942, a subject I shall return to in Chapter Four.

“The Man Who Lived Underground” is not at all duty-bound to Party principles, as *Native Son* had been – at least to the extent that Wright had in some degree considered the Party’s response to it (as he relates in “How Bigger Was Born”). This story, concerning the psychological and physical ordeals of a black fugitive, discusses no Marxist principles explicitly, and in tone is rather similar to the *Uncle Tom’s Children* stories, but for one thing – a developing consciousness and celebration of an existential outlook. In an existentialist reading, “The Man Who Lived Underground” differs from *Native Son*, which gradually resolves an existential protagonist through violent contact with whites, in the increased non-race conscious speculation by the narrator (who again writes in the third person, entering the mind of only the protagonist). Wright wrote to his publisher, Paul Reynolds, “This is the first time I’ve really tried to step beyond the straight black-white stuff” (*Unfinished Quest* 240).

The sparse plot of “The Man Who Lived Underground” concerns the burrowing into an urban sewage system, by way of a man-hole, of a newly escaped black convict, whose name we later learn is ‘Fred Daniels.’ Daniels, who is hiding to escape the police (three of whom have already beaten him into a signed confession), is believed to have committed murder, though in his mind he is innocent of the crime (whose details are never disclosed in the portion of the story that has been published and frequently anthologized). Daniels wades through the dirty sewage water, and one of the first things he sees is the body of a dead baby, floating past him in the current. His initial reaction is to try to save it, before he realizes that it is “dead, cold, nothing, the same nothingness he had felt while watching the men and

women singing in the church” (27). Thus, Daniels is numb to either religion or his own African American peers, or both. He nests into a cave in the underground sewer, and soon searches about, finding glimpses of a nearby Negro church, a fruit and meat store, and a jeweller’s shop. Over a period of a few days, he enters all of these places from below, stealing food and supplies from the church and meat store, spying on and stealing from the vault in the jeweller’s. Rather than pocketing the fortune in cash and jewels that he steals, Daniels retreats in glee to his underground lair and pastes monetary bills to the electrically illuminated walls of his cave. He dumps the jewels on the ground and rubs them into the dirt with his boot. He delights in the sight of this, knowing that he has somehow subverted the world “aboveground.” Daniels, who has clearly lost his rational sense by story’s end, decides to turn himself in to the authorities because of his obsessive need to throw his acts of subversion into the face of the law. The disbelieving police officers follow him to the manhole cover entrance to his underground home, and he anxiously invites them in to see his lair. However, before he can enter, one officer suddenly shoots him and his body falls lifeless into the sewer water, to float away like the dead baby he had first encountered. When the officer is asked by a colleague why he had committed such a violent act, he replies, “You’ve got to shoot his kind. They’d wreck things” (74).

“The Man Who Lived Underground” is the ultimate expression of a man facing absurdity. Daniels is so certain of the absurdity “aboveground” that he prefers to stay below (like Ellison’s *Invisible Man* a decade later). Following the existential maxim that “a human being is never at a preordained state of development,” Fred Daniels is reborn when he first enters the waters underground; the baby floating past him is a symbol of this rebirth. Daniels creates his own rules in his underground cave, and laughs at the world aboveground that he

sees in fleeting glimpses. Denied the details of the crime committed and the treatment from whites experienced by Daniels, we read a black protagonist whose sense of the absurd is not motivated by awareness of skin colour. Michel Fabre contends that Daniels is an outsider “not because he is black in a white context, but because he is now a human being in an unreal, inhuman context” (*Unfinished Quest* 241). Fred Daniels feels that “if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture” (52). Though mentally unstable and unravelled by the end of his life, Daniels nevertheless engages a purely existential perspective, and is so delighted in his social construction of the world that he rushes into the arms of his captors to share it with them. Richard Lehan: “Both the underground man [Daniels] and the baby are innocent, victims of a cruelty and a system which they can neither understand nor control. Their deaths are pathetic proof that civilized life expresses itself in absurd ways” (102). The murderous officer’s comment that “They’d wreck things” symbolizes the existentially-opposed perspective that “everyone may be measured according to a standard.” Even though his existential perspective comes from a mind clearly unstable, Daniels feels morally innocent and is therefore dangerous to the keepers of the aboveground order (the concept of radical innocence will be developed in much greater complexity by Wright in *The Outsider*.) “The Man Who Lived Underground” is significant in that it is perhaps Wright’s only successful attempt at a convincingly non-race conscious existential character. Hereafter the existentialism he creates, in less surreal settings, will be increasingly challenged in its capacity to view reality apart from racial perspectives.

Black Boy (American Hunger)

One significant element of *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Wright's autobiography, is its construction of Wright's contact with, and joining, the Communist Party of the United States (see Chapter One), as well as his departure from it (to be discussed in Chapter Four).

Herein, I mainly focus on the Existentialist elements of this autobiography.

Black Boy was written in 1943, though not published until 1945. It was Wright's first major project after formally leaving the Communist Party in 1942, and according to Kate Baldwin it is an autobiography that seeks to remove itself from the burden of "representativeness," to be "existentially free" as Ward writes in the paperback introduction. Kate Baldwin suggests that Wright had politically-motivated reasons for asserting the priority of the individual over the communal, owing to his renouncing affiliations with the Communists (295). *Black Boy* is in many ways an existentialist autobiography in that the narrator (much removed, of course, from the "boy" of the text) applies existential values onto his fictionalized autobiographical self. M. Lynn Weiss suggests that what makes *Black Boy* unique (in comparison to standard autobiography or slave narratives) is its inclusion of the conflicts around which sociological theory and literary modernism were developing. Weiss believes that moving "the Other" from the circumference to the centre was Wright's particular gift (15). I agree insofar as what Wright's attempt was, but the effect for readers remains one of a racial conflict creating the narrator's perspective. As previously noted, Richard Wright questioned Sartre on the degree to which a black American in the South can possibly confront freedom, in that the smallest moves and choices made by others could lead to his/her death. Yet, increasingly, as Wright's work of the studied period progresses, he wants to believe that all men are fundamentally free, and he wants to believe it for everyone –

blacks as for whites. In constructing a memoir of his life, Wright for the first time attempted to rationally explain something that neither the consciousness of the non-intellectual Bigger Thomas or the mentally unstable Fred Daniels could – why a self-conscious African American of Wright’s era, particularly from the South, is uniquely situated to confront absurdity (and by extension develop an existentialist perspective). Wright in *Black Boy* :

Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in turn to hate in himself that which others hated in him. But pride would make him hide his self-hate, for he would not want whites to know that he was so thoroughly conquered by them that his total life was conditioned by their attitude; but in the act of hiding his self-hate, he could not help but hate those who evoked his self-hate in him. So each part of his day would be consumed in a war with himself, a good part of his energy would be spent in keeping control of his unruly emotions, emotions which he had not wished to have, but could not help having. Held at bay by the hate of others, preoccupied with his own feelings, *he was continuously at war with reality.* [my emphasis] (313)

Thus, in Wright’s carefully articulated view, the black American is not in confrontation with the white American, but rather is at “war” with himself, and is of necessity in ultimate confrontation with the very (American) reality within which he exists. And herein lies the root of the dilemma that Wright would face years later in writing *The Outsider*: how can a black American, in America, overcome this complexity and achieve intellectual and psychological freedom?

The childhood and youth constructed by Wright in *Black Boy* is one of relentless confusion, anxiety and uncertainty, with regular assertions of individuality, eventually leading

to a religious confrontation. The amusing incident of the visiting preacher who eats too much chicken at the Wrights' table is described by the author as a moment when his "hate of the preacher finally became more important than God or religion and I could no longer contain myself" (31). The young Wright runs from the table screaming, "That preacher's going to eat *all* the chicken!" (31). Such moments are emphasized throughout Wright's account of his hunger-stricken childhood – moments where the child Wright rebels against his own confusion and ignorance of the world around him, but is regularly reminded of how dependent he really is. Amongst his schoolboy peers, Wright remembers that "we strove to convince one another that our decisions stemmed from ourselves and ourselves alone," but concedes that they "concealed how dependent we were upon one another" (91). The key moment of Wright's childhood is his assertion of independence in what becomes the final rejection of his maternal family's fundamental Christianity. Wright writes that "wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn" (159-160). Wright recalls the amusing incident of his misunderstood words to his "Granny" at a Church revival, bringing her "the greatest shame and humiliation of her entire religious life" (136). Attempting to articulate the lack of personal evidence he has seen for the existence of God, Wright whispers, "You see, granny, if I ever saw an angel like Jacob did, then I'd believe" (137). Wright's Grandmother, however, hears "I saw an angel," and the confusion over this misinterpreted statement exposes Wright and his Grandmother's differences in front of the Church elder and members. On the way home, while his Grandmother refuses to talk to him, Wright reflects that "I knew more than she thought I knew about the meaning of religion, the hunger of the human heart for that which is not and

can never be, the thirst of the human spirit to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human life” (139-140). Here, in essence, Wright describes Sartre’s belief that “believing in God’s will is a rationalization,” itself a concept related to several proto-existentialists such as Nietzsche. The final victory over his family’s religion leaves the young Wright in a state of perennial sin, and he finds this experience liberating. Finished with concern about his own salvation, Wright looks at the totality of existence as no more than that which is before him: “I felt that I could breathe again, live again, that I had been released from a prison. The cosmic images of dread were now gone and the external world became a reality, quivering daily before me” (143).

Wright did not study Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread* (1844) – often cited as a text influential to twentieth century Existentialism – until the Wright family’s permanent move to France in summer 1947 (Rowley 357), but “dread” is already a motif unto itself in *Black Boy*. Translator Walter Lowrie summarizes Kierkegaard’s “dread” (or, in fact, “angst,” as it may also be translated) as “an apprehension of the future, a presentiment of a something which is ‘nothing,’ that...it is ‘the next day,’ and, in another place, ‘it is fighting against the future,’ therefore against oneself—‘and no man is stronger than himself’”(Kierkegaard x). Eight years after *Black Boy*, book one of *The Outsider* (“Dread”) would be prefaced with the following definition from Kierkegaard: “Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears what one desires” (*Outsider* 1). Kierkegaard’s belief was that a human being’s freedom of choice leaves him/her in a constant fear of failure in responsibilities to God. Of course, Wright’s feeling of dread emerges in the absence of God, and he suggests that the dread of his youth is overcome only after he wins a battle of wills with his family, wherein sin no longer applies

to him. Thus, in a sense, Wright overcomes dread only by becoming God-like himself. The complications of this atheistic approach to Kierkegaard's dread will be explored further in *The Outsider*.

Wright notes the intellectual stimulation he received from hearing and telling fantastic stories, of the escape that pulp fiction gave him. Kierkegaard: "If we observe children, we find...dread more definitely indicated as a seeking after adventure, a thirst for the prodigious, the mysterious" (38). Wright's autobiographical accounts of childhood often read like an accumulated record of dread. Temporarily placed in an orphan home as a young boy, Wright states that "dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being," and that "I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others" (35). Recalling the time when his mother first falls seriously ill with a paralytic stroke, Wright remembers that "a slowly rising dread stole into me" (98). When the extended family intervenes to help raise the two young brothers, Wright "felt dread, knowing that others – strangers even though they were relatives – were debating my destiny" (101). When Wright moves in with his Uncle Clark and attends a new school, "a new dread arose" (108) on the school grounds, as Wright must defend himself physically against bullies and classmates. Wright explains the trauma his mother's permanent illness created as a "symbol" of "the futile seeking...the fear, the dread" (117) that was his childhood. As discussed above, Wright's sense of dread only dissipates when he is at last free to stare down his own mortality in defiance of his Grandmother, the church and his culture. His final denial of the religious life allows Wright to be "no longer set apart for being sinful" (143). Wright's construction of the events of his life emphasizes dread (as in the citations from *Black Boy* above) within his smaller childhood world, long before racial differences are even known to him. Concurrently, Wright

emphasizes the degree to which he felt different and isolated from his own schoolmates and peers while growing up in Mississippi and Tennessee, a point he reaffirms when confronting Black Marxists for the first time. Wright seems to suggest, in *Black Boy*, that the psychological dread of his childhood was overcome by his “leap” (Kierkegaard’s term) into conscious choice that was his denial of his family’s belief system. Thus, the fear of the white world that follows, in later life, is not the originator of dread but rather of the “dream” that is Wright’s adult life (no motif occurs in Wright’s fiction more than the “dream”). Just before his departure for Chicago, he describes his days and nights as “one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension, and anxiety” (299), but notably not of “dread.” Wright’s intellectual awakening, from the endless reading he does as a youth in the South, is constructed as a tool that allows him to understand, and therefore morally subvert, the white world around him. Instead of dread, it is “guilt” that he feels because he “had read a book that had spoken of how [whites] lived and thought” (294). These books immerse Wright in dream-like moods, but he “could not conquer [his] sense of guilt” (295). He writes that “the white men around me knew that I was changing, that I had begun to regard them differently” (295). “Terror, tension, and anxiety” (299) are the feelings experienced by Wright as he prepares to leave the South. But these feelings are, in his narrative construction, attributed to his own (teenage, no less) psychic development, and not to direct influence by the white world.

For purposes of the impasse to be reached in *The Outsider*, it is important to note that in the latter portion of *Black Boy* Wright clearly wishes for meaningful fulfilment of his life’s pursuits. His perspective is existential but idealistic, not nihilistic. In the early part of the Chicago portion, Wright describes his frustration in conversation with a simple working class

girl (whom he meets because of his job as an insurance premium collector). Wright stares at the girl, ponders their mutual existence for a moment, and comes to the conclusion that “[her life] meant absolutely nothing. And neither did my life mean anything” (*Black Boy* 341). But shortly thereafter, having become sympathetic to the Communist urge “to believe in life,” Wright’s perspective undergoes quite a change. The Communist message said to Wright, “If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone” (375). As discussed in Chapter One, Wright initially felt considerable scorn for other Black Communists, and part of the reason was their lack of positivity of vision. He describes the quality of them as “shabby” (346), because of their lack of philosophical ambition:

They had rejected the state of things as they were, and that seemed to me to be the first step toward embracing a creative attitude toward life. I felt that it was not until one wanted the world to be different that one could look at the world with will and emotion. But these men had rejected what was before their eyes without quite knowing what they had rejected and why. (350)

We shall see, however, that this criticism might well be aimed at Wright’s fictional protagonist of *The Outsider*, a novel written several years after *Black Boy*. In 1943, as Wright looked inward for his life’s story, he still very much believed in what the *Norton Anthology* calls “the transcendent spark of selfhood” that exists in his fiction and prose to this point. *Black Boy* suggests that the non-racial world view that Communism had temporarily offered Wright was not something he was willing to give up, even after being disillusioned by the Party. The Existentialism in *Black Boy* is retrospectively projected in order to deter the effects of race-consciousness on the youthful Richard Wright.

The Outsider

Black Boy finds Wright reviewing events of his life from an existential narrative perspective at a time just before he immersed himself in the literature of this ideology. Considering several factors – Wright’s permanent relocation to Paris in 1947, his friendship with Sartre and de Beauvoir, the quotations and terminology of Sartre, Kierkegaard and others that appear in the text (more of which to follow) – it is not surprising that *The Outsider* (published some eight years after *Black Boy*) is commonly described as an “existentialist novel.” However, as with *Native Son*, the protagonist of *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, undergoes something of a change in the course of the novel. But whereas Bigger Thomas unconsciously develops an existentialist perspective, Cross Damon relinquishes all systems of belief, all ideologies, in the knowledge that he is trapped by his own existentialism. *The Outsider* also reveals Wright’s increasing desire to depict Black American characters’ destinies in such a way that racial matters are denied importance. We shall see that as the protagonist of the novel loses his own inner conflict with Existentialism and ideology, the novel itself loses authenticity and the construction of Wright’s didactic approach falters for it.

The Outsider, which Wright began as early as 1948 and completed in 1952, is his first major work written abroad, though he actually began planning it in New York. Set in 1950, it is the story of Cross Damon (i.e.: Christ/Demon) a young, black intellectual from the South Side of Chicago, who is not concerned with the effects of race. Wright by extension goes to considerable lengths to deny race as an issue in the greater philosophical problem of (the) modern (black) man, a position and a philosophical approach that did not sit comfortably with American reviewers and readers at the time, effectively ending the period

of Wright's highest profile in American literature.¹³ Hazel Rowley suggests that "in an embattled world in which it was impossible to admire either [Communism or the West], Wright, along with Sartre, Camus, and others on the non-Communist Left, was looking for a middle-ground—a third way out" (373).

The Outsider begins with a quote from Kierkegaard, while the first book of the novel is titled "Dread." Citations in the novel from *The Concept of Dread* not only indicate Cross' psychological condition at the beginning of the book, but also foreshadow his conclusive thoughts on his own life, at its end. Cross' life is in chaos, and he is already consumed by self-hate in the novel's early sections. We learn from his Post-office co-workers that he used to read books voraciously; some of the authors are later identified as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. Cross *wants* to believe in the principles of Existentialism, but any philosophy in his life at this point is untried, untested. (It is also later revealed that Cross is knowledgeable of the Russian revolution from the pens of Bolsheviks.) Cross, 26 years old and a University dropout, is depressed and in the company of three of his co-workers as the story begins.¹⁴ Cross' friends describe him as a singular, bemused, and intelligent person. Even at the beginning of the novel, there is a sense that Cross' existential, intellectual projects are failures. He is asked by a friend why he had spent so much time reading books:

"I was looking for something," Cross said quietly.

¹³ Arna Bontemps reviewed *The Outsider* in the *Saturday Review*, stating that Wright had "had a roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre, and apparently he liked it" (Rowley 408); reviewer Granville Hicks of the *Herald Tribune* wrote that Cross Damon's principal problems have nothing to do with his race" (McCall 150); John Henry Raleigh of the *New Republic* described Cross Damon as "Bigger Thomas intellectualized and gone French Existentialist" (McCall 154).

¹⁴ A group of four black men, or boys, is a recurring motif in many of Wright's fictions (including "Big Boy Leaves Home," *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, and *The Long Dream*).

“What?” Pink asked.

“I don’t know,” Cross confessed gloomily. (8)

He is then asked why he no longer reads such books:

“Now, honest, Crossy, how come you don’t read no more?”

“I’ve put away childish things,” Cross said.

“Aw, be yourself, man” Booker said.

“I am what I am,” Cross said. (8-9)

Like Bigger’s, Cross’ father is absent, while his mother is from the South. Cross is thus another young, black character thrust into the ghetto environment of a Northern, industrial city. He is an intellectualized Bigger Thomas, the result of Wright’s attempt to create a black protagonist who views whites as merely another aspect of modern man’s challenge to (re)create himself. However, the other black characters in the book plainly fear whites.

Cross’ wife Gladys is one example:

[Cross] was amazed at how uneasy Gladys was in the presence of whites. She’s too conscious of her color, he thought.

“Look, buck up,” he sought to put some backbone in her. “Don’t let the mere existence of these people intimidate you.”

“They think they’re something and we’re nothing,” she snapped.

“It’s up to us to make ourselves something,” he argued. “A man creates himself...” (65)

Wright is attempting to create a model black character who is so far advanced of menial racial concerns that he can view the world, without Communist help, through a non-racial lens.

Following the birth of he and his wife's first child, Cross recalls the drunken day he ended up in bed with another woman as his wife returned home. The tension this creates in their relationship endures, and after the birth of twins whose economic needs strain his income, Cross realizes that his own life is no longer his: "Dating from this period, a wave of self-loathing began to engulf Cross. Each time he realized how much he had lost control of his life, his self-hatred swelled threateningly" (71). Matters are complicated when we learn that Cross is now involved with a 15-year old girl named Dot, who has lied about her age and is pregnant with his child. With Cross under a barrage of accusation from his religious-minded mother, Dot's doctor informs him that if he is not Dot's husband, he will be accused of "the crime of rape." When Gladys finds out what has happened, she finds herself in a position of power and demands that Cross take out all of his insurance money and the maximum salary-advance from the Post Office to give to her, with the understanding that she will then consider granting him a legal divorce. Cross does so, brooding incessantly about the state of his life in between numbing himself with liquor. While carrying the money home on the Chicago subway, he is involved in a horrific underground crash. The first of many plot convolutions occurs here. Cross is one of the few unhurt survivors of the crash, but in fleeing the scene he has to leave behind his jacket which contains his identification (though he remembers to take his money). By chance, another black man, who dies and is physically mangled in the crash, had sat beside Cross on the train and is mistaken for him when the bodies and Cross' identification are recovered. Before being recognized by anyone who knows him, Cross realizes what has happened and takes advantage of this twist of fate to escape his own life and literally create a new identity. He is officially declared dead by Chicago police; later, he literally observes his own funeral from a distance. Before escaping

Chicago for New York, Cross, in the presence of a white prostitute at a hotel, encounters one of his co-workers at the Post Office. Panicked and alone with his friend, Cross kills him with a blow to the head, and sends his body out the window to fall into an alley.

Cross' flight to New York is the first major act which shows him taking active control of his own life. This is his Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" into the terror, but liberation, of existential freedom. Freedom is something Cross has longed for, and henceforth he will have his opportunity to test it (i.e.: Wright tests it against his own experience, in the novel). In the initial fervour of flight, Cross' perspective on himself is changed from hate to love:

He found that he had been deprived of the will to make decisions, that he had, by his flight, abandoned himself to be tossed and buffeted by the tyranny of daily minutia. Thrust thus back upon himself, his actions were snared in a web of self-love that made the images of his mind assume a hypnotic sway over his body that was more decisive than the food he ate to sustain himself. (150)

Hereafter, the "Dream" (the title of book two) begins. Cross is "alone at the center of the world of the laws of his own feelings" (148). At this stage, he is almost comparable to Bigger Thomas in that they both feel existentially redeemed in the aftermath of murder and flight. But Bigger does not have a new life to deal with (indeed, his life is effectively over at the moment of greatest change), whereas Cross must face the unknown from a starting position.

To this point in the novel, Cross has been something of an intellectual elitist, looking down on his family and peers who do not understand the forces of modern existence at the level he does. This changes because of a chance encounter on the train from Chicago to New York. Sitting across from Cross is Ely Houston, the District Attorney of New York

City, a hunchback. The two begin talking about the “Negro Question,” and Houston immediately recognizes that Cross (who, for the second time, gives a false name) is both an intellectual and a prototype of the ‘Negro’ that he believes is emerging in the modern world. According to Cedric Robinson, Wright believed that American blacks had been “recreated” by capitalist exploitation, which had integrated them into industrial production, but had (due to the effects of racism) simultaneously denied them the full impact of bourgeois ideology. The Black proletariat had therefore developed a unique identity apart from the standard American culture (Robinson 429-430). The D.A. Ely Houston, also an “outsider” by his condition as a hunchback, understands this and evokes W.E.B. Du Bois in telling Cross that

[Negroes] are outsiders.... They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time.... Negroes will develop unique and specially defined psychological types. They will become psychological men....”
(163-164)

But just as Houston indirectly labels Cross an outsider, so Cross describes Houston in the same terms: “He was frightened of that hunchback, that outsider who understood *too* much” (165). Despite Cross’ suspicions that Houston is somehow aware of the murder he has committed, the two men are in agreement that “the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization” is simply man’s attempt to hide from himself (171). Cross comes to realize that Houston’s job of upholding the law is his way of deluding himself from what both men recognize – the otherwise natural and existentially permissible lawlessness that is the real order of human existence. Houston says, “My greatest sympathy is for those who feel that they have a right to break the law” (171), unaware that he is describing Cross. Because

Houston lives the delusion as District Attorney, Cross also dismisses him as ultimately false, a “little God” who rules over those under him. But the most severe form of this judgement is reserved for the Communist Party, which, as with Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, attempts to use Cross as a tool. However, Cross is quite consciously aware of what the *Invisible Man* takes most of Ellison’s novel to learn: “Each white man would project out upon him his own conception of the Negro and he could safely hide behind it” (217).

Thus when Cross first thinks of Communism, he “found as much to hate in it as to admire” (196). He is consistently “ambivalent” towards ideologies, which for him are simply the numerous ways in which humans choose to organize themselves, none of which has any inherent value: “Even if Stalin had personally eaten fifteen million human beings, it did not cancel the destructions of entire civilizations and the barbarous slaughter of countless millions by...the Western World” (197). Cross feels “constrained by logic to accept Marxism as an intellectual instrument whose absence from the human mind would reduce the picture of the processes of modern industrial society to a meaningless ant heap” (197). During Wright’s Party years, the primary focus of the movement in Western Europe and the United States had been opposing fascism (Robinson 425). Although uninspired by any ideology, Cross is nonetheless more disinclined to Fascism than Communism, simply because of Fascism’s “boast that it needed no ideological justification for its desire to rule,” which to Cross “denud[es]” life of all meaning (*Outsider* 197). But this difference is significant, and is at the heart of what makes *The Outsider* a novel of a failed Existentialist. Like Wright, Cross wants to believe in ideology. In the course of the novel, he learns that his own Existentialist beliefs fail to satisfy him (although, interestingly, the word “Existentialist” does not appear once in the lengthy book). And although Cross professes ambivalence to Communism as

ideology, he decidedly hates Communists in reality: “Above all, he loathed the Communist attempt to destroy human subjectivity; for him, his subjectivity was the essence of his life” (197). Cross thus articulates the large difference between ideal and reality, while reaffirming his own psychological freedom. But due to his ambivalence about the practicality of ideology, he also considers that Communism and his own Existentialism are easily compatible: “He had never seriously considered Communism. But why not?... Cross felt that at the heart of all political movements the concept of the basic inequality of man was enthroned and practiced, and the skill of politicians consisted in how cleverly they hid this elementary truth” (224). Cross’ reasoning is that as he and Communists both have something to hide, he should therefore be able to function within their ranks: “They are deceivers and so am I” (224-225). However, at the beginning of Book Three (appropriately titled “Descent”) Cross begins to comprehend the complexities of his attempt to live existentially; he begins to see how easily even he may be trapped into “bad faith” thus becoming the very thing he hates. In Sartrean-Existentialist terms, he has accepted the invitation to move in with a young Communist couple for the wrong reasons. There is a “compounded duplicity” in his actions:

He had accepted their invitation in bad faith... he was convinced that bad faith of some degree was an indigenous part of living. The daily stifling of one’s sense of terror in the face of life, the far-flung conspiracy of pretending that life was tending toward a goal of redemption, the reasonless assumption that one’s dreams and desires were realizable – all of these...were bad faith. (253)

This page of the novel in itself suggests that Wright, despite borrowing Sartre’s term “bad faith,” was not duty-bound to use such terms as Sartre had in *Being and Nothingness* (see

Chapter Two), and was perhaps not “Sartre’s disciple” after all. Additionally, Cross’ denial of the simple possibility of living in “good” faith explodes one of the essential demands of Existentialism, demonstrating that more than Communism and Fascism are exposed in *The Outsider*.

Under his final assumed name (Lionel Lane), Cross is introduced to white Communist Gilbert Blount of the Central Planning Committee, and his wife Eva. Cross’ immediate impression of the Communist leader is of “a kind of cold hunger in the man... a waiting, calculating consciousness whose ends seemed remote” (235). Blount immediately invites Cross to live with him and Eva (referred to above) because an “open Fascist,” landlord Langley Herndon, an enemy of Blount, needs to “learn a lot” (242). Blount wants to use Cross, whose intelligence he recognizes, to make a political statement. The expected confrontation between Communist and Fascist occurs soon after, while Cross waits upstairs protecting Eva, the blond, artistic wife that he is attracted to. A bloody fight ensues, and Cross covertly intervenes in the landlord’s office, enjoying the spectacle of two “little Gods” – Blount and Herndon – fighting each other. In a moment of extreme psychological intensity, Cross is compelled into action, the second significant moment of the Kierkegaardian “leap” into choice. He uses a broken oaken table leg to deliver a death blow to Herndon’s head, and then surprises Blount by doing the same to him. Having symbolically killed both ideological monoliths, Cross returns to Eva and avoids suspicion long enough to murder another Communist the following day (although this time there is a clearer motivation – the Communist in question secretly knows that Cross is a murderer). The investigation at the Blounts’ Greenwich Village apartment is, in another convolution, headed by D.A. Ely Houston, who again trades wits with the “outsider” and throws heavy

Communist suspicion on Cross for the simple fact that the two men are acquainted. In a scene that is equatable to Boris Max's proselytizing in *Native Son's* final act, Cross Damon lectures Eva and her Communist acquaintances on the real nature of the ideologies they and other people believe in:

Under the ideological banner of Dialectical Materialism, a small group of ruthless men in Russia seized political power and the entire state apparatus and established a dictatorship. Rationalizing human life to the last degree, they launched a vast, well-disciplined program of industrialization which now rivals that of the United States of America in pretentiousness and power.... Imagine the British, past masters of exploitation and duplicity, allowing a Karl Marx into their British Museum to pore over and unravel the pretensions and self-deceptions of British banditry! Such records...served thoughtful and astute men as guides in the building of new, scientific, and more efficient methods of deception!.... You don't want [workers to become more human] and the capitalists don't want it. Why? Because you cannot dupe free men who can think and know.... (476-486)

Perhaps Cross' most interesting point is simply that Communists are not revolutionaries in a real sense, in that they, as with all members belonging to an ideology, actually seek to take advantage of the emerging condition of modern man; that is, that Communism in some degree succeeded from the Bolshevik Revolution onward purely because modern man, losing grip on his myths, was ripe to be exploited by a new system of organization. Cross continues:

[Communists] love human nature just as it is!.... To their minds human life on this earth is a process that is transparently *known!*.... they will replace faith and habit with

organization and discipline.... What...sincere people do not realize is that Communism and Fascism are but the political expressions of the Twentieth Century's atheistic way of life, and that the future will reveal many, many more of these absolutistic systems whose brutality and rigor will make the present-day systems seem like summer outings. (490-491)

Cross gives no consideration here whatsoever to the unique situation of the "Negro" in America. In an earlier scene, Cross had mused that

his consciousness of the color of his skin had played no role in [the rejection of his former life]. The general circumstances of his upbringing...[and] the insistent claims of his own inner life had made him too concerned with himself to cast his lot wholeheartedly with Negroes in terms of racial struggle. Practically he was with them, but emotionally he was not of them. (195)¹⁵

In an article titled "Christian Existentialism," Claudia Tate suggests that Wright has "tried to characterize [Cross] Damon as a universal embodiment of the alienated, modern man and therefore tempered his racial personality in order to broaden the application of the existential argument" (376). And yet, as Tate points out, everyone else in the book makes reference to Cross' blackness. The effect is of a protagonist, and perhaps an author, failing to convince readers that race has not influenced him.¹⁶ As with Cross' spurned wife Gladys, it is the

¹⁵ Wright says in *Pagan Spain* (1957) that "I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong" (quoted in McCall 145). In *The Color Curtain* (1956), he would write that he was "opposed to all racial definitions" (quoted in McCall 145).

¹⁶ Five years after *The Outsider*, Wright seems to have reneged on the suggestion of a modern black man unaffected by whites. In *The Long Dream* (1958, Wright's last novel), the teenage hero, Fishbelly Tucker, "knew deep in his heart that there would be no peace in his blood until he had defiantly violated the line that the white world had dared him to cross under the threat of death" (165). In *The Long Dream*, as in the *Uncle Tom's Children* collection, white America, not the terror of freedom, is again the greatest source of the dread in Wright's protagonists.

intellectually weaker African American characters that dwell on being black. The Caribbean-born Party member Bob Hunter, who introduces Cross to the Communists, is insincere in his commitment to the interracial policy of the Party. Bob Hunter tells Cross that as “a professional revolutionary,” beating the “rich, white bastards” makes him “feel *good!*” (221). The degree to which supporting characters in the novel articulate the prevalent reality of racial issues further alienates Cross Damon.

Eventually, the D.A. Ely Houston begins to turn up the truth about Cross' identity and past life in Chicago, bringing in his wife and children to identify him, and the shock sends Eva, now Cross' lover, to commit suicide. In confrontation with Houston, Cross reaffirms that “the real heart of Communism, Mr. Houston, is the will to power” (515). Houston determines correctly that Cross is guilty of all the related murders because only a man completely outside of human society, a man who would not even react upon hearing that his mother had died (as she did, in the shock of learning that Cross was still alive), could have so spontaneously murdered men without remorse. But Houston lacks evidence, and is satisfied to set Cross free. Cross must face a unique punishment in the challenge of living under his own law. As with Sartre's judgement for all humanity, Cross is “condemned to freedom.”

Cross is shot in the street on his way home, presumably by the Communists, and lies breathing his last as a crowd of people, including Houston, arrive on the scene. Houston asks Cross if it is the Communists that have shot him, and why. Cross replies, “they shoot what they don't understand...” (583). With his dying words, Cross tells Houston why he lived as an outsider: “I wanted to be free...To feel what I was worth... I loved life too...much...” (585). Conclusively, Houston asks Cross what he found as a result of this

effort, and Cross replies “Nothing” (585). His next words read like the failure of Existentialism: “The search can’t be done alone...Never alone...Alone a man is nothing...Man is a promise that he must never break...Tell them not to come down this road” (585). Cross gives Houston one last lesson on the state of modern man: “I’ve lived alone but I’m everywhere...Man is returning to earth...The myth-men are going...The real men, the last men are coming...” (585). Pressing Cross to find out what his own, personal life was like, Houston hears that “it was...horrible” (585). Houston asks why this was so, and Cross’ last words before he falls dead are, “Because in my heart...I’m...I felt...I’m innocent...That’s what made the horror” (586). As Kierkegaard writes, “the profound secret of innocence...is dread” (38). Kierkegaard determines that dread is properly a psychological condition, and that “in his innocence man...is soulishly determined in immediate unity with his natural condition” (37), which is exactly how Houston viewed Cross – a “pre-Christian” man of a natural state, returned. In fact, Kierkegaard opens *The Concept of Dread* with the following mini-preface: “The age of distinctions is past and gone, the System has overcome it. He who in our age loves distinctions is an eccentric man whose soul clings to that which has long vanished” (2). These words clearly influenced Wright, being the foundation of the lesson of Cross Damon. Though Sartre believed that “Man is totally free and entirely responsible for what he makes of himself,” Kierkegaard believed this freedom and responsibility to be the source of dread (*Columbia*). *The Outsider* appears to agree with both concepts. Consciousness is set into a state of terror when the thing that humans hold up as having “meaning” – which for Wright meant societal myths – is destroyed or forsaken. Cross Damon, having learned nothing from his University studies, lived in dread while imagining the terror of freedom, then took advantage of the subway wreck to actually achieve

existential freedom. He finally realizes that he himself is as guilty as the Communists in his need to control and dominate the environments in which he exists (often through murder), but resolutely clings to his belief that his blackness is not at all a factor in his understanding of himself. In the end, the result of an existential life lived is not only joining that which Cross hated most (the power-hungry “little Gods” such as Houston and the Communists), but is the learned equivalent of what Cross obtained from his academic studies in Chicago – nothing.

Can such a character ultimately be called an existentialist? As with Bigger Thomas, it must be reinforced that Cross Damon undergoes change in *The Outsider*. His project of living existentially is a failure. The complete denunciation of Communism and all socio-political ideologies, while valid, has found nothing to fill the void. Wright, in a sense, has failed to replace the “transcendent spark of selfhood” that has gone out. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre writes that

what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic, it a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confusing their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope. (56)

Existentialism, by epistemological definition, should not be depressing or nihilistic (the very qualities that Wright had disparaged Black Marxists for possessing in *Black Boy*). Writers who are labelled “existentialist” share as their primary philosophical concern that of alienation in its many forms, but in this, anthologist David E. Cooper would like to exclude Albert Camus because his fiction does not attempt to overcome a sense of alienation from the world (9).

The argument here is that, in *L'etranger*, the disaffected Meursault takes “a defiant pleasure...in our alienated condition” (9). It is significant that Sartre and other existentialists view Existentialism as essentially optimistic. Indeed, seeing it as pessimistic would be to settle for one of two extreme poles rather than facing the reality of ambiguity, and thus to be, as Sartre would say, in “bad faith.” In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre writes of the “absolute responsibility” that an individual has, “since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are” (quoted in Solomon 229). He continues:

Furthermore, this absolute responsibility is *not resignation* [my emphasis]; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom. What happens to me happens through me, and I can neither affect myself with it nor revolt against it nor resign myself to it. (Solomon 229)

And later:

The one who realizes in anguish his condition as being thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation” (232).

This description is of a state of self-conscious existence that Cross Damon, for all his intellectual awareness, never approaches. *The Outsider* is not so much an “existentialist novel” as an expression of the failure of such ideologies, including both Communism *and* Existentialism. Cedric Robinson asserts that *The Outsider's* purpose is “to demonstrate the terrible consequence to the human spirit as well as to social organization of a total exorcizing of social ideology” (431). Odajnyk writes that the very aim of Existentialism is to “end...self-deception and to bring man out of his ‘false consciousness’ into the true

realization of his existence—which is freedom” (14). Cross Damon embraces the terror of freedom, living it out in pathological ways, but somehow he fails to reach either Sartre’s “revelation” or the “true realization of existence.” Existentialism, like Communism and like Black Marxism for Wright in *Black Boy* (and arguably for Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*), is a failure. We are thus less convinced of the validity of Cross Damon’s – and by extension Wright’s – argument that “the color of his skin had played no role” (*Outsider* 195).

Chapter 4 – Conclusion: The Gods (and Author?) That Failed

Membership in the American Communist Party peaked at 85,000 in 1942, the same year that Wright was preparing to formally leave it (Ward 328). Between this year and the Khrushchev revelations of 1956 (wherein the Kremlin revealed information about Stalin’s reign of terror), membership gradually dropped (K. Baldwin). Even during wartime, social changes in African American status in the United States contributed to the fall of the CPUSA in influence and popularity. The necessity of government programs like the Works Progress Administration had allowed a select number of African Americans a window into the world of skilled jobs theretofore unknown. Meanwhile, the sheer number of competing social/political organizations appealing to African American interests increased throughout the 1930s. Following the War, with a strong national economy and advances in the legalities of racial problems (slowly) occurring, the Communist Party seemed too radical for many, a position furthered by McCarthyism in the 1950s. Near the end of the war, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. wrote that the African American was “ready to throw himself into the struggle to make the dream of America become flesh and blood, bread and butter, freedom and

equality” (Harding, et al. 445). The war and the era of international awareness and postcolonialism that it ushered in may have also served the odd effect of making America’s most oppressed more aware of their very “American-ness.” Since 1941, the CPUSA had been forced to support the war-effort against Nazism, and following a tumultuous victory in which half a million African Americans saw service overseas (Trotter 439) while Hitler denounced “non-Aryans,” it grew yet more difficult for radicals to further galvanise African Americans.¹⁷ In the 1950s, Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois suffered the penalties of being branded “un-American” by having their passports confiscated (Harding, et al. 454).¹⁸

Richard Wright’s own departure from Communism preceded the major fallout. Some of his reasons for leaving the Party are perhaps typical of his African American peers, but in other ways are very distinct. There are revealing passages in the latter pages of *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, written shortly after his formal departure, that explain Wright’s disappointment in the Party. As noted in an earlier footnote, Wright was criticized by some of his peers, notably Zola Neale Hurston, for his disregard of southern “Negro folk culture.” Although, as I suggested therein, this is not an entirely accurate or fair observation, it is true that Wright viewed “Negro identity” in general as more of a hindrance than an aid within Communism, to which he was initially attracted by the promise of interracial fraternity. In

¹⁷ It should, of course, be noted that not all African Americans left the Communist Party after the second World War. William Maxwell argues that the popular opinion of African American Party membership in the post-*Native Son* world of arts and literature has been “miscoloured” (187). Such is Wright’s heavy shadow on African American writing of the period that the retrospective analysis of Party criticism in his work, including *Native Son*, has engendered a history that paints the post 1940s world of African American letters a canvas of dashed hopes and lapsed Party support. Maxwell rightly points out that such a history ignores writers like Nelson Algren, Arna Bontemps, Lloyd Brown, Alice Childress and others who continued to produce Black Marxist work well into the 1940s and 1950s (187-188).

¹⁸ Recently uncovered evidence (detailed in Hazel Rowley’s biography) reveals how closely Wright himself was monitored by the CIA in his years of self-exile in Paris.

Black Boy, Wright recalls that “white Communists had idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw” (399). Here, Wright describes the transference of a paternalistic attitude from a racially oppressive environment (America) to a racially “equal” environment (the CPUSA), and realizes the inherent problem in this. In such a condition, the “Negro” falls again to a political symbol, to a status rather than an individual, cancelling the value of equality. In *Black Boy*, the effect of Wright’s narrative makes his time in the Party feel like several months instead of many years; similarly, he describes his falling out from the Party in rapid fashion. Following his ousting from a Party May Day Parade that apparently occurred in 1936 (or 1937)¹⁹ Wright’s autobiography suggests that his time within Communism is effectively over. There is no mention that he will join the Party in New York City shortly thereafter (Griffiths 629), remaining a member for at least five more years.

We have noted that in Wright’s youth he felt as isolated from his own peers in Mississippi and Tennessee as from whites, and he therefore makes a bold point in *Black Boy* by stating that, within the Communist Party, he “began to feel an emotional isolation that I had not known in the depths of the hate-ridden South” (399). Though he does not like to identify himself as an “intellectual” to his party comrades (see page 396: “I sweep the streets for a living”), it is certainly his desire for intellectual freedom that Wright feels marks him as untrustworthy to the Communists. And although “the emotional cost of membership was too high” (413), Wright, at the time of *Black Boy*’s composition, was still very much disturbed and upset by the conditions that forced him to leave the Party. Wright still very much wanted an instrument to galvanize the working classes. He believed in black America’s

¹⁹ See Margaret Walker’s biography, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988) and Frederick T. Griffiths (2001), which argue that the Party Parade detailed near the end of *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) is the 1937 celebration of Angelo Herndon’s courtroom victory (though Wright’s memory seems to indicate otherwise).

psychological need for a “remote” body that would direct redemptive sacrifice. Even as he listens to a comrade question his commitment to the Party, Wright thinks, “I heartily agreed with this, for I knew that it was impossible for working people to forge instruments of political power until they had achieved unity of action” (*Black Boy* 421). In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright states that “at the moment a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed” (1383). The need for Communism has not left him at the time of *Black Boy*’s composition. Even at the end of his autobiography, having denounced many Party practices, he still feels that Communism is “the future of mankind,” “a way of living that would eventually win out” (438), and that “the spirit of self-sacrifice that Communism engendered in men would astound the world” (439). It is probable that Wright’s feelings about Communism, at the time of *Black Boy*, were still very much confused, emotionally isolated as he was during its composition. He notes with disdain, for example, Communist discipline on page 405 (“when I saw it in its concrete form it tore my feelings”), but on page 422 he writes that the “Communist method of unity had been found historically to be the only means of achieving discipline.” Still, Wright’s existentialist outlook recognizes the inability of Communism to deal with unique individuals.

From *Black Boy*:

There existed in the Western world an element that baffled and frightened the Communist party: the prevalence of self-achieved literacy. Even a Negro, entrapped by ignorance and exploitation—as I had been—could, if he had the will and the love for it, learn to read and understand the world in which he lived. And it was these people that the Communists could not understand.... the slightest sign

of any independence of thought or feeling, even if it aided the party in its work, was enough to make one suspect, to brand one as a dangerous traitor. (436)

Wright does concede his own racial predisposition for the Party (“I was for these people. Being a Negro, I could not help it” [435]), but he also criticizes Black Communists who mindlessly toe the Party line. In Wright’s construction of events, it is not racial complication but the lack of intellectual freedom that severed his membership: “I wanted to be a Communist, but my kind of Communist” (422). In this, however, Wright is not adequately distinguished – as he should be – from most of his Party peers, including African Americans and writers, the vast majority of whom undoubtedly sought the same intellectual (or perhaps, spiritual) freedom, though not all were as economically secure to leave the Party as was Wright. Wright is most certainly unique, both for his literature and his legacy, and I believe this is for two reasons.

Firstly, as determined in *Black Boy*, Wright developed an existentialist perspective from childhood (not particularly in racial isolation but rather in isolation from his own black, southern peers), and was in complete spiritual isolation from his family. Wright was an outsider at every stage of his life, from childhood to death in exile in Paris. Such ingrained isolation made him more aware of, and more empathetic to, the plight of young African Americans removed to northern cities from southern backgrounds. Wright foresaw the spiritual isolation that this situation engendered, because he had been living it his entire life, both in the south and in the north. In short, Wright understood intuitively the existential plight that African Americans would face when cut off from what amounted to their own American “place” (i.e.: the south), and the violence that this could (and in fact, did) lead to. Cedric Robinson suggests that although Wright believed in a workers movement, by the time

of *Native Son* “this ordered revolution had been replaced by a chaos consisting of the collective action of a brutalized human force. The destruction of capitalism would come at the hands of the brute social force it had itself created” (428). Bigger Thomas, Wright himself in *Black Boy* (albeit without violence), and Cross Damon are representational examples of this type of African American. It is therefore not surprising that Wright became retrospectively claimed by the ‘Black Power’ era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period in which black American ghettos openly and frequently rebelled, a period that Wright in many ways foresaw. In 1949’s groundbreaking study of lapsed Communists, *The God That Failed* (the first book to include a section of Wright’s autobiographical accounts of his Chicago years), R. H. S. Crossman suggests that a group of “numberless men of letters, both in Europe and America” (3) that were attracted to Communism in the 1917-1939 era, were atypical converts. These “men,” of unusual sensitivity, including Richard Wright, “had a heightened perception of the spirit of the age” (3); in other words they were intellectuals of considerable sensibility, in Wright’s case from an Existentialist perspective.

Secondly, Wright is unique amongst the majority of Communist-affiliated black intellectuals in that he himself was of the working classes (nor did his socio-economic status rise after formal education; he was educated in a poorly-funded ‘Negro’ school to the ninth grade). Middle-class blacks, those of Du Bois’ “talented tenth,” logically constituted or produced most of the intelligentsia in African American leadership and achievement in the inter-war years. According to Cedric Robinson, members of this group, who had benefited from the advantages of the system they later protested against, inevitably came up against two alternatives: “to bitterly endure the cynically-indulged illusion [of the ‘universals’ of Western civilization] or to attempt its realization” (416). While future Communist members

chose the latter option and distinguished themselves from their class in doing so, they nonetheless were seduced into Marxism by aspects of it which owed to the sources of its genesis: intellectual power, the promise of a hidden truth, opposition to insidious social order, an alternative way of viewing the origins of the ruling class that they despised, and identification with the under classes (Robinson 416). Though Richard Wright was, as a Black American intellectual, predisposed socio-historically to Marxism, he was of a unique position amongst his intellectual/artistic peers, not being of the petit bourgeoisie and with his roots in the peasantry of the American South (Robinson 417). Therefore, his experience of Marxism and Communism was, according to Robinson, “unmediated by the cultural misdirections which accompanied the intellectual awakenings of middle-class Black men and women” (417). This is of course a contentious point, but we may at least conclude that Wright had no appreciation or expectations for bourgeois society. And within the Communist Party, at the height of his influence and standing as ‘proletarian writer,’ *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, as I have shown, makes clear Wright’s personal alienation from his Marxist peers as much as from the mainstream materialism of American life. Robinson further affirms that Wright had “an alternative penetration into the relationship between European radical thought and the historical configurations of the Black movement” (418). In addition to adding to Wright’s spiritual isolation from many of his black comrades, his background of poverty made him more acutely aware of the need for the proletariat (not necessarily the black proletariat) to *express itself*, and not be defined or determined by Party principles. Thus, Wright saw his own struggle for intellectual freedom within Communism not only as a struggle of artistic principles, but as a struggle of the proletariat, regardless of race.

Richard Wright's Existentialist conceptualizations in literature developed dialectically through the Bigger Thomas character in *Native Son*, were exemplified by 1941's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and were confirmed by his chosen style of autobiographical representation in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Thus, it is clear that Existentialism was understood by Wright intuitively and/or intellectually before and from within his period of Communist Party membership, and most particularly in its latter stages (the early 1940s). As the historical information in Chapter Two indicates, Wright was extremely interested in the epistemology of Existentialism from 1946, though he does not appear to have been as bound by the contemporary ideology of Jean-Paul Sartre as some have suggested; indeed, as I have determined, 1953's *The Outsider* is a definitive denunciation of all ideology, including Communism (and in any case is more particularly influenced by the philosophy of Kierkegaard than Sartre). It has also been determined that *The Outsider's* protagonist, Cross Damon, is a "failed Existentialist," in that his life ultimately reveals the failure of Existentialism; in essence the opposite experience of Bigger Thomas in his final hours. Wright was always an Existentialist. An outsider, an atheist, an intellectual, and a person who saw the oppression of individuals from a Marxist perspective, he was also (regardless of skin colour) very much a "modern man" who always believed in the ability of the individual to create himself. However, Wright was a Black American and his most successful literature deals with this practical challenge directly.

Humankind's search to relieve "dread" is stilled and satiated by the discipline of Communism, which also, at least for Wright (and no doubt for other African Americans) removed the barrier of racial segregation. Communism was, for many, a God-like institution that replaced dread, or angst, with a sense of purpose and a feeling of security in fraternity.

What Wright's relentless artistic search soon uncovered, however, was that Communism was not capable of reaching the Bigger Thomases of the world, and that it failed to allow them their own expression and representation (hence, *Native Son*). The inner conflict this discovery created forced Wright to leave the Communists, though this came with a heavy emotional and psychological price; in effect, the only "God" he was to know had failed. The French variety of Existentialism, which was essentially Wright's own philosophical position intellectually articulated, was therefore ideally suited to Wright's interests. He immersed himself in this philosophy, which in many ways directly opposes Marxism/Communism. However, his Parisian exile, followed by his working through of the major ideologies that he embraced in *The Outsider*, led Wright to the bleak conclusion that all ideologies were failures, that none was capable of redeeming and exemplifying the modern man who lived apart from material society, and that a Black American, living in good Sartrean "faith," who creates his own existence in defiance of a corrupt world, is doomed to spiritual defeat; further, that the black American cannot live existentially free of his/her racial reality as an oppressed minority. *The Outsider* is thus something of a tragedy, if lacking the identifiable protagonist favoured by Aristotle. In many ways, it marks the end of a path that Wright's career as a writer undertook in the 1930s.

Wright's importance is that he wrote from a highly dynamic era in African American history – spanning the Depression to the dawn of the 1960s – and he understood the significance of this era (see Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* xv-xviii). M. Lynn Weiss (1998) believes that Wright's effort to "understand and represent the epistemological crises of the twentieth century" is one of the "early maps" of our postmodern world (137). The recurring example of this is the young African American, of a vaguely Southern background, thrust into the

ghetto of Northern cities in *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and *The Outsider*. Wright's literature searches for a complex and multi-faceted portrait of the African American of the twentieth century. Wright's journey from Communism through Existentialism, as expressed in the literature framed by *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, suggests that Communism's failure is its intra-group politics and dependence on God-like authority, wielded over masses rather than individuals. Existentialism's failure (for a Black American) is in overcoming racial problems to feel as existentially free – within Sartre's "condemned" state – as a white American, or any member of a majority population. Ironically then, Wright seems to have found that both Communism and Existentialism, in looking beyond racial matters, actually re-emphasized them. Both ideologies, though ostensibly liberating Wright from "straight black-white stuff" (as he put it), instead became metaphors for race. Even amidst the existentialist themes of *The Outsider*, and the speeches of a protagonist who denies the importance of his race, race remains central. Claudia Tate writes that "racism [in *The Outsider*] is both a compelling social reality as well as a striking metaphor for the forces at large which assault and, yet, fortify man's growing awareness of his own humanity" (384). Reflecting the earlier description of Wright's "testing" of the realities he knew in his texts, Mae Henderson suggests, of *The Outsider*, that "Wright, as author, struggles through the conventions of the form [naturalism] for the realization of his text in a manner not unlike that in which his protagonist struggles through the conventions and values of an unreal world" (405). Similarly, the psychic and philosophical struggles of Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon reflect the inner struggles of Wright, within and against Communism and Existentialism. The sometimes unconvincing attempt by Wright to relinquish "blackness" as a matter of influence in man's determination is ended by Cross Damon's death, where "nothing" is learned. Although Wright may have

struggled artistically in his literary representation of such a reality, his attempts reveal a great deal about the American condition of his time, and is nothing less than the working through of his own intellectual struggle.

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