An Insurgent Aesthetic: Reading Richard Wright

by

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Obsessed with guilt, we have sought to thrust a corpse from before our eyes. We have marked off a little plot of ground and buried it. We tell our souls in the deep of the black night that it is dead...but the corpse is not dead! It still lives! It has made itself a home in the wild forests of our great cities, amid the rank and choking vegetation of slums! It has forgotten our language!

--Boris Max, Native Son
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Capitalist Transition & the Emerging Black Aesthetic

O that we were our primal ancestors,
Small lumps of plasma in hot, sultry swamps;
Life, death, conception, parturition
Emerging from those juices soundlessly.

--Gottfried Benn

A Prologue: Linguistic Perfidy and Radical Critique

Radicalism names the impulse to take matters to their extremes: to recover the origin, to establish the fundament, to excavate the root. It proposes seeing things through to their final—and first—consequences. Literary radicalism describes a maxim that condemns moderate approaches to readership as inappropriate, impotent and illegitimate. Within such a mode, readership recognizes subjects as abstracted entities, revealed as nothing more than the language that represents them and the vessels of the ideologies by which they are (linguistically) constituted. Language, of course, does not stop at text; while the figuration of literary characters is a process visibly and explicitly accomplished through language, even subjects existing off the page are likewise so designed.

The word emerges inside a conceptual galaxy of internally contradictory meaning and against a backdrop of subjective emotion, context and comprehension. In language, as within novelistic discourse, are found nebulae of unique usage and intent, the “heterogenous stylistic unities” that combine to form social discourse; this is the proposal Mikhail Bakhtin offers in his linguistic philology. As Bakhtin emphasizes, language is always internally stratified in historically-specific and
materially relevant ways. Out of language, the vast multiplicity of social speech emerges as an archive of contention and contradiction.

Language, bearing no necessary nor natural relation to the objects it describes, is an abstract medium historically contrived and pregnant with cultural arcana, marking the growth of sociopolitical consciousness. This archival function, as Bakhtin describes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is a predominant feature of prose, and of spoken language generally: these index “various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit[ing] with one another” (291), artifacts which take up residence inside language. Social values are incubated inside patterns of diction, are communicated by colloquialisms, are lodged in linguistic syntax; they are dispersed across genre and embedded invisibly within textual aesthetics. Where the grammars of social and political life underlie a heteroglot landscape of language, text—in its formal and diegetic presentations—emerges as their enduring palimpsest.

Out of the matrix of language, marked by histories and social contexts of use of which it bears the trace, the novel coalesces. “The novel,” writes Bakhtin, “can be defined as a diversity of social speech types…artistically organized” (262). It is the heteroglossia of language, *internal* to language, which gives both the novel as a literary genre and anticipates its stratification into diverse genres of its own. In the novel, as in the languages that interweave to fashion it, social relationships are verbalized, textualized, and left to become conversant. Language in this way consolidates (and also *dissembles*—language is both centripetal and centrifugal) as the dialogical template of social encounter and transformation.
The dialogism internal to language bespeaks the struggle carried out among
the worldviews of its many users, and this “stratification and heteroglossia widen and
deepen as long as language is alive and developing” (272). Discourse is the evidence
of an incompatibility immanent to language, an incommensurability of language with
itself. Linguistic discourse is split internally, appearing coherently at different
moments of social life before revealing its multiplying fissures, diffusing in directions
ever more remote. Remoteness characterizes the experience of expressing oneself in
language; it exists always “in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts,
serving other people’s intentions” (294). Language retains always the trace of the
other’s use; hence, deep social histories may be exhumed and inventoried through an
indexical attendance to language and literary form; in text as in spoken language is
unconsciously enacted the latent politics of linguistically-constituted subjecthood.

It is from a linguo-textual theory rooted in such radical, historical, and
structuralist precepts that I proceed to posit an approach to textual analysis wherein
the content, along with its intra- and extra-textual presentations and triangulations,
informs the technique applied to its theorization. This approach, like Bakhtin’s, elides
the division between content and form, considering them but variations on a common
theme—that of language. Form and content are ineluctable; form carries immanently
its own ideology, the content of form, offering language as a medium to
conceptualize the interrelation of social matrices and the schemas (spoken, textual,
aestheticized, embodied) by which these are communicated.

This approach conceives text as an artifact, as the trace by which social
history is made legible. The radicalism of this effort is in its self-conscious imperative
to take matters to—to take matters at—the root. Mine is a method that understands radicalism as the mandate extending analysis to its discursive extremes, unveiling in text the radix of its constitutive consequences. For an understanding of text consolidated here—as the total product, as the form and content of language—moderate frameworks are inadequate. The reading practice herein developed proposes itself as an antidote to the tyrannies of prevailing orders—political, spiritual, communal and individual, as well as linguistic, textual and interpretive.

*Approaching a Literary Radicalism*

This stance meets and addresses (in its own language) an authorial program of aesthetic radicalism. Among modernist authors of the early 20th century, Richard Wright is emblematic of this approach, writing the quotidian horror of his life in the vocabulary of insurrection. His radicalism develops an aesthetic—animated by modernist characters and set amidst the rural planes of the South and the Northern cityscapes of industrial America—made overtly political by its treatment of its subjects and themes, and innately so by its historico-social situation. Wright makes legible, in a specific discourse intertwining content, form, social history and national ideology, the anxieties of the Afro-American subject of 20th century America. These contexts, for Wright, are deeply personal. In the endnotes to *Native Son*, he offers in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” the explanation that “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect” (434). He roots his explication of Bigger’s emergence—a character famous for representing a social type—in these same sociological details: “In Dixie,” Wright begins,
There are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God . . . .

This separation was accomplished after the Civil War by the terror of the Klu Klux Klan, which swept the newly freed Negro…out of the United States Senate, the House of Representatives, the many state legislatures, and out of the public, social, and economic life of the South. The motive for this assault was simple and urgent. The imperialistic tug of history had torn the Negro from his African home and had placed him ironically upon the most fertile plantation areas of the South; and, when the Negro was freed, he outnumbered the whites in many of these fertile areas. Hence, a fierce and bitter struggle took place to keep the ballot from the Negro, for had he had a chance to vote, he would have automatically controlled the richest lands of the South and with them the social, political, and economic destiny of a third of the Republic. (437-8)

These details give view to the way black life in America, literally for Wright and figuratively for whites, was life in America. As Wright powerfully quotes, “Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!” (12 Million Black Voices 146). The psychic condition Wright begins to uncover, writing in the metropoles of the urban North, is a precursor to one that will devolve upon America during the interwar decades. This condition, focused and intensified for black Americans by embedded racial animus and the persistent edifice of Jim Crow, is gradually applied across the psychology of a
modern and modernizing country. “If we black folks perish,” Wright predicts, “America will perish” (146). The experience of black Americans during the decades of Wright’s authorship had the quality of synecdoche, “at once something private and public by its very nature and texture” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 433).

Wright strives to represent social antinomies and political conflicts—but, he labors diligently to depict such abstract phenomena as the poles around which subjective existence is structured. He writes of his work that it “represents the merging of two extremes; it is an intensely intimate expression on the part of a consciousness couched in terms of the most objective and commonly known events” (433). In an elision of the personal and the political, Wright seeks to articulate the deep wellsprings of emotion inaccessible by the vocabularies of the everyday. Yet, the reflexive realism Wright develops for this task is embedded in an experience of the quotidian marked indelibly by racial terror: Wright’s everyday is not prosaic.

Of the Biggers who typify the modern psychology Wright explicates, Wright remarks that “[Their] life was a continuous challenge to others” (435), a reactive reaffirmation of the fugitivity of their existence. They responded with violent contempt to a contemptible system which had caused them to become “estranged from the religion and folk culture of [their] race” (439). To capture this unstable reality, Wright summons a practice of aesthetic formalism contra the modernist and white supremacist menace of spiritual dispossesson, communal dissolution and social obfuscation. To the project of depicting the Biggers of the world, those black Americans who “carried [their] life in [their] hands” (435), Wright champions a literature with the “ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men,” a style
made enormously powerful “because [this] writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because [it] can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 102). This literature, promoting common consciousness and spiritual revolt, emerges out of a pathologically modern moment as its symptom and its antidote, making legible the manifold anxieties of its time.

Wright casts his fiction as an attempt to overcome the inarticulacy plaguing efforts to represent black experience in America. Urban blacks “live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance that words cannot bridge” (12MBV 100). Bigger Thomas typifies the ravages of this experience: he “had all of this in him, dammed up, buried, implied” (452) Wright explains, though Bigger himself “did not offer in his life any articulate verbal explanations.” These, Wright sought to develop in fictional form. This fatal inarticulacy, threatening foremost black Americans but extending its influence to all Americans caught in the emotionally- and socially-abjectifying riptide of 1930s and 40s modernization, is the impediment Wright’s fiction endeavors to overcome. Wright’s literary praxis offers itself as a radical program of representation, answering the “wild and intense longing…[of Negroes] to belong to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were” (440). Literary radicalism, striking at the root of these desires, is the materialization of this project. Wright’s work communicates his credo that the mission of the writer is to overcome unspeakability, to mobilize linguistic, literary and historical dialectics in pursuit of those aims that require emphatic articulacy and articulation.
Thus emerge Wright’s literary ambitions: from the first, they are oriented towards a radical effect, synthesizing social theory into the process of artistic production. In “Blueprint,” Wright imagines the way successful Negro authors will produce work which “embraces all those social, political, and economic forms under which the life of their people is manifest” (104). Wright’s ideological-cum-aesthetic device utilizes language as the tool of a deviant praxis instituted against the hegemonic display of white supremacy. He seeks to “tell the truth as [he] saw and felt it. That is, to objectify in words some insight derived from [his] living’ (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 458). For Wright, this is consolidated as a new mode of representation, one emphasizing the emplacement of contexts of creation within the artistic product. His term for this is perspective, “that part of a poem, novel or play which a writer never puts directly on paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people” (“Blueprint” 103). My project, then, becomes an excavation of the linguistic artifacts of this modality, and an attendance to the palimpsestic qualities of this literature. These discoveries, I direct towards the exposure of textual and linguistic complicity in ideological subjugation—and a proposition of language’s ability, yet, to overcome.

Wright’s work, anticipating Gayatri Spivak, asks: can the subaltern speak? Wright believes in the radical effect of public articulation, supporting both its viability and urgent necessity; he writes of the power of a dialogical dialectic to “restore to the writer her lost heritage, that is, her role as the creator of the world in which she lives, and as a creator of herself” (“Blueprint” 102). But still, this expression is stilted, constrained by the language that makes the author subject and
against which, *with* which she struggles for control. The trace of the other’s use, Bakhtin reminds, is indelibly inscribed upon language. There is no neutral language, no innocent articulation; against this grim prospect, an active dialectic of language and literary culture emerges with Wright at its vanguard, bearing the standard of an unruly, insubordinate textuality.

*Modernity and History*

By a modernist view, the spiritual vacuity and cultural depletion of the 19th and 20th centuries awaken a motive—perhaps, even, an imperative—towards artistic production. As T.S. Eliot asserts in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” “The next generation is responsible for its own soul.” This ontogenesis, he imagines as an effort proper to art which “manipulates a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,” towards the urgent modernist project of “controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” This impulse—to create, through artistic tender, an order which could reveal the shape of the modernist “soul”—arises in response to a paradox built into modern existence, itself constituted at every level by contradiction. The modernist tendency is imbricated in the irreconcilability of reaching towards a province of the future while leaning wistfully into the myths of the past.

This paradox is ineluctably tied up with the modernist problem of cultural articulation: as capitalist transformation physically consolidated the masses that were to populate its industrial labor force, and as technologies for facilitating proximity grew more sophisticated, as the rise of mass media disseminated a diet of popular culture and a doctrine of assimilationism, and amidst proliferating nationalist
narratives undergirded by a liberal rhetoric of civic equality, *something significant* intervened, dissembling the common psyche and disenabling economic equity—and with these effects, relegating the reassurances of cultural unity to an idealized past or a utopian future. Marshall Berman, in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, describes the false synthesis of modern existence as a “paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” (15). There thus emerged, proper to the experience of 1930s and 40s America, a peculiar modern temporality which was perennially out of sync, one according to Berman “out of [its own] time.” The stunned subjects of modernity, both black and white, found themselves walking (among) contradictions, living (among) anachronisms.

The modernist paradox runs all the way down to the bottom. Despite the spiritual dispossession and cultural disenfranchisement characteristic of the era—indeed, perhaps *because* of it—American modernists lived during a revolutionary age. Americans became “the subjects as well as the objects of modernization” (16), writes Berman, inextricably implicated in a historical dialectic born of its own founding contradictions. Socially and politically, America was fragmented, torn between conflicting impulses which each promised safe passage towards the restored cultural cohesion of an impending future. Wright perceived his moment as one situated at a critical vantage, located precariously between two world wars. Poised on the apocalyptic brink represented by fascism’s proliferating articulations, America found itself vying fiercely with its political consciousness, primed to enter global conflict under the banner of its own impotent liberal democracy. But the dialectic of
history was alive and well: the social and politico-economic conditions of the century birthed Berman’s characterization of the thoroughly modern subject, she who was vested with “the power to change the world that is changing [her]” (16). This Promethean modernist figure commands the authority to mediate paradox and resolve the contradictions modernity imposes upon her, answering the revolutionary calling of her age with the radical praxis of her life.

*The Phantasy of Return*

A sense of historical rupture is central to modernist psychology. This ethos holds that antiquity must be reassembled from its fragments to cover over the disjointedness of the present and reconstitute a future incubated within the modernist imagination. Amidst the cultural disenchantment of the present, futurity becomes the dominant aspiration, but retrospection the prevailing disposition. This ontological contradiction, this modern anachronism, succinctly summarizes the modernist conceit: subjects of modernity yearn for return to a utopian past, and seek remedial admittance to such by leveraging innovation towards a nostalgic and regressive future. Modernism’s monomaniacal faith in novelty conditions a prospective stance that, rather than mending a pathological present and addressing itself to iniquities lodged therein, becomes a mode of living inflected towards the futurist promise emblematized by Ezra Pound’s injunction to “Make it New.” Modernism remains an aesthetic as much as a political disposition, one that “makes new” the conditions for a future restored to the legacy of America’s past from which it—the modernist present—has been dissevered.
Though the modernist aesthetic trajectory orients itself towards the indomitable slogan of “making new,” though the future glimmers indistinctly as the reclaimed progeny of America’s disrupted cultural genealogy, the modernist present remains insupportable. Modernism’s utopian vision is cordonned off from a present denied the immanence of such a future; the modernist moment is contaminated by legacies of overcrowded industrial urbanity, omnipresent capitalist exploitation, and 250 years of American slavery. The inaccessibility to the modernist imagination of a cultural destiny adequately revolutionized, appropriately attendant to these violent histories, is incriminating. The modernist future-phantasy retains all the perfidious dimensions of historical erasure, emerging as the troubling effect of a doomed and willfully blinded cultural nostalgia. The fantastical fallacy of a utopian past, the realm to which modernism affects to return, reveals the truth of white America’s self-delusion and produces the prophecy of its perdition. White modernist imagination is self-damning, condemning America to the reactionary re-entrenchment and chronic recidivism built into the phantasy of return.

*The Augur of Blackness: Modernist Prefigurations*

The incongruence of modernism’s reactionary politico-cultural visions and radical aesthetic aspirations symptomatizes its psychology, revealing in the interval a damning inconsistency. The faulty memory of America’s cultural clerics (these forgetters of traumatic pasts, these agents of modernist self-sabotage, these abettors cooking the books of a whitewashed auto-history) becomes evident as a gap, as a civic checkbook that refuses to balance. In the impossible paradox of modernism, in the urgency with which it cleaves to a phantasy of historical return, something crucial
has escaped America’s social accounting. The missing check, the ligature between modernism’s incompatible social and political concerns, the forgotten element blocking the escape valve historical reversion purportedly represents, materializes as a deliberately forgotten piece of the social compact. This site of contact and the repository of America’s abiding logical inconsistencies is the modern Afro-American.

Wright’s view of black history in American consolidates thus. He characterizes the psyche of black America, saying, “We are a folk born of cultural devastation, slavery, physical suffering, unrequited longing, abrupt emancipation, migration, disillusionment, bewilderment, joblessness, and insecurity” (12MBV 142). In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright crystallizes the framework of this critique, noting the “intense longing [of black Americans]…to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were, to be caught up forgetfully and exultingly in the swing of events, to feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others” (440). Even as he notes their disenchantment with America’s liberal capitalist politic, Wright recognizes the psychological paradox prompting black Americans to strive towards the promises of white civilization: “because blacks were so close to the very civilization which sought to keep him out,” he writes, “they could not help but react in some way to its incentives and prizes” (438). But of course, the boons of liberal democracy and capitalist ideals apply themselves unevenly; for black Americans, they are revealed as a sham. As Wright reminds, “Day after day [black Americans] labor in the gigantic factories and mills of Western civilization, but we have never been allowed to become an organic part of this
civilization” (I2MBV 127). Striving towards its prizes, laboring in its economic substrata, black Americans are forgotten, erased by the very civilization they underlie.

The social abandonment America perpetrates upon its black citizens is the caesura of modernism, this gaping void bearing the traces of violent disjunction embodied by each black citizen, the telltale heartbeat of America’s guilty unconscious. This unsteady liminality, made the province of the black American, is populated by figures like Bigger Thomas; upon these individuals is enforced the irreconcilable psychology of marginal-centrality, of hypervisible-invisibility, of strangeness-within, of enduring estrangement from. These oxymoronic mandates materialize simultaneously in the figuration of black citizens claiming legitimate status as “native sons” and daughters, but nonetheless made heir to a vague sense that they “are not allowed to live as Americans” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 451). These disenfranchised Bigger Thomases suffer the modernist pathos as a feature already internal to black existence. “What made Bigger’s social consciousness most complex,” Wright intones, “was the fact that he was hovering unwanted between two worlds—between powerful America and his own stunted place in life” (451). Wright aptly describes this province as a “No Man’s Land,” a no-time, no-place to which the psychic life of the black American is forcibly confined.

Illustrating the receding possibility for social and historical unity the black subject represents, Wright ventriloquizes the experience of this abject urbanite. Like Bigger himself, this figure was “attracted and repelled by the American scene” (451), understanding this seduction as an annex in cultural memory, inaccessible to the blacks and coquetting dangerously with whites. It is this unconsummated seduction,
in America’s defection on the promises of equity and equal opportunity, that contributes to the rise of the Bigger Thomas type. Wright writes,

The civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance…had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses. The results of these observations made me feel more than ever estranged from the civilization in which I lived, and more than ever resolved toward the task of creating with words a scheme of images and symbols whose direction could enlist the sympathies, loyalties, and yearnings of the millions of Bigger Thomases in every land and race . . . . (445)

The black industrial subject, for Wright, represents a superlative example of racial subjugation and compounded modernist anxiety. “Day after day,” he writes, “we labor in the gigantic factories and mills of Western civilization, but we have never been allowed to become an organic part of this civilization; we have yet to share its ultimate hopes and expectations” (12MBV 127). The black factory worker suffers social exclusion alongside economic exploitation; but by this same effect, black proletarianism is afforded view of the disjointed political compact America represents. This figure retains, despite the psychological privation of modernism and the daily ordeal of discrimination, a measure of salvation in the already-rejected, already-denied expectations wrought by the mythology of American democracy.

In America’s vast unconscious, the black laborer appears as the truth of historical discontinuity and the prefiguration of modernist anxiety. The black subject,
haunting a past towards which America condemningly turns (and the consequences of which, from which it turns away), bears witness to the dangerous nostalgia of modernism’s historical yearnings. Wright thus intones, “We cannot shake off three hundred years of fear in three hours” (12MBV 100). Black memory insists that the present projects itself towards no exoneration, affords no temporally-contiguous path to a socially-acquitted future which delivers, finally, on the grand promises of liberal democracy. Denied access to an unfolding self-narrative innocent of the ravages of its past, modern America must accept revolutionary reconfiguration. Only in radical—but deracinated—social reorganization can America descend from the Calvary of self-crucifixion and prevail against a fatal self-figuration, which, consolidated on the grounds of violent historical obliviation, remains inviable.

The modernist problem of (re)constructing America’s future—the question of its character, the road by which it may be reached—is deeply related to a past the modernist moment suddenly and forcibly confronts. The rupture of black history, the dissociation of black citizens from meaningful narratives of natality and community, is rooted in the same historical castration arousing white America’s own modernist anxieties; but these scenes of cultural disenfranchisement are incommensurable. Wright remarks that “[whites] usually take us for granted and think [they] know us, but our history is far stranger than [they] suspect” (12MBV 10). If “modern personhood” is figured as a spiritual condition—one which cannot shield itself effectively from the forces of spiritual disseveration, economic industrialization and urban experience—then black Americans are violently, inescapably modernist. Even
as the outward guise [of new black urbanites] still carries the old familiar aspect
which three hundred years of oppression in America has given [them], beneath
the garb of the black laborer, the black cook and the black elevator operator lies
an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from
many points of time and space. (11)

These figures are the heralds of modernity. Indeed, blacks are doubly, multiply
modern, pushed to the historical avant garde and forced to suffer the conditions of
modernity before time—before the modernist present—has caught up to them.

Black Migration, White Urbanity

Under the impetus of industrialization, as the Afro-American tide “continued
to roll from the farm to the factory, from the country to the city” (12MBV 93), spatial
exodus and historical displacement coincided. Black sharecroppers, escaping the
crumbling plantation economy, moved North towards the promise of industrial
advance. Expropriated already from the land, “thundering tractors and cotton-picking
machines more and more render [black manual] labor useless” (79). Black tenant
farmers flee, seeking assimilation into the modernizing social and economic forms
found in urban centers. “When a man lives upon the land and is cold and hungry and
hears word of the great factories going up in the cities,” Wright rationalizes, “he
begins to hope and dream of a new life, and he leaves” (93); and leave they did.
Where the provinces of the American South remained submerged in antiquated feudal
arrangements and the social orders that supported them, the North represented an
indomitable horizon of synchrony.
But the Great Migration was another doom; black Americans found themselves unprepared for the ravages of casual racism and the brutality of urban life, where again they found themselves “excluded, left behind” (128). This subset, assimilated quickly by industrial capitalism, remained a social remnant precluded from the political compact of white America. Inside a country psychologically menaced by displacement and dislocation, Afro-Americans remained homeless. Deracinated, exploited, and subordinated, black America became the visible symptom of history’s tyrannies, revealing the crucible of America’s pathological modernity.

But for this same reason, blacks became the prophets of America: afforded an unencumbered view, unconvinced—that is, already disillusioned—by capitalist promises and democratic ideals, black Americans are a radical vanguard emematizing the potential for sociohistorical synthesis. Wright allows that “our scale of values differs from that of the world from which we have been excluded; our shame is not its shame, and our love is not its love” (12MBV 61). With the distinct aspirations and spiritual orientations of black America, its social politics afford a different view of the road to progress, to synthesis, to revolution. In 1930s America, black cultural producers like Wright emerge as the antinomian antidotes to a distinctly modernist-capitalist disenchantment. The radical vision Wright saw immanent and imminent in black experience was nurtured by the paradox of black existence; the figure of blackness emerged from the modernist present both as a traumatized, traumatic reminder and as the indication of an abiding sequence of contradictions circumscribing America’s political prospects.

*An Insurgent Aesthetic*
Counter the unparsable Gordian knot of modernist social aspiration, Wright imagined the viability of an aesthetic response, actuated and elaborated by a potent black antinomianism. Against the violent history white Americans sought so frantically to reclaim, the Promethean articulation of humanity’s collective will—by eschewing tradition, by embracing the modernist impulse for novelty and propelling it towards its aesthetic apotheosis—became, in Wright’s view, the destiny of black artists. Thus, a literature of black revolution emerged. Belying its particular birth, the goals of this literature were universalized; its aims counteracted the parallel problems afflicting Afro-Americans and white modern subjects. Black artists, as the radical substrate of America’s social centrifuge, demanded in their literature political redress for grievances produced by a historically-elaborated condition of black exclusion, and reparations for America’s excoriating regime of social, artistic, political and cultural non-recognition. Out of the unique terrors of slavery, disenfranchisement and historical disseveration, 20th century black literature emerged as the precipitate of a volatile social admixture, synthesizing the revolutionary vision of black America into the broader project of modernist regeneration.

*The Birth of a Modernist Practice*

Modernity, as high novelty, was articulated across the social, political, and economic domains of American culture during Wright’s active decades. Wright’s theory of modernity, wrought in the smithy of violent social contradiction, involved mitigating the conflicts and incongruences of modern life by arranging, reconfiguring and reconciling the emergent strains of radicalism—political, social, artistic—that impelled him to write. The modernist context incubated a generation of artists
catalyzed by this same Promethean impulse towards radical expression and expressibility. This impetus, arising from the smoggy background of industrial transformation, impassioned Wright’s work and prompted him towards the elaboration of social and aesthetic theories of his own design, promulgated in his essays and works of documentarism, and incubated likewise in his novelistic fiction.

In the third decade of the 20th century, Wright thus emerged as a titan of the literary arts who realized a distinct aesthetic, insurrenctly motivated and concurrent with the implicit mandate of staging the radical—and radically disjointed—politics of his era. Taking up the Brechtian opinion that “Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change” (“Towards a Historical Definition of Modernism” 851), so emerged Wright’s experimental proletarian naturalism as the precipitate of this process. The internal incongruences of this aesthetic, maintaining natural-realism as its style but modernism as its psychological disposition, was materialized simultaneously as a theoretical praxis and an explication of the social philosophy Wright gradually developed; it gave, implicitly, answers to abiding questions of the role of art and the import of theory in reorienting, revitalizing or thoroughly razing and reconstructing the social landscapes of modern America.

Whose Ideology?

Countering naïve contrasts between naturalist and modernist commitments, Wright’s approach synthesized the two. The move confounded the algorithms of aesthetic theorists like Georg Lukács, who, in his essay “Narrate or Describe?” as in “The Ideology of Modernism,” betrays a deep mistrust for modernist affiliations. Recapitulating his hesitations, Mary Gluck in “Towards a Historical Definition of
Modernism: Georg Lukács and the Avant-Garde” writes that Lukács condemned modernism as “fundamentally reactionary in character if not in intention, representing the pseudoradicalism of a ‘rootless and decomposing petty-bourgeois intelligentsia’ whose affinities with fascism were unmistakable” (850). For Lukács, modernism is an expression of narrow and individualistic bourgeois aesthetics, and an implicit acquiescence to its values.

In the lexicon of Lukács’s argument, narration signals a realist mode, where description indicates a naturalist one. Naturalism represents the “typical” without accounting for willful action and interaction; this is where naturalism fails, for Lukács, to communicate the constitutive interrelationship between an individual and a social milieu. These aesthetic impulses, Lukács figures as contemporaneous developments that recapitulate a larger break in realist representation. “The new style,” Lukács writes, describing the narrative mode, “developed out of the need to adapt fiction to provide an adequate representation of new social phenomena” (“Narrate or Describe?” 117). Wright’s own approach would seem to accord with this—setting, description and characterization are never “pure,” nor are they incidental; rather, each is imbued with the immanent sense of social imbroglio, positioning itself as a point of contact for systemic clash. Wright’s characters exemplify the Lukácsian injunction that “‘ontological being’…cannot be distinguished from social and historical environment” (“The Ideology of Modernism” 19), and that “their human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created.” Wright’s characters are nodes of collision where the war of ideology is fought.
Following Brecht, Lukács posits stylistic rift as evidence of capitalist emergence, marking its ascent through shifts in the popular regimes of representation. Capitalism, Lukács argues, destroys the realist conceit that pronounces the world cohesive and narratable; it is here that modernist aesthetics intervene with techniques like temporal distortion, undermining realism’s neat mimetic account of a continuous and *inevitable* social history. Lukács yet maintains that modernism instantiates an articulation of bourgeois culture. The authors Lukács lauds, in contrast, develop a style responsive to “a bourgeois society consolidating itself after severe crises [i.e. semiotic transformation], the complicated laws of development operating in its formation, and the torturous transitions from the old society in decay to the new society in birth” (“Narrate or Describe?” 118). Narration, Lukács contends, is the literary antidote capable of exposing bourgeois society, which finds itself divested suddenly of old, reliable ideologies, and cast into a welter of social transition. Narratively-engaged authors are the midwives of this transformation, working in the medium of language, in the mode of literature.

Authors like Wright, then, take up the mantle of a literary tradition born of bourgeois values, and reconstitute it as “a manifestation of opposition, an expression of hate, revulsion and contempt for the political and social order of [its] time” (“Narrate or Describe?” 119). “People who made peace with the order [of bourgeois life],” Lukács contends, which includes accepting its aesthetic self-articulations, “turned into soulless, lying apologists for capitalism.” The only creative integrity bourgeois culture and its modernist offshoots could claim was a praxis enraged by social conditions and engaged in their aesthetic dismantling. Wright, inheritor of the
tradition of bourgeois modernism, did precisely this, pioneering a new literary mode in the shell of the old, consolidated against the authority of bourgeois values.

Per the account Lukács offers, capitalist transformation emancipated representation; the post-semiotic order capitalism introduced was no longer susceptible to the hegemony of facts a naturalist aesthetic propounded. The tastes of readership and the tendencies of authorship migrated instead towards apocalyptic modes dramatizing human interiority and staging the struggles of the human will. Modernism names this mode, representing the “abstract particular” of allegorized social types. Kafka exemplifies this literary malpractice, inflecting his work with an “aim to raise the individual detail in its immediate particularity...to the level of abstraction.” Kafka’s method, Lukács contends, “is typical, here, of modernism’s allegorical approach” (“The Ideology of Modernism” 45). According to Lukács, this tendency elides the way the materialist subject is constructed dialectically within the specific conditions of her world.

At this juncture rests Wright’s own fiction, synthesizing modernist allegory into scenes of apocalyptic realism. As Lukács notes, in a milieu characterized by advancing capitalism and predominating bourgeois values, “Distortion becomes [an] inseparable part of the portrayal of reality” (33). The defamiliarization of quotidian experience, warped by racial horror of gothic proportions, is hallmark of Wright’s fiction: in Big Boy’s heroic struggles against malevolent forces, in Mann’s superhuman transcendence of natural disaster, in the magnitude of Bigger Thomas’s crime, fact and subjectivity—each made volatile by the other—spectacularly collide.
Wright’s is a hybrid literature; it assimilates naturalism, as a hypostatization of fact, alongside modernism, as a hypostatization of subjectivity.

The apparent incompatibilities of these modes as sketched by Peter Bürger are sublated by a literature where facticity violently encounters the black subject. Wright formulates a genre where “the subject…constitutes itself in and through engagement with the objective world” (*The Decline of Modernism* 97). Wright’s fiction develops an experimentalism which looks quite different from the modernism Lükács is wary of and the realism Proust condemns; Wright’s gothic allegories of capitalism and racism exceed conventional realism to depict a condition latent below reality’s surface. Bürger cites Proust’s critique, who rejects the tendency of realist literature to “offer us a wretched compilation of the external forms and surfaces of things,” as such a literature “impoverishes us…since it violently destroys the communication of the present self with the past” (96). Lükács concurs, decrying work that leaves “the hero without personal history. [Herein] she is ‘thrown-into-the-world’: meaninglessly, unfathomably. She does not develop through contact with the world; she neither forms it nor is formed by it” (21). Wright’s is a literature ostensibly susceptible to such criticism, but which in praxis contests it. His modernism presents allegorized individuals, but enmeshes them in a matrix of social relationality, erecting the arena where their choices become consequential.

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright calls for an expanded and revitalized realism, saying, “a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of [Negro workers] devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of revolutionary significance…[does] a rank injustice to the Negro people” (101). Thus, Wright
intercalates a distinct modernist ethos into narratives scaffolded upon stylistic commitments to realism. The revolutionary significance Wright cites is immanent in black consciousness; this possibility is the very subject his work endeavors to depict in its damaged but defiant modernist incarnation. Wright’s stylistic merger is accomplished as the consolidation of his social philosophy, to the effect of reiterating his theory on the radical potential of black representation via a modernist-realism: in Wright’s fiction, naturalism and modernism expound black America’s Promethean response to the conditions of modernity; these, in turn, are consolidated as the expression of Wright’s own revolutionary aesthetic will.

Thus, to questions confronting the modernist vanguard, the sovereign answer Wright’s work leaves to history is this: theories of quotidian modernity, actualized as literary artifact, are an insubordinate potentiality, an existential necessity offering redress to the cultural impotence, social disjunction and political inefficacy of a modern industrial order. “A new role,” Wright intones, “is devolving upon the Negro writer. She is being called upon to do no less than create the values by which her race is to struggle, live and die” (102). Literary production is a materialization of the spirit of the Negro and the modernist both, exemplifying their continued will to survive amidst the wreckage of urban modernity. Authorship becomes an act of artistic indemnity—articulating a philosophy, a program and a praxis—addressing the violent erasure America imposes upon its black subjects, and depicting the parallel condition of psychospiritual death enforced upon all subjects of modernity.

Wright’s artistic philosophy hones his inclination towards a vociferous revolutionary politics intent on cutting across iniquities of race and class as it
simultaneously confounds aesthetic categories. Wright establishes thus a curriculum of nonconformist aesthetics, inclined equally towards naturalist, realist, modernist, and proletarian modes. These, he instrumentalizes towards the project of constructing a broad social consciousness not content to simply withstand modernity, but one which could rise up on the legs of its own synthetic logic to march against the oppressive, erratic and fatally dissembled social politic of Wright’s age.

A Social Philosophy of Race

In 1941, Wright’s 12 Million Black Voices emerges as a document and documentation of protest, itself nonetheless situated within the modernist paradigm. This text embarks upon a socio-theoretical journey through the stages of America’s changing political and economic landscapes, exposing the distinct relationship these bear to the Afro-American. Wright catalogues this fraught development, counterpoised with the auto-narrative of white America’s founding: he chronicles the early horrors of the slave trade, the miseries of plantation life, the terrible violence following Reconstruction, and charts the migration of Southern blacks to the provinces of the North. Wright offers a “depiction of a complex movement of debased feudal folk towards a twentieth-century urbanization” (xx), recuperating the racially- and culturally-specific articulations of such. Tracing the history of the modern black subject, Wright illustrates a pattern of disenfranchisement, asynchrony and modernist dispossession.

Wright’s text focalizes upon America’s black working-class, making a case for it as the “forgotten” subject of capitalism, trapped by the indenturing model of a Southern feudal system while subjectified simultaneously by sociopolitical
modernization. “They got all this machinery,” a black laborer in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* says, “but that ain’t everything; *we the machines inside the machine*” (217). The black subject is assimilated by white America’s capitalist imperative, becoming a cog in the machinery of exploitation. But this subjects represents, herein, a rational incongruity, emerging as an incompletely sublated element powering America’s economic substrata while remaining unaccounted for in its political tallies. “By all historical logic,” Ellison’s narrator affirms, “we, I, should have disappeared around the first part of the nineteenth century, rationalized out of existence” (442). In a rapidly growing economy, black labor—particularly in Southern land tenancy arrangements—is an irrational, *irrationalized* blip. The theory Wright develops recognizes the black subject as an archetype of modernist psychology: “it is in industry,” he writes, that the black laborer “encounters experiences that tend to break down the structure of [her] folk character and project [her] towards the vortex of modern urban life” (*12MBV* 117). In the words of Ellison’s protagonist, black labor and afflicted white modernists “share a common disinheritance” (345). The black subject of this era, suffering parallel race-based and modernist afflictions, is doubly-dispossessed, doubly-disillusioned, doubly-dissatisfied.

Here materializes the proletarian complaint: alongside the depersonalizations and alienations already effected by capitalism, America’s sociopolitical abuse of the black industrial subject propels her towards a *premature* modernist disenchantment. The black laborer, in a feudal relationship with the vacant soils of the South, is bound to an economic system already obsolete; chained to an antiquated past, she feels her destiny fed into a machinery of ruination. Meanwhile, social and economic conditions
propel black labor North towards the efficient modern industry that will exploit its capacities far beyond the scope of the feudal imagination. The black laborer is hence never at ease with history, perpetually banned from existing in her own time. These figures, Ellison posits, “speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamor, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams” (Invisible Man 441). Black labor occupies this unstable interstice between rural life and industrial urbanity, between insupportable past and unpredictable future. In a tone arcing from mourning to hope, Ellison concludes that black proletarians “were [people] out of time” (441). Blacks are precluded from the generative continuity the very concept of history implies, toiling within antiquated economic models while being forcibly assimilated by the psychology of a modernist present. (“What did they ever think of us transitory ones?” Ellison rhetorically asks.) The black subject of modernity is thus a living anachronism, condemned to “plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history” (439).

*Alienations Social, Economic and Historical*

Capitalism, meanwhile, continues to divide social life, inhibiting communal formations and disenabling the strategies for addressing modernist anxiety these might afford. “A division of labor, splitting [workers] up into groups and classes,” Wright explains, “enables whole segments of populations to be so influenced by their material surroundings that they see but a little phase of the complex process of their lives” (12MBV 24). The psychosocial effects of rationalization and commodity fetishism brand equally the subjects of capitalism, urban and rural, black and white. Evidence of this becomes manifest in the migrants seeking new life in the cities of the
urban North. These wayward blacks desperately “needed the ritual and guidance of institutions to hold [their] atomized lives together in lines of purpose; [they] who had known only relationships to people and not to things” (93), devolves Wright’s materialist critique. In response to alienations both social and economic, black labor is forced to mobilize its psychological life towards the stilted articulation of the dispirited modernist moment.

Alienation acts upon the body of the black worker as it plays upon her psyche. White modernist mythos paints black labor as an exotic remnant, a mystified relic from a remote past—both the domestic one of the American South and the more distant suggestion of maternal country and ethnic homeland. The black worker is never included in America’s present-tense; she is perpetually “outside of historical time,” and thus, she remains “untouched” (Invisible Man 44) by it. This illogical relation materializes a potent message for America: black subjects are the “stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hate because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it” (441). This onus is the paradoxical heritage of America’s dispossessed. To the black subject, white capitalism says, “You’re like one of those African sculptures, distorted in the interest of a design” (440). But the design is of white America’s devising: black labor, it pathologically constricts towards the project of its own self-realization.

Capitalism makes psychological slaves of its labor force—but this is a metaphor. For the black industrial worker, the specter of slavery carries concretized and infinitely more terrifying dimensions. The black subject, enslaved, represents the
fully fetishized commodity: the human not recognized as such, but literally transformed into a commodity. Enslavement is thus the full and dramatic articulation of capitalist exploitation. The black slave, despite violent economic injunctions, is insistently and indomitably human, caught in crushing logics which endeavor to deny this. Slaves are commodities with the properties of subjects, but, objectified precisely as property, they represent a relation of ownership to capital. What happens, Wright’s materialist argument asks, when the commodity revolts? If the precondition for freedom in America is property ownership, what happens when property asserts its freedom? The logic becomes jammed; this eventuality represents not the end of slavery, but rather the end of freedom. As Ellison’s Invisible Man reminds, “there’s always an element of crime in freedom” (155).

Significance and Signification

The narrative logic of Wright’s work and the vision it inculcates aspire towards a future where the Afro-American is not a figment, a liminal fragment, a darker sister in the mirror of America’s guilty unconscious, but rather a symbol of syncretism and an element in the social whole. But this realization depends upon the cohesion, health and viability of the social compact, one which redresses the routine dehumanizations of capitalist domination. Perhaps, this is the vision the black sharecropper labors towards as she “plows, plants, chops, and picks the cotton, working always towards a dark, mercurial goal” (12MBV 49). Accompanying this posture of imaginative projection, the retrospective mode of Wright’s modernist historiography recognizes the black American, the slave-turned-sharecropper-turned industrial laborer as, in fact, a vanguard of capitalist dissolution. This character
consolidates as a transitional element always out-of-time; but Wright’s figuration situates black labor, for precisely this reason, as a catalyzing force in “the multi-colored, polyphonic tides of revolution” (25) of which Berman speaks in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. Revolution, Wright theorizes, is the mighty and inevitable product of a doubly-dominated psychology suffering the violent alienations of slavery alongside those imposed by capitalism.

The black migrant’s journey North, a symbolic emancipation from the shackles of feudal economy, presages the revolutionary vision this subject carries into the urban venues of capitalist industry. This journey is spatial and also *temporal*, launching the black migrant from a passed-past into an incipient future. The black urbanite is thus a disjointed composite bearing the marks and influences of incongruous national moments, superimposed upon historical memory and biographical time. These transient figures were people “out of time,” but chronically and symptomatically of time. Black subjectivities, bodies and biographies bear missing links, representing the moments of lost time America excludes in narrating its own transitional birth.

“Coming North for a Negro sharecropper,” Wright intones, “involves more strangeness than going to another country. It is the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness” (*12MBV* 99). This consciousness is the legacy of the atemporality of black existence. Damaged by its feudal past and destined to deformity by capitalist and white supremacist authority, this sensibility nonetheless holds immanently the memories of abjection and dispossession, quietly preparing them for radical exposition. Black laborers are transitive interstices in America’s
temporal sequence, holding memories which augur its future. Civic segregation, historical solecism and industrial servitude establish black subjects as the conspicuous remnant, the diagnosable symptom of economic and temporal contradiction insisting vociferously upon radical—upon revolutionary—social synthesis.
Towards Deracinated Signification: Repurposing the Capacity of the Modern Sign

What a life it is we live! Our roots are nowhere! We have no home even upon this soil which formed our blood and bones!

--12 Million Black Voices

Semiotic Transition and the a-History of the Sign

Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* witnesses the evanescence of feudalism and the rise of capitalist industrialism that supplants it. In the vocabulary of literary-historical analysis, Barthes gives an account of capitalist emergence, classing it as a semiotic transformation: “The difference between feudal society and bourgeois society, index and sign,” he writes, “is this: the index has an origin, the sign does not: to shift from index to sign is to abolish the last (or first) limit, the origin, the basis, the prop, to enter into the limitless process of equivalences, representations that nothing will ever stop, orient, fix, sanction” (40). Barthes recapitulates an argument that sees feudal economies as historically embroiled, invested in tracing lineage and cataloguing generational transfers of wealth. A capitalist arrangement, however, is not beholden to the indexical imperative, allowing instead for the free play of capital, which becomes both signifier of wealth and its sign. Capitalism is the global-industrial incarnation of a radically *deracinated* semiotic syntax, the uprooted socioeconomic logic of modernity. Wright takes up Barthes’s paradigm at this juncture, mobilizing it towards a different horizon of symbolic commerce.

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright narrates the “strange birth” of the American Negro, constructing a retrospective metaphysics of black African expatriation and enslavement. In the frenzy of the early slave trade, he reflects upon
how an “all-powerful atmosphere of ambition and passion” was conceived, “in which we black slaves were the main objects of exploitation” (16). This is a historical fact; but to it, Wright adds an interpretive lens, recounting how “daily, eager [slavers] slashed off the rotting trappings of feudal life, a life which for centuries had endowed man with a worth, rank, use, and order” (16). This is the origin of the technique of radical deracination, one Wright re-appropriates in his insurgent literary aesthetic.

Wright makes use of Barthes’s characterization of feudal society, where the sanctioned sources and lineal genesis of wealth are part of what wealth itself implies: a heredity of money, property and prestige, an evolutionary social narrative accountable to (and capable of accounting for) each of its successive stages. This structure, literally and metaphorically, is a continuity the slavers’ violations destroy; theirs was a theft of people from homeland, of signified from sign, of synthetic history from an unsettled and migratory present.

Following upon the slavers’ heels, capitalist arrangements destroy the authority of linear flows of wealth, liberating the traffic of capital to untraceability. Capitalism forgets its past; the markers of meaning ensured by feudal pacts, under capitalism, are dissolved. The discharge of capital in this manner, as both symbol and quantitative reality, effects another emancipation: that of the sign. This theorization bears a critical link to the way the history of the black laborer is (dis)articulated, forcibly severed during successive tenures of enslavement, agricultural bondage, land tenancy, domestic and industrial servitude, and incessant capitalist exploitation.

Barthes’s theory emphasizes economic rift as equally a semiotic one, manifest in commercial ambits as the predomination of money’s signifying qualities over its
indexical ones. Barthes indicates the shift from money as a revelatory (denotative) capacity to that of a representative (connotative) one. Where denotation implies a fixed relation—reality connected stably to its referent—connotation expands almost indefinitely to the free play of signification.

An Absent Natality

Enslavement perpetrates a similar violence, denying the black laborer a historical and biographical heritage. In *Slavery and Social Death* by Orlando Patterson, the slave is theorized precisely as a product of deracination and disenfranchisement, negating the continuous flow of history. The concept of “natal alienation,” Patterson writes,

> goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of “blood,” and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master. The slave was the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished. (7)

The slave is thus radically *de-historicized*, configured as a blank surface for the realization of the master’s will. “Not only were they natally alienated from their ancestors and often from their community of origin, but also from their descendants,” Patterson emphasizes: “[slaves] were genealogical isolates” (331). America’s socio-
economic consolidation was purchased at the great expense of these disseverations; for Patterson as for Wright, the figure of historical dislocation is blackness. Patterson affirms the institutionalization of black liminality in American as the outcome of a prolonged and calculated effort to divest black subjects of their claims to natality. The symbolic currency of lineage, as a tie to both national compacts and personal heritage, is a powerful one; to deny this is to prevent a stable sense of identity and belonging from coalescing. In a white supremacist national framework, the technique of domination represented by the denial of natality systematically elided black Americans from communities of national belonging.

Denied the resources of self-definition, “The slave’s natal alienation and genealogical isolation made him or her the ideal human tool,” Patterson contends, “perfectly flexible, unattached, and deracinated” (368). Not only in the shift from feudalism to capitalism does the signifying capacity of the sign change; to the enslaved-turned-sharecropper-turned-industrial laborer, whose history has been irreparably breached, the sign is altogether denied. The tools of self-definition, along with the claim of the black subject to national and historical incorporation, are slashed. The cut, the break enacted by the slavers who pull black laborers out of feudalism constitutes the refusal of the past to acknowledge and contextualize an orphan present. To those unclaimed subjects of history, it extends categorical prohibition from full access to the sign.

*Incompatible (with) Signification*

In the context of modernism, the black subject confounds Barthes’s historiography because she *exceeds* it. This figure troubles the symbolic dichotomy of
denotation and connotation, of indexicality and signification—though indeed embodying the truth of disseveration from personal genealogy, common cultural heritage and cogent social history. Complicating the Barthian distinction between feudalism and capitalism, the black subject represents a function itself indexical: “Standing now at the apex of the twentieth century,” Wright announces, “we look back over the road we have traveled and compare it with the road over which the white folk have traveled, and we see that three hundred years in the history of our lives are equivalent to two thousand years in the history of the lives of whites!” (12MBV 145). Wright gives monumental vision to this thesis of black anachronism, presenting a historically substantiated theory of black politico-temporal displacement.

The history of black America is a compressed version of many hundreds of years of white Western development. This parallel but syncopated evolution has the curious quality of affording white America an indexical account of its own social history, inscribed upon the memory of its black citizens. As Wright proposes, “We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America” (146). The black subject of America’s dialectic is a self-contained account of the psychosocial transformations both begetting and symptomatizing America’s pathological modernism. As Ellison predicts, this essential interrelation qualifies black Americans as the prophets of national fate.

*White History, Black Destiny*

If we take seriously postulates advanced by Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, we see an actuation of this peculiar dynamic: Norton, white trustee of a historically black college, says to his young black beneficiary, “I felt, and I still feel, that your people
are in some important manner tied to my destiny” (94). Norton imagines, in the way Wright also does, that the fate of black America *foretells* that of its white counterpart. The dialectic of history pauses, alongside white-man’s-burden-toting Norton, to “look forward with the greatest of interest to learning [black America’s] contribution to [Norton’s own] fate” (108). The temporal speculation—the projective “looking forward”—and the grotesquely proprietary gesture of imagining black material life as a “contribution” to white destiny reflect the lopsided kinship of white and black history. Where Norton proposes black life and labor as genesis points for white fate, Wright imagines the trajectory of black history as a mandatory recapitulation of that of its white counterpart. In *12 Million Black Voices*, he writes, “Imagine European history from the days of Christ to the present telescoped into three hundred years and you can comprehend the drama which our consciousness has experienced!” (146).

Black history in America defies the limits set by white historico-temporal ontology, accomplishing a mirrored concatenation within a timeframe compulsorily compressed. Genealogy and temporality—as well as the claims to ownership over distinct and autonomous black histories—are discombobulated in the conceptualizations offered by Ellison and Wright. As the latter contends,

> We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*…If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the *living* past living in the present, for our memories go back…to a time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land. (146)
The indissolubility of the trajectories traced by black and white America conditions the mutuality of the fate towards which they each proceed. American must accept a recognition of black labor as heir to the historical dialectic whereby labor transforms material conditions and constructs an autonomous fate; black material life thus exceeds history and produces America’s fate.

*The Indelible Black Proletarian Consciousness*

The fates of black and white America, from the first white foot falling heavily upon colonized land, have been intertwined. As Wright and Ellison suggest, this is not a metaphor: the fate of white America is black America. In its black counterpart, white America is afforded a darker image of the founding narrative it constructs for itself and is awakened to the violently fistular quality of this birth. The drama of black consciousness is the imposition of the headlong trajectory of white Western development upon it, which owes its very materialization to it. As Wright contends, “the many historical phases which whites have traversed voluntarily and gradually…black folk have traversed through swift compulsion” (145). Unwittingly, unwillingly, the black figure affords a telescoped image of America’s national psyche, emerging as the dark proof of sociopolitical transformation—and expounding the damaged modernist psychology of America’s capitalist apotheosis.

But an essential contradiction arises. Even while the black figure indexes America’s legacy of racial brutality and economic upheaval, she is herself expropriated from social history. The black subject is the corporealized indecision, anguish, and self-contained contradiction enforced by opportunistic capitalist orders;
she embodies an imperiled psyche alienated by slavery and its enduring violence, and alienated again by capitalism and its virulent logics. This paradox realizes a superlative form in black labor, the vertex where racial animus and proletarian consciousness meet. Black proletarians are the “landless millions of the land” (12MBV 93), bound in feudal contracts to depleted soils while capitalist development rushes on before them, despite them, because of them.

The figure of blackness in America is the custodian of modernity, symptom of its psychical disfigurement and distress. The black subject, expelled from a national history molded by her own hand, is disbarred from access to the pre-modern imagination upon which Barthes’s analysis dwells; therein, she is denied the phantasy of return to which her white contemporaries appeal to quell incipient modernist anxieties. Where white America turns to the past for ideological self-assurance, black America makes no such mistake. “I am not a prisoner of history,” writes Frantz Fanon; “I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny” (229). America’s socioeconomic trajectory, attended by the semiotic shift Barthes describes, instead imposes itself in the interval where black history should reside.

“So,” Wright concludes, “under the black mourning pall of smoke from the stacks of American industry, our observing Negro eyes watch a thousand rivulets of blood melt, fuse, blend, and flow in a common stream of human unity as it merges with the great American tide” (102). This bleak picture of humanity, fetid flow of urban existence, is the true American heritage the black subject reveals. Seeking the comfort of a communal past, a misremembered epic of national history is invoked by white America’s phantasy of return. But over the shoulder of the black laborer lies no
record of triumphant growth, no personal genealogy nor narrative of collective
evolution; instead, history records and individual memory affirms the black hole of
expatriation, the “mourning pall” of industry, and the deeper, darker void of slavery.

Black Radicalism and the Materialist Dialectic

In Barthian analyses of the semiotic transformation attending the rise of
bourgeois capitalism, an adjustment hastily made to negotiate the fall of feudal
society, there is a revelation for the project of black literature. This, Wright elaborates
in his discussions of the viability of a radical art born of Marxist doctrine, laying out
his projections for the position of black authors within it. Wright levels his criticism
at the failures of black artists to harness the revolutionary vision of their social
minoritism towards a praxis that effectively metabolizes their particular history.

“Lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide
social vision and a deep social consciousness” (“Blueprint” 98), he writes. In
bourgeois arrangements, minority groups represent a radical vanguard, Wright claims.

Wright’s “Blueprint” explores the peculiar revolutionary consciousness he
identifies as the heritage of the minority subject, asking how it can be actuated
towards a literary discipline bearing witness both to the Negro’s and the proletarian’s
struggle. The aesthetic impetus Wright identifies as the one lacking in extant black
expression mirrors the new mode of signification Barthes watches emerge,
phoenixlike, from the ashes of feudal epistemology. While Barthes describes the shift
from index to sign, from continuous and historically-assimilated representational
schemas to the free-flowing, itinerant logics of bourgeois representation, Wright gives
voice to his vision of a transcendent black aesthetic both radical and radically *deracinated*, emancipated from history and from the servility of artistic predecessors.

Wright sounds a call for black artists to break with a past both politically and artistically desolate. “A slavish respect for past standards,” he contends, “hinders rather than helps. An attitude of self-consciousness and self-criticism is a more…fruitful point of departure” (“Blueprint” 98). The destiny of black artists is the projection of historical consciousness into a present *not yet materialized*. To activate the radical potential of black subjecthood, Wright prompts authors to begin the process—rather, to continue it, but this time of their own volition—of historical divestment, sublating the violent exclusions it chronicles into revolutionary ambition. The paradox of *radical deracination*, deepened in Wright’s prefiguration of *uprootedness* as precisely the condition for radical praxis, is but another added to the crucible of black existence, already a compounded quagmire of social history.

Wright, true to his materialist roots, remains invested in the dialectic of history and its role in displacing an incumbent politic. A dialectical commitment sees history as fluid yet accretive, subjected always to the modulations of its evolving forms; these are constantly resituating each other, paradoxically building upon precedents while repudiating historical mandates. Wright’s analysis traces the silhouette of a present insistently *not* the integrated plenary of teleological processes and products, but rather the precipitate of snapshot visions of history’s constant flow. Invoking Barthes, Wright takes up the shift the former traces towards capitalism’s decontextualized semiotic paradigm, synthesizing it into a program of radical literature of his own design. The dialectic of history reemerges not as a continuum but
as another sort of cypher, delivering the present as a phenomenon interpreted through its links with the past, but foremost critically mediating it. For black subjects denied meaningful inclusion in national memory, the present recapitulates nothing but itself. For these homeless of history, the present is legible as the expedient script of capitalism’s signature—a momentary incarnation of abiding class and racial struggle, settled upon the truth of a world in constant reconfiguration.

Capitalism’s oppressed black minority trysting with revolutionary consciousness is founded upon its own antinomies. It is this subset Wright calls upon to consummate its cultural perspectives in forms of representation both radical and dialectical. This mode will itself be symptom and solution, the living praxis of black America’s revolutionary social vision. It will preclude a criticism of aesthetic revolt that decries such works as “without artistic consequence when they do not probe the root of the emptiness of life under capitalism, when they do not afford direct experience with the struggles to restore meaning to life, and when they do not investigate and seek to depict artistically such struggles with ideological understanding” (“Narrate or Describe?” 147). Rather, the art Wright calls for, the art he demands, holds immanently the power to propel capitalist, white supremacist America towards its ruinous fate. The potent new modality Wright imagines will break with feudal pasts, will expropriate itself from depleted lands, will renounce fallacious genealogies, will cut the signifying chain, and will appropriate the sign into a new system of semes designed with—designed by—the radical consciousness of black subjecthood. In a semiotic regime Barthes sees profoundly altered by vying economic paradigms, and in a nation Wright envisions recreated by the appropriation
of liberated signs, black artists are the manifest destiny of their own orders of signification, children of apocryphal births, the poets and prophets of America’s symbolic—and actual—fate.

An Anticipatory Recitation

Across the corpus of modernist literature, the dialectic of history makes routine appearance. Conversations on the nature of modernity materialize as an autonomous style in its own right; the preoccupations of modern experience consolidate into a literary discourse characterized by sampling and experimentation, by citation and reference. This literature reflexively reiterates, reaching back into a common cultural past to extract aesthetic values incubated in the Western canon—and utterly reconceptualizing them. Literary modernism begets a proliferation of illegitimate children, birthed as the expression of generalized dissatisfaction and malaise in the modern present, alongside a deep yearning for return. Modernist literature represents a disruption of cultural genealogy, indicated by the insolubility of this paradox; modern authorship enacts an aesthetic recitation that has also the quality of a recalibration, cycling through the massive cultural backlog of literary tradition in order to excavate enduring modalities and reimagine them in entirely new forms.

Wright, in his own fiction, delivers on this dialectical promise, depicting Berman’s modernist subjects who “change the world that is changing them.” Wright’s work communicates this social philosophy in a formalism that reiterates his radical aspirations and sketches his vision for the reclaimed destiny of black Americans within the vortex of literary production. In “Blueprint for Negro Literature,” Wright describes his dialectical-artistic view, placing “an emphasis upon tendency and
experiment,” and endorsing “a view of society as something become rather than as something fixed” (99). This materialism, Wright establishes as the foundation for an engaged black literature, inflected towards the same revolutionary ends as his own political alignments. This brand of modernist literature synthesized the revolutionary and aesthetic impetus of his work, which endeavored to “point the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers” (99). Revolution—in literary craft as in the technologies and hierarchies of production—materialized for Wright as the only viable strategy for enduring social reconfiguration.

Revolution, indeed, was a possibility forged over the *longue durée* of America’s violent past. The dialectic represents the potential for novelty and innovation in the way it reimagines such a past through its constitutive effect on the present; this is a fundamentally modernist position. If the present is the lens through which the past is understood, the dialectic fills a structural lacunae in the scaffolding of history—tenanted also by the figure of the Afro-American—that affords a broadened view of temporality in a transcendent vision encompassing past, present, and future. The dialectic in process is cyclical: repetitive without redundancy, referential though refusing regression. Inside its elliptical logic, a present still in sight of a traumatic and exploitative past is self-redemptive; herein, abandoned histories become forcibly reinterpreted towards a reformed vision of America’s *yet-to-come*.

*The Paradox of Capitalist Irrationality*

Southern agriculture during the period of American slavery was integrated into a cotton economy whose demand was enormous and whose scale was global. Salves, as property, represented investments; as commodities (and as commodity
producers), they formed the economic substratum of a network of global finance. Despite contributing to it materially, slave economies remained outside the category of waged labor; hence, these were not rationalized in the same way as other capitalist enterprises. Still, a capitalist logic of excess regulated the relations of slaves to the land—they were forced to cultivate surfeits of cotton on exhausted soil, submerging themselves in debt and becoming increasingly, inescapably indentured to the land.

Exploitation, under capitalism, is an exigency of profit. The relegation of the black laborer to feudal status through land tenancy arrangements ensured the production of capital at a low-cost margin. As cotton became a fixture of the global marketplace, slavery embedded itself in pre-industrial ecosystems. Where capitalist development heralded a new order of sociomaterial existence for white Americans, black labor was allowed no such freedom. *12 Million Black Voices* documents this rift: it emerges as a barometer of national psychology, recovering the contribution of black labor to America’s social history. Yoked obsequiously to an tyrannical past, the black subject cannot escape her chronicity—a condition here emphasized as recurrence through time, as a generational condition, as chronicle, as chronology. Black labor maintains a position as both symptom and cure for the crucible of modern experience, the messianic vision of America’s torturous self-realization.

*A New Role Devolving…*

Following Barthes, the difference between feudalism and bourgeoisie culture—between slavery and capitalism—is the premise of Wright’s own work: feudal society he characterizes by its illusions of rootedness (in terrains equally social, semiotic and cultural…), while bourgeoisie society is untethered, ethereal,
modernist. Wright argues that because of the nature of slavery and its strange relationship to capital, in the feudal world of the American South, the black slave was already thrust into modernity. This anachrony was assured by a macabre parade of those teeming black millions who endured the physical and spiritual ravages of serfdom; those legions of nameless blacks who felt the shock and hope of sudden emancipation; those terrified black folk who withstood the brutal wrath of the Ku Klux Klan, and who fled the cotton and tobacco plantations to seek refuge in northern and southern cities coincident with the decline of the cotton culture of the Old South. (12MBV xxi)

The modernist valence of Wright’s work serves to emphasize a conception of Afro-Americans as ahistorical signs. The transient history of black life in America is underscored both as a physical, material condition, and as a shifting affinity with systems, values and relationships of meaning inside America’s racist ecosystems. Wright remained committed to the uprootedness of signs, to their semiotic and social indefinacy, instrumentalizing this innate quality whereby they access the alterability of cultural codes. Wright attests that the word “Negro,” for instance,

is not really a name at all or a description, but a psychological island whose objective form is the most unanimous fiat in all American history; a fiat buttressed by popular and national tradition…which artificially and arbitrarily defines, regulates, and limits in scope of meaning the vital contours of our lives. (12MBV 30)
Wright’s resistance to the ascriptive and regulatory qualities of the sign is the theoretical investment he shares with Barthes, whose own work is pledged to the malleability of signification. In “Blueprint,” Wright reiterates the point, writing forcefully of the “new role devolving upon the Negro writer” (102). He imagines this writer as an agent of symbols and signs, “called upon to do no less than create the values by which her race is to struggle, live and die” (102). It is the province of the Negro writer to communicate, to make legible the distilled experience of black life in America—an experience of which white life is correlate. Negro authors, per Wright, are called to the task of “making articulate the experiences of men” (102), a shared heritage upon which they can rely to “create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life.” The Negro writer claims Promethean destiny through a praxis which “ultimately restores to the writer her lost heritage, that is, her role as a creator of the world in which she lives, and as a creator of herself” (102). This is the province of a radical black art, which recognizes the apex of the 20th century as a moment offering itself to the reconfiguration of America’s semiotic commerce. Upon the triumph of Negro art thus rests the balance of meaning—reclaimed from the racist systems that hitherto had violently defined and denigrated its subjects—the reaffirmation of faith, the fruition of artistic striving, the consolidated products of human hope.

A Brief History of American Democracy

In the semiotic transformation proposed by Barthes as the heritage of capitalist industrialism, a thesis on the source of Ellison’s white savior character Norton and his racial-historiographical paternalism begins to emerge. To see its beginnings, it is necessary to turn to the founding paradox of America: as it began to
trace the contours of its nationhood, a registration of New World democracy was scaffolded upon ideologies of liberal capitalism. Freedom of self-definition, however, was a fallacy exposed by America’s defection on the promises of liberal democracy, in its failure to include black citizens in its self-conceptualization. The imperative of national self-realization, according to Wright, is thus transferred to another heir: it becomes the province of forgotten black America. Wright ventriloquizes America’s racial underclass, writing, “Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!” (12MBV 146). This statement resonates strangely with Norton’s sense that white and black Americans share a common fate…of which, ultimately, black America is the author.

*Feudal Index, Bourgeois Sign*

Bourgeois culture, reaching a pitch in the 1940s, provided the social and economic venues for this recalibration. As opposed to the entrenched metaphysic of a feudal model, bourgeois configurations affirm all points of reference as exchangeable; but bourgeois ideology seeks to obscure this. Where middle-class society clings to stability, naturalizing its ideology and reifying its signs, the black figure, as both covert index and unfixed sign, undermines the conceit of cultural predetermination. Enslaved, the black subject experiences firsthand the awe and terror of reconfiguration. As slavers “slashed off the trappings of feudal life, which for centuries had endowed man with a metaphysical worth, rank, use, and order” (12MBV 16), the black slave bears witness to the dismantling of a commerce of feudal signs, watching a new semiotic dispensation supplant it.
As the world of meaning dissolved and reconsolidated around her, the black slave remained a point of orientation: slavery was thoroughly deterministic. Where the shifting signifier is not ineluctably related to its referent, feudalism’s indexical sign is anchored to one; tied, yet, to a system binding her to vacant lands and assigning to her a nonessential social value, the black subject recognizes in herself another paradox, beyond the one consigning her to fixity despite semiotic flux: within transitional feudal structures, social nonrecognition of the black subject is maintained alongside tacit acknowledgment of her economic agency and necessity. As a “fixed” value in a system moving away from the stability of indexical valuation towards the indefinacy of the bourgeois sign, the black subject is incompletely accounted for. The space slave labor occupies in a system founded on waged production remains an irrational element, a symbol of social and economic excess.

Unincorporated by capitalist logics, slavery is nonetheless gradually “rationalized out of existence.” Flattening inconsistencies and stitching up commercial time, the black subject herein synthesizes the qualities of index and of sign; she is made to embody both semiotic functions, suffering the inscription of America’s transitional currents upon her psyche. In Slavery and Social Death, Orlando Patterson theorizes such incompatibilities as routine features of slave experience. “Slavery involved two contradictory principles,” Patterson writes, “marginality and integration” (46). Indebted as it was to black labor, America, in the project of rationalizing its economic progress and principles, was forced to establish black labor as a site of this same contradiction. It reconciled the paradox by “formalizing the marginality”—that is, by fractionally incorporating the outlier,
extending partial recognition to the black subject, and codifying the move within
abiding institutional structures.

The slave is thus “formalized” as a proximate strangeness and a remote
familiarity. Such a “stranger is by nature no ‘owner of soil’,” attests Georg Simmel,
“not only in the physical, but also in the figurative sense of a life-substance which is
fixed, if not in a point in space, at least in an ideal point of the social environment”
(“The Stranger” 403). Black Americans are perennially denied this possibility:
expropriation is the machinery of exploitation, serving both capitalist and white
supremacist aims. As Patterson reminds, “it was the slave’s isolation, his strangeness,
that made him most valuable to the master; but it was this very strangeness that most
threatened the community” (38). Black Americans represent a paradoxical
combination of nativity and strangeness; the black American is suffocatingly close to
whiteness—a strangeness within—and a supernumerary, a perennial outsider.

The figure of blackness, also, is the specular image of impending modernist
disenchantment. In a context where ordinary signs can be separated from their
referent and from the artificing hand of concept, the black figure testifies of the
possibility for semiotic reconfiguration: that is the condition of modernity. The black
figure, anachronistic herald of modernist subjecthood, embodies the emancipatory
promise of modernity where signs are indefinitely malleable—and wherein they
become revolutionary. The prospect of semiotic insubordination, for the black
plantation worker, was an instrument of survival. Wright ventriloquizes this figure,
imagining how they “who have followed the plow…have developed a secret life and
language of [their] own” (12MBV 40). Toiling upon the land as sharecropper and
slave, the black laborer submits to the material mandates of feudalism; but yet, the resources of the liberated sign become the province of this figure, the proof and the device of her insurrection. Wright, in the voice of the plantation worker, speaks again:

We stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning. And we charged this meagre horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our own language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety...by rolling our eyes, by flourishing our hands, by assigning to common, simple words new meanings. (40)

Feudal orders construct a fantasy of naturalness, a farce to which bourgeois society also applies for the contrivance of immediacy, structure, and heritage given by the cumulative genesis of meaning through time. Bourgeois cultural expression, to verify its own stability, effects a fantastical return to pre-modern society where the fixity of feudal signs rests upon a reified social substratum establishing hierarchy and order. But, the figure of blackness in America cannot lean on this reprobate fantasy of return; there appears to blackness, rather than the pre-modern harmony to which bourgeois society longs to return, the abject horrors of slavery.

In this sense, the black American might occupy a locus of social objectivity. “But objectivity does not simply involve passivity and detachment,” writes Simmel. Rather, “it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” (404). The instrumentalization of black labor assures compulsory involvement in America’s socioeconomic composite. However, “the steady impact of the plantation system upon our lives,” Wright attests, “created new types of behavior
and new patterns of psychological reaction, welding us together” (41). For the black subject, no regress is possible. This painful truth, this burgeoning modernist consciousness, is shared amongst Afro-Americans in the transitional plantation language appropriated from various systems of meaning. Taken up by slaves and their descendants as the semiotic refuse left to them by their white masters, this language was emboldened by the shifting codes it made use of: it created “new meanings, meanings which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware!” (40). Thus, fixity became possibility and subjection became freedom.

The black subject in America can only go forward; hence, she evades capture by the naturalized ideology of bourgeois capitalism which propels its subjects backwards into a past that is violent, reifying, and reactionary. Blackness is the only posture which resists (which sees through) the deceptions of a modernist future-phantasy, constructed as a mythological realm of plenitude where signs are endowed with spontaneous meaning. Modern signs are vacant; the black slave, the plantation worker, the sharecropper and the tenant farmer recognize this, and they revel in it. These figures claim the indefinacy of signification as license to dwell in a secret language, one which “extended [their] understanding of what slavery meant and gave [them] the freedom to speak to [their] siblings in captivity” (40). This peculiar consciousness is the heritage of the black subject, the heritage of all those created by the machinations of enslavement, capitalist transformation, semiotic reconfiguration and modernist disenchantment.
It is this same legacy of violent exclusion that carves out of the modernist moment a province of radical black self-definition: Wright describes this as the “intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of a world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity and tangibility (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 443-4); but it was this identical sense that “made [Wright] grasp the revolutionary impulse of [his] life.” The violent machinery of enslavement was the context that produced revolutionary awareness—this came in the exposed fallacy of definitional fixity amidst broad semiotic upheaval, in the poetic potency of a liberated language. This consciousness emerged as the quiet triumph of plantation laborers, those who “polished [their] new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, though they were the words of the Lords of the Land, they became [their] words, in [their] language” (40). Black subjecthood thus becomes both historical index and insurrectionary sign. *12 Million Black Voices* recognizes this, opening, prophetically, on misrecognition—*and we are not what we seem.*

*When the Commodity Revolts*

Barthes paves the way for Wright’s articulation of the semiotic uncertainty visited upon modern black subjects. These authors, both, are architects of a hermeneutical method that derives its logic from the material it investigates—here, communist economic logics, capitalist transition, semiotic transformation and paradoxes of black subjecthood in America. Barthes’s image of the relationship of signs to economic orders is instructive for thinking of the black laborer as, herself, a sign. Barthes’s account seems to open a space of ambiguous possibility for the
subaltern subject of a capitalist order, which privileges capital as the supreme sign and appendage of social status. The enslaved black figure is an exchange-value that is likewise a use-value, endowed forcibly with the qualities of the unfixed sign. Barthes here provides a critical link, opening towards a theorization of subaltern positionality vis-à-vis the socioeconomic arrangements which subjectify her as itself a semiotic order, a mode of reading, a method of textual analysis; the figure of the slave is perennially in excess of the closed system of capitalist semiotics, a polyvocal, polyvalent sign. Wright’s analysis as it develops across the pages of 12 Million Black Voices complicates Barthes’s theorem, allowing that the privilege of status-granting capital unburdened of violent heredity is one enjoyed by whites alone. White America was able to escape (the not-so-distant memory of) a feudal past precisely because it excluded blacks from a capitalist order ostensibly unencumbered by social history; yet, the “freedom” white Americans enjoy is supported by their status as property owners. As themselves property, under slavery, blacks have no access to this self-realizing freedom. Instead, the slave becomes the subject-turned-object of a primordial capitalist order, the unrecognized labor capacity assigned the mute status of representation, replication and objectification.

**Alienation, Artifice, Delusion: A Theory of Bourgeois Naturalism**

The impersonal, inhuman effect of capitalism is experienced variously by its various subjects: Karl Marx writes, “The proprietary class and the class of the proletariat experience the same alienation. But the former class feels at ease and justified in this alienation, recognizing in it its source of power and the basis for a sham existence.” The bourgeoisie recognizes its reign as the effect of an eradication
of meaning, inviting arbitrariness into social and semiotic regimes. An affected disinterest in semiotic transformation, constructing an alibi for (lost) signification, is the attitude that births bourgeois naturalism. Descriptive naturalism, edging ever towards realism, is the artistic nation of semiotic dispossession, the realm of objectivism (or worse, pseudo-subjectivism) and the domain descriptive passivity.

Here, objects are made symbols instead of the products of dynamic social forces and processes; and herein, literary renderings become still-lives, metaphors overwrought (over-written) with impastos of symbolic intent. As Georg Lukács imagines, the danger of descriptive bourgeois literature is in its figuration of a world where “lifeless, fetishized objects are whisked about in an amorphous atmosphere” (“Narrate or Describe?” 133). This naturalism accepts the aesthetic trace of its economic history, exemplifying bourgeois anxiety over the very loss of meaning capitalism threatens, and betraying the desperation with which artists worked to recover it—or to simply cover it over.

Stylistically, the artifice of the bourgeois descriptive apparatus reifies its objects, snapshotting them in triumphant moments of signification—though the “significance” of these instants is devoid of dynamic interrelation, conferred artificially by naturalist aesthetic conceits. There is a devastating irony here: the bourgeoisie, feeling the beginnings of a seismic semiotic shift—and scrabbling to gloss it artistically, to welcome it economically, and to answer it semantically—recognizes the same as the proof of its reign, as resounding evidence of the triumph of its ideology. The cultural authority of bourgeois ideals is soundly evinced by the
prevalence of this aesthetic mode, this literary impulse towards realist description and naturalist—*naturalizing*—objectivity.

The remedy that Wright proposes to this static, monotonous literature and its fallacious claims to realism is modernist radicalism. Just as Marx demonstrates the necessity of proletarian revolt to counteract the reification of bourgeois order, so must this revolt be actuated in the domain of art. “When this revolt is represented in literature,” assures Lukács, “the still lives of descriptive mannerism vanish” (145); bourgeois naturalism will disappear in favor of a material-dialectical mode. While Gillian Johns, in “Reading for the Comic and the Tragic in Modern Black Fiction; Or, Reflections on Richard Wright’s Change of Heart from *Lawd Today!* to *Native Son*,” notes that “*Native Son* is viewed by some as a mechanical naturalistic or sociological study,” she counters that the novel still has revolutionary portent. “Wright’s use of tripartite structure,” Johns writes, alongside a “limited point of view and heightened setting to develop his protagonist’s inner experience as he approaches death allows [Wright] to foreground tragic ‘redemption and meaning in the struggle to pursue freedom to the limit’” (261). This insight revives the radical potential of *Native Son*’s formal and diegetic presentations.

In his process notes, Wright identifies an aesthetic intent diverging sharply from those of natural realism. “I had spent years learning about Bigger,” he writes, “so, when the time came for writing, what had made him and what he meant constituted my plot” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 454). This evinces Wright’s commitment to the dialectic naturalism reviles, and his attendance to the sociological machinery underlying Bigger’s emergence. “While writing,” he continues, “a new
and thrilling relationship would spring up under the drive of emotion, coalescing and telescoping alien facts into a known and felt truth” (457). Wright rejects naturalism’s mimetic impulse, projecting his work into the abstract province of “felt truth.” His fiction proceeds directly into the contours of Bigger’s consciousness, “enclosing” the reader’s mind in a new world…blotting out all reality except that which [Wright] was giving her” (459). This reality was consolidated through an aesthetic program that dismissed plausibility as the criterion for truth; that is, mimesis was neither the means to nor the goal of the “reality-effect” Wright’s fiction conjures. Rather, Wright’s creative rubric relies on feeling: “the degree of morality in my writing,” he asserts, “depended upon the degree of felt life and truth I could put down upon the page” (458). Though positing truth as the metric of veracity sounds perhaps like tautology, Wright maintains that “what I wanted [a] scene to say to the reader was more important than its surface reality or plausibility” (458). Thus, even in Native Son, work narrowly and erroneously consigned to the category of naturalism, the mechanism of Wright’s reality-effect dodges mimicry and literal representation, lodging itself elsewhere.

_Lawd Today!,_ revealing a straightforward interest in experimentalism, accomplishes this more explicitly; Brannon Costello sustains this argument in “Richard Wright’s _Lawd Today!_ and the Political Uses of Modernism,” where he notes that “the novel seems influenced less by the naturalism or social realism that we typically [though I contend, misguidedly] associate with Wright and more by modernist aesthetic and thematic concerns” (39). Aesthetic radicalism is an enduring commitment espoused by Wright. Wright’s literary radicalism breaks with bourgeois
forces and forms, refusing their aesthetic values and opening his own terms to the endless play of signification. The aesthetic paradigm Wright champions is soundly modernist—it is involved in ushering out the limping refuse of antiquated bourgeois forms, and reflexively engaged in creating a literature capable of rising up to “ask questions, to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built” (“Blueprint” 106). Wright’s dialectical fiction acknowledges that racism and capitalist transformation are totalizing in their consequences; but this same monolithic influence inspires diverse avenues of dissent and provokes expansive, explosive rebellion.
There is, I feel in the words, some goad of the flesh driving him into a new passion, a darker shadow of the first, darkening even his own understanding of himself. A like fate awaits him and the two rages commingle in a whirlpool…

--Stephen Dedalus, Ulysses

Wright’s Modernist Heritage

Wright, in his essays, poetry and fiction, exemplifies a maverick approach to engaging with literature-as-practice. Wright’s texts exploit the elastic potentials of literary form, exemplifying modernist bricolage in the way they assimilate problems posed by the Barthian distinction between index/sign; represent the travails of urbanism; give accounts of the process of capitalist transformation; and punctuate all these with the question mark of black subjecthood in America. Despite archetypal thematic commitments, Wright seems often to elide categorization as a modernist author. As Wright scholar Brannon Costello notes, Yoshinobu Hakutani takes Lawd Today! to task “for its failings as a work of naturalistic protest fiction, à la Native Son” (39). Hakutani implicitly acknowledges a view of Wright’s early work as lacking the naturalist gloss of his later fiction. Indeed, in his mature novels, Wright turns away from linguistic pastiche and the discombobulated formal experimentalism where Lawd Today!’s modernist inclinations reside.

Wright’s critics perhaps forget this, omitting Lawd Today! from considerations of the viability of Wright’s modernist affiliation. This occlusion recapitulates the curious history of Lawd Today!, the first-written, last-published novel of Wright’s œuvre. Later-written and better-known novels like Native Son,
however, would be misunderstood were they classed as mere realism. Despite a
giving the appearance of Gothic naturalism, *Native Son* takes a distinctly anti-realist
turn, shading towards abstraction and defamiliarization as the narrative heightens.

Wright’s formalism is inherently modernist, the self-reflexive response of a
dexterous literary talent to the myriad preoccupations addressed individually to his
modern subjecthood and his Afro-Americanism. The apparent naturalism of Wright’s
later work results from a misapprehended critical slant, given by a mistakenly
synchronic image of Wright’s work—when viewed in stereo, however, Wright’s
formalism remains close to its modernist roots. Wright’s work does not depart from
*Lawn Today!’s* original insistence that mimetic realism and quotidian experience
might equally be the terrain of the strange, the grotesque, the unfamiliar.

Wright’s modernism is thus traceable as an embedded feature and of his
authorial biography; but it is equally visible in his status within a larger artistic
pedigree. In Wright’s own words, he became willing heir to an aesthetic lineage
established by early 20th century authorship: in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” he
sounds a modernist roll-call, enumerating these inspirations: “Eliot, Stein, Joyce,
Proust, Hemingray, and Anderson,” he lists, “…no less than the folklore of the
Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro writer” (103). Wright’s
influences were many; T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Henri Barbusse and James Joyce
were but a few practitioners of the rich tradition of experimentalism that informed
Wright’s own style. In the voracious attitude of modernist assimilationism, Wright’s
work exemplifies the aesthetic trappings of this heritage. Wright’s fiction exacts the
author’s prerogative to sample heavily, to borrow liberally, to pay homage and to wholly undermine the literary progenitors of her age.

Wright practiced a modernism of content alongside one of form; while his experimentations were not invariably carried out at the level of the letter, they accrued gradually across the total production of his oeuvre. Jake, for instance, the protagonist of Lawd Today!, is a recognizable modern character. He suffers acutely from “‘spiritual poverty’—a fundamentally modernist dilemma” (40) Brannon Costello attests. Wright’s treatment of his subjects synthesizes the aesthetic suppositions of his literary predecessors—themselves, explicitly experimental, avowedly modernist—and applies them to the distinct anxieties of the black subject. For this reason and towards this aim, Costello maintains, “stereotypically modernist subject matter and aesthetic strategies were actually available and indeed very attractive to Wright” (40). Eschewing eventually the sensational experimentalism that characterized the work of his progenitors, Wright nonetheless mobilized the radicalism of the style, allowing it to emerge sometimes ostentatiously, sometimes discretely, in the form. Costello cites Lawd Today! as a novel “very much in keeping with Wright’s original conception of the relationship between his art and his political ideology” (40). In Black Boy, Wright articulates his political project as an equally formal one, engaged in disrupting and reconfiguring semiotic regimes. “I would make voyages;” he writes, “discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back” (41). In his later fiction, then, principles of structuration are a blueprint, a roadmap offered to the attentive reader as she embarks to reconstruct the conceptual edifice of Wright’s social theory and his artistic thesis.
Among those who allow Wright the legitimacy of his modernist title, a convincing number sustain their arguments upon this formalist platform. “Wright makes an intervention in literary discourse,” contends Gillian Johns, “that would bind black cultural production to working-class life” (257), implicating the former as an aesthetic articulation of the latter. Johns offers a materialist analysis qualified by the idea that art and history are dialectical, thus inextricable. To “depict the lives of [black Americans] devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of revolutionary significance” (“Blueprint” 101), exclaims Wright, “must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom.” Wright envisions the genesis of a radical black praxis as one of these “allies,” as an art endowed with radical significance and made inherently modernist.

Johns quotes Bill V. Mullen on the same point: Mullen speculates on Wright’s brand of black protest literature as a “signal articulation of an African American literary aesthetic, foregrounding black proletarian experience, on the one hand, and a literary aesthetic of class-based analysis on the other” (257). In “Blueprint,” Wright remarks begrudgingly on the inherently nationalist implications of Negro writing and its ambivalent force as a form of unity, but also as an integument that perpetuates the social and aesthetic circumscription of the black imagination: “Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them” (101), he declares. “A nationalist spirit in Negro writing,” Wright continues,

means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness.

It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the
dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society. (101)

Wright’s formalism remains rooted in the soils of Afro-American life, and in the specific emergence of these within the broader conditions of capitalism. Wright urges wariness against the context that gives rise to a proletarian art, and even to a distinct “Negro writing,” but encourages these impulses as vital, dialectical moves away from traumatic histories they refuse to deny, and inroads towards a revitalized black art.

Wright’s parables and the characters that populate them are archetypes of modernism, and Wright’s aesthetic treatment offers the theories of their emergence. Texts like 12 Million Black Voices replicate and diagnose the modern condition, responding to its development as an effect of capitalist transformation. But even 12 Million Black Voices, as a consolidated effort of social documentarism, belies a simply mimetic format: the critical argument of the work is constructed in the collage of pictures and text, in the relationships Wright assembles towards a depiction the spiritual squalor and material abjection of transitional black Americans.

On both formal and diegetic planes, 12 Million Black Voices images modernism, offering its socioeconomic etiology. The modernist-realist thrust recalls that modernism is a set of material-economic conditions and a psychological orientation; but it is also a literary determination. The ideological suppositions of the genre locate the modernist present as a position of crisis, which has a political, economic, social, spiritual and cultural nature. As an aesthetic categorization, the
modernist mode foregrounds textual constructivism, answering a compulsion to surface its formal programs. Works of modernism lay bare their conceptual syntax; against a naturalism that submerges the trace of textual assembly, modernism cleaves to a belief about what can be said when authorship renounces reticence, when it resists effacing the evidence of craft. In this way, such works offer accounts of their artistic parentage, conceptual trajectories, and social origins. Literary genealogies as well as cultural histories may be reconstructed from the very bodies of modernist texts, which offer their palimpsestic enumeration. The modernist canon emerges as literary bricolage, a polyvocal scene of citation and sampling. It is this aesthetic heritage that Wright cleaves to and makes his own.

*Justifying Joyce: Strange Semiotician, Modernist Forebear*

Out of this same tradition—in fact, oft-cited as one of its representative instances—emerges the leviathan that is James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. This novel hypostasizes the modernist conceit, foregrounding formalism to the pitch of hyperbolic excess. The aesthetic commitments of *Ulysses* are carried out, it sometimes seems, to the exclusion of all else (though materialized, paradoxically, as the *inclusion* of all else)—that is, to the submersion of plot, to the profusion of chaotic detail, to the effect of diegetic discombobulation. The story of *Ulysses* is embedded in a labyrinth of technique upon which the reader must work, circuitously and laboriously. In this construction, Joyce exemplifies a tenet central to critical understandings of modernism, both as textual practice and as a farther-reaching phenomenology: *Ulysses* is a novel that proposes structure (and with this, its unique aesthetic vocabulary, effect of Joycean joy in poetic profusion, compound words, and
phonic and sensual surfeit) as utterly indispensable to the interpretive work. While this is not a maverick proposition, *Ulysses* is singular in its emphatic insistence upon the analytic exigency of form.

The critical project, *Ulysses* contests, is to accept linguistic submersion: to abandon oneself to a hypertrophied stream of signs. This surrender invites attunement to those moments of excess where language overshoots story, where plotline is subsumed by sound (of chewy assonantal sequences, of nonsense words); this is the transcendent moment of high modernism where expression eclipses representation. *Ulysses* enjoins that there is no territory accessible to readership in which representation alone is adequate to the material conditions of modernity; reality, in text as elsewhere, is nothing but a deluge of signs. Joyce’s textual metaphysic repudiates the phantasy of an antediluvian state or pre-modern high ground where the sign is fixed by tethers to “reality,” where the linkage between signifier and signified is sacrosanct. The process of making sense, *Ulysses* contends, is one constantly undermined by the conditions of modernity, a cosmopolitan landscape where economies of representation are thoroughly alienated, fetishized and commodified.

The intervention of capitalist logics in popular schemas of representation is an abiding feature of modernist prose. Barthes affirms this in his characterization of capitalist transition as a semiotic transformation. Capitalist arrangements, like the one structuring the cityscape of *Ulysses*, are not beholden to signification’s indexical imperative; their economic values invite the free play of capital, which becomes both reference and referent, both signifier of wealth and its sign. Capitalism is the incarnation of a radically *deracinated* semiotic syntax, the erratic economic logic
extending its mandate into the domain of representation, which endeavors to give context to modernity. *Ulysses* affords a concise way of considering the link between these economic and literary-semiotic paradigms in the figure of Leopold Bloom.

Bloom’s profession is canvassing, and his thoughts often express themselves in the language of advertising; Bloom is preoccupied with the expediency of such a discourse. “What were habitually [Bloom’s] final meditations?” the unnamed interrogator of Episode 17 asks. The answer comes: “Of some one sole unique advertisement to cause passers to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient terms not exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life” (592). Herein is delivered Bloom’s view of modernity and the theory of prose Joyce develops to depict it. This passage summarizes the points of contradiction between these philosophies, and the pivots upon which each turns: in the ambition of the statement (Bloom’s) is an interest in the efficient and minimalist use of language which Joyce’s prosaic practice roundly refutes; in the “span of casual vision” is indicated the multiple contacts generated by Bloom’s urban flânerie; in the imagined form of delivery (as advertisement) is a reminder of ubiquitous capitalist ethos within which Joyce’s characters realize their lives. Bloom expresses a yearning to mediate the modern deluge, to cut through it with a message of pure, purposeful intent. He is an idealist: “I stand for the reform of municipal morals…esperanto the universal language with universal brotherhood” (399). Where modern industrial life persists as a welter of human contact and a jungle of unchecked signs, Bloom hungers for some
other thing, some collective tongue, some guarantee of solidarity and communal articulation which the modern world denies him.

For Bloom, the world is a venue of pure collision and coincidence. *Ulysses* represents this in a literary language overflowing with itself, unruly with the accumulation of signs. The edict of “extraneous accretion” is a feature of modernity embedded in the text, overwhelming Bloom’s wish for its elimination. Joyce communicates, through Bloom, a frustration with the proliferating discourse of modernity, an exhaustion with a cacophony of signification which overwhelms interpretation. Bloom decries modern advertising for its verbosity and inaccessibility; this is the linguistic consequence and textual debris of modern industry, manifest as a psychology of compulsive replication, accumulation and contact. Rather than surfacing sense, however, an economy of representation premised upon modernist consumptive logics accrues signs without mobilizing them towards significance. *Ulysses* refuses the capitalist injunction which advances accumulation as a prerequisite for definitional meaning, using this logic as a technique of obfuscation. *Ulysses* posits excess as a mode of alienation, offering no egress from modernity’s sensual surfeit and directing the course of interpretation back into its textual fabrics.

*Ulysses* is consolidated as a commerce of representation that deconstructs itself linguistically. Its discourse foregrounds the appetitive excess of signs as a self-replicating logic around which sense abortively attempts to organize itself. Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as the reader is reminded at intervals, encompasses the breadth of the Western literary canon in scope, style and ambition. This monolithic entelechy presents itself as the sum of Western literature, situating itself as a defamiliarized,
though deeply familiar, textual object. The formal topos of *Ulysses*, which I call hyperbolic accumulation or a hypertrophy of signs, disrupts the conventions of textual semiotics upon which the mythos of, say, Homer’s *Odyssey* relies. The hyperbolizing function Joyce enlists in his recapitulation of literature’s formal concatenations consists a vast effort in destabilizing sense, investigating origins, and surfacing inequivalences. *Ulysses* emerges as an alchemy of text interrogating the provenance of a modern people and a formal paradigm, presented in the syntax of a discombobulated, deracinated and overgrown economy of signs.

**Modernist Fabulation**

The style of *Ulysses*, and likewise that of Richard Wright’s *Lawd Today!*, might rightly, thought reductively, be called overwrought. And overwrought, over-writ, *Ulysses* indeed is: both texts, in their construction, betray a compulsive tendency to *include*. These works encapsulate, by Joyce’s treatment, a comprehensive literary chronology, and in both cases, all the minute detail and disembodied enunciation revealed to the modern flâneur. To the wandering observer of the sights, signs, and sounds of urban life, *Ulysses* and *Lawd Today!* give a startlingly mimetic accounting of the experience of modern city-dwellership, offering themselves as textualizations of this cultural cornucopia. In the semiotic regimes these novels establish, representation moves towards experimentalism—these texts embed stretched and compressed duration, stream-of-consciousness narration, and other defamiliarizing functions. The structural interest in innovation *Ulysses* and *Lawd Today!* convey situates them decisively within the modernist paradigm, which devises strategies to overturn traditional aesthetic schemas. This phenomenon, Tavia Nyong’o adapts as
“afro-fabulation,” theorizing it as a feature originating in black experience. In Nyong’o’s words, afro-fabulation is a “tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false” (Afro-Fabulations 6). The representational schemas of Ulysses and Lawd Today! answer the conditions of a reality that appears in alienating proportions, “registering in the fractured space between story and discourse what it feels like when history and violence conspire against narrative and social coherence…when familiar narratives are no longer adequate to experience” (Narrative Theory 9). Modernist literary discourse does precisely this: it disrupts representation to depict a world become suddenly inhospitable, suddenly unrecognizable.

Modernism disrupts the authority of representational mimetics, pioneering a language of text addressed to the alarming novelty of an industrializing world. Wright remarks on his desire to materialize the experience of urban life, to bring its effect to the reader through the mediations of this discourse—“And always,” he asserts, “I tried to render, depict, not merely to tell the story. If a thing was cold, I tried to make the reader feel cold” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 458). This effort constructs the text as an object, an artifact capable of communicating materially the sensual profusion overwhelming Wright’s characters. Wright engages the signal operation of a modernist aesthetic, which likewise employs Nyong’o’s fabulatory function. “Fabulation,” Nyong’o writes, “points to the deconstructive relation between story and plot” (3). A fabulist approach mirrors the work of hyperbolizing rhetorics, disrupting the claim representation makes to reality; Wright’s formal manipulations
triumph over reality, submerging the reader en-scène and communicating the rhythms of modern life in rhetorical and fabulatory contrivance.

An Argument for Overwriting

Wright and Joyce offer in their novels a comprehensive account of the fractal quality modernity visits upon lines of communication, movement and social commerce. In “Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Barthes writes of a discourse of sociality that it would “be a highly synthetic language, essentially founded on a syntax of embedding and enveloping: each part of the narrative radiates in several dimensions at once” (118). Where Barthes is concerned with the refractive quality of narrative and its effect on signification, Wright and Joyce emerge as the stewards of this supposition. These authors convey the modernist mood of an irradiated social reality, which multiplies its effects and submerges subjects in cultural copia. Ulysses and Lawd Today! depict scenes of cosmopolitanism wherein signs (and sights, and sounds) and the vectors of their travel are insistently perceptible, but yet unplaceable and untraceable, lost to sheer numerosity. It is a curious feature of hyperaccumulation which renders the accumulated unintelligible; but this, in fact, is a ruling logic of modern experience, which emerges under the auspices of capitalist deluge.

The overwhelming sweep of urban experience is a context common to Joyce’s and Wright’s fiction; profusion of consumable commodities is the condition for their emergence. Wright describes such a cityscape as the venue for Bigger’s evolution, which both receives and provokes the acts he perpetrates: “There was the fabulous city in which Bigger lived,” Wright begins, imaging Chicago,
an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! A city so young that, in thinking of its short history, one's mind, as it travels backward in time, is stopped abruptly by the barren stretches of wind-swept prairie! But a city old enough to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man’s age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas, of dramas as abiding as the soul of man itself! (453)

Plot details, character types, and diegetic trajectories emerge from the welter of contradiction the modern cityscape supplies.

Commenting on his proclivity for aesthetic excess, Wright justifies it as a feature central to the daily experience of his characters. He remarks that “I kept the scenes long, made as much happen within a short space of time as possible; all of which, I felt, made for greater density and richness of effect” (459). The stylistic modulations, the “density” Wright’s fiction invokes, convey the tumult of Bigger’s inner consciousness, which mirrors the confusion of his urbanite state. “As much as I could,” Wright explains, “I restricted [Native Son] to what Bigger saw and felt, to the limits of his feeling and thoughts” (459). The diegetic excess of this novel—recall the protracted monologue of Boris Max during Bigger’s trial—replicates the sensual surfeit of modern urbanity, which predetermines the characters and circumscribes their lines of escape. Native Son, like its sibling Lawd Today!, formally replicates the
discombobulation of mid-century life in the American metropole; for the European city, Joyce’s *Ulysses* does the same.

The formal effect of *Laud Today!* and *Ulysses* reproduces the psychological heritage of the urban modernist. In such texts, a proliferation of voices, interests, and pure signs detached from their objects are left to spontaneously populate the text—this is the result of a life lived “in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted: a world ridden with national and class strife, a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 446). These are the trappings of modernity; and a literature which formally accommodates them, it comes to seem, offers uncannily realistic (re)presentations of capitalized modernity, issuing from it as the effect of its structuring principles and operative logics. The hyperbolism of Wright’s and Joyce’s fiction *produces* a mimetic effect, where it encounters the reader’s sensual faculties. In his process notes for *Native Son*, Wright remarks on how his fiction is intended to communicate truths “more important than surface reality or plausibility” (459). Capitalist industry denies plausibility as criterion for truth, and mimesis ceases to be the appropriate aesthetic to depict the travails and emotional textures of modernity.

Acceding to a mandate of economic excess, hyperbolic textual accumulation is a perspicacious posture; it represents an effect, materializing as a response to scenes of capitalist cosmopolitanism. Wright and Joyce equally employ this strategy, struggling to *re*-present modern social commerce through a traffic of accreted signs. Hence, perhaps, the acuity of charges of overwriting, over-representation and over-signification that devolve upon *Ulysses* and *Laud Today!*; but it is fitting that these
archetypes of the modernist genre would be precisely overwrought. Overwriting is an impulse that betrays a reflexive interest in interpolating all the vast material of cultural life. It means reaching back, through writing, into writing, and laying bare its economic and aesthetic histories for the pleasure, confoundment and edification of a modern readership struggling to do the same.

The Radicalism of Hyperbole

Hyperbolic expression represents a radical articulation. In its very etymology, the term reveals revolutionary commitments; it connotes literally an “over-throwing,” a gesturing-beyond. Glossing Adorno, Nyong’o writes of how “the powers of the false point to a potential correction of our dystopic present, but not necessarily by providing a picture of the true” (18). Nyong’o’s “powers of the false,” Roger Grant speculates, “which ‘point’ forward into an alternate future bear a great deal of formal similarity to the overshooting figure of hyperbole itself, which achieves its end...by ‘affirming the incredible’” (The History of Extra, or the Sound of Hyperbole in Three Scenes 13). Radicalism, inherent to the hyperbolic device, is manifest as a comprehensive, exhaustive effort of representation whose effects are transcendent, indicating a space somewhere outside itself where the objects of representation lie. Hyperbole specularizes Wright’s own literary radicalism, which displays a propensity towards the thoroughness, ambition and alienation achieved always by hyperbole.

Joycean hyperbole, forebear to Wright’s later applications, is a tactic capable of actuating textual and semiotic revolution. In the way Joycean discourse exceeds sense, overthrowing the bounds of the real, hyperbole allows for a thinking-beyond. This replicates the aims and interests of fabulation, a speculative metaphysic which
also “is an insurgent movement…toward something else, something other, something more” (Afro-Fabulations 6). The very act of propagating an accumulation of signs, imperative of Joyce’s writerly praxis, constitutes an effort of revolutionary imagination. This radical imaginary, province of a precarious moment of modern industrialism, describes the ability to conceive a different, an outside, a further-on. Ulysses, and likewise Lawd Today!, coalesce as textual artifacts that reach beyond the objects and experiences of a modernist present, into this future-imaginary. Because experimentalism in general and hyperbole in particular depict the fabulist conditions of a reality they simultaneously locate elsewhere, these tropes gesture towards a speculative space that remains unrepresentable.

Hyperbole succeeds: in Ulysses and Lawd Today!, representation overthrows meaning, positing it as a the condition of an aporia, an insurmountable and unruly excess. Meaning is always overflowing its vessel; signs are insufficient to contain it, and meaning, unbidden, continues. In Ulysses and Lawd Today!, the reader proceeds through a dense jungle of signs, through a quagmire of suggested meaning, only to reach the realization that meaning is located elsewhere. Hyperbole follows through, to the very root, on its revolutionist intervention in semiotics and aesthetic representation; it “threatens to untether both history and memory from the grounds of veridiction” (Afro-Fabulations 7). Hyperbole, fiction, and fabulation reiterate a commitment to bypassing truth in search for a better truth. Fabulation is not historical reconstruction, nor is it revisionist practicum. It is, rather, a speculative aesthetic which imagines—which creates—the possibility of the future-beyond.

The Poetic Function
In his “Theory of Prose,” Shklovsky gives an image of language, sketching discourse as it breaks into poetic and prosaic functions. In Shklovsky’s interrogation of “…the law of difficulty for the phonetics of poetic language” (13), he deduces that “the language of poetry may be said to be a difficult, ‘laborious,’ impeding language.” Instead of delivering immediately the object it represents, a poetical language imbricates the reader in the effortful process of interpreting it. Poetic language, rather than self-effacing, materializes as an obfuscating rhetorical effect. In contrast to a highly economical language of prose whose operative exigency is efficiency—the expedient delivery of ideas—poetic language renders itself opaque.

The site of meaning, in a poetic traffic of signs, is located not in the object its discourse represents, but instead somewhere in the juncture between object and representation. A language of prose affects to suture this joint, to erase the evidence of incongruency which exists always between reality and its myriad representations.

Joyce and Wright, each, employ hyperbole to the effect of engaging the poetic function of language. Hyperbole is a trope particularly apt to the description Shklovsky offers, as it posits the truth of its enunciation somewhere beyond the profusion of its signs. The symbols of excess, paradoxically, are inverted, signifying a representation that is inadequate to the meaning it proposes. Wright muses on this phenomenon, saying, “As I wrote, for some reason or other, one image, symbol, character, scene, mood, feeling evoked its opposite, its parallel, its complementary counterpart” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 460). Wright observes the incommensurability of language, be it poetic or prosaic, with the vast scene of human experience. “One can account for just so much of life,” he continues, “and then no
The signifying authority of hyperbole is always located elsewhere; it points away from that which it represents, foregrounding an excessive affectation that reverses itself, excommunicating its literal signification. Through compulsive, constitutive overstatement, hyperbole breaks with verisimilitude in order to offer it in another place. Self-negation of the superlative signifier (accomplished paradoxically through the emphatic reiteration of its multitudinous signs) creates a specular space, not directly represented, where meaning is purported to lie.

*Capitalism and Truth*

Hyperbole in the work of Wright and Joyce is a feature of both textual phenomenology and formal design. The modernist heritage of these authors submerges them in a sociopolitical matrix where capitalist logics have liberated signification and emancipated the sign. In this aesthetic economy, hyperbole replicates the same mandate of productive excess the capitalist moment extends. The industrial-capitalist context of Joyce’s and Wright’s fiction maintains that reality is already unreal. For Wright, this unsteady ontology is both a modernist affect and a consequence of racist hegemony. Nyong’o recognizes the condition of a reality which does not fit its purported effects, identifying it in “the false terms of an anti-black racial order” (19). Unreality exists as much in reality as in its representations; but the terms Nyong’o describes “are the signs of both that false order and its potential correction.” Wright recovers this opportunity in a system of modern signs, adapting them towards a nonrepresentationalism that reproduces the “familiar emotional patterns” common to black experience specifically, and to modern existence generally. Where conventional representation is inadequate to address the anxieties of
a white supremacist industrial moment, the schemas Wright employs disrupt mimetic chains of signifiers to reveal the fallacies and fabrications visited upon reality.

Hyperbole thus intervenes, describing a tendency of representation towards excess. This, in a discourse of surplus, is aimed always at some object external to accumulations organized under the rubric of excess. The purported referent renders perceptible a *relationship*—it makes legible the vexed quality of representation’s claim to mimesis. Ironically, it is this purposeful *anti*-realism wherein hyperbole registers the tones of reality, consigning them to the condition of *hyper*-reality.

Hyperbole, like fabulation, “exposes the relation between truth and lying in an other-than-moral sense” (5), Nyong’o writes. Troubling mimetic authority, a modernist literary language becomes the alibi of signification, insisting that meaning exists, but directing investigations of its source back into the inexhaustible economies of text.

Representation, hyperbole asserts, is never adequate to reality. In a discourse of surfeiting signs, hyperbole contests the monogamous logic of signification which establishes a relationship of 1:1 between signifier and signified. The rhetoric of modernism disrupts the simple calculus of pre-modern semiosis, which enlists a phenomenology of equivalences to scaffold regimes of natural-realist representation. The proportionalizing practice of this discourse affirms that meaning depends on the symmetry of object and representation. Hyperbole, in contrast, erects an unstable relationship between these elements, making legible the gap between figurative and literal, between the sign and its object. Hyperbole, equivocating thus, is a discourse that exhausts its representational resources. Signifying authority is denied, even as the hyperbolic mechanism proliferates the signs by which it relentlessly continues *on*. 
Inadequacy and Excess

In Wright’ and Joyce’s texts, hyperbole is a synecdoche for the broader aesthetic and thematic edifice. *Ulysses* and *Lawd Today!* instantiate modernist appropriations of the resources of language to reveal a deficiency of representation; and, perhaps, a deficiency of reality. Hyperbole accomplishes this, acting against ideologues and artificers, and dosing them with their own fabulist discursive strategies. Hyperbole is a rhetorical space where the inadequacy of words finds remedy in their paratactic copia. Words are no longer contingent upon reality, but only upon each other: this is the source of modernism’s anxiety and delight. Bloom reflects upon how “he is always the last term of a preceding series even if the first term of a succeeding one, each imagining himself to be first, last, only and alone whereas he is neither first nor last nor alone in a series originating in and repeated to infinity” (601). A logic of excess which institutes isolation is the structuring paradox of modern existence. Hyperbole is forever un concluded: it amasses symbols around the periphery of an object, tracing its contours but never reaching its center. Modernist expression is left nothing but empty rosters of beings and signs accumulating along the metonymic axis of infinity; this diagnoses an insufficiency, adducing discursive dilation as the inverted symptom of unrepresentability.

The modernist moment Wright and Joyce inhabit is imbued with this; dilation, as an instance of temporal distortion relying on accumulation, becomes useful to Wright in figuring this paradox. In *Lawd Today!* he mobilizes this trope towards the image of an endless set of steps, “miles and miles of steps” (9), which the protagonist climbs in the interminable interval of dream-time. Despite a night’s hard climb, the
protagonist remains “right where he had started!” (9). Stasis becomes a metaphor for blackness, which, Nyong’o contests, “resists reproductive, developmental, and accumulative time” (11). Hyperbole affirms this, working on a horizontal plane of mutuality—it posits a non-transcendental linguistic metaphysics that can only make deictic moves towards a field of proliferating specificity. Hyperbole inhabits the exhaustive, inexhaustible form of the list: irreducible, because its terms are incommensurable, but linked by mere relations of proximity and succession.

Gesturing towards the endlessness of signs, hyperbole innately acknowledges finitude: its own. Hyperbole marks the bounds of human knowledge and expression, curtailing knowability and expressibility even as it projects itself towards these same vanishingly abstract horizons. It recognizes its limit, ironically, through a hyper-abundant accumulation of signs. The summary effect of this commitment to excess is expressed in a modernist discourse exhaustive in both length and rhetorical texture. *Ulysses* materializes this; but neither its dramatic proportions nor its vigorous discourse succeed to capture a meaning which vanishes from the page. “Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word?” (63), appeals Bloom’s correspondent, a woman who calls herself Martha. Yet this is no name but an alias, and the word to which she refers remains undefined; “real meaning,” meanwhile, vanishes entirely. Unrepresentability prevails: *Ulysses*, even in its reflexive enterprise as a superlative act of enunciation, remains rich with the ineffable, spattered with moments where sense emerges in the space between words, in combinations of nonsensical consonants, in unfinished thoughts, unpredicated sentences and predicted, unpredictable endings. Semiotics, *Ulysses* contests, is an ungovernable matrix,
reconfigured as often and entirely as the sociopolitical materialities which enlist it towards representation. Relentlessly self-begetting, meaning goes on.

A Reading of Overabundance

In the province of high modernism, Joyce mobilizes signs to emphasize unfixity and heighten decontextualization. Instability is introduced by manipulations of individual signs, which become compound words like *willowpatterned*, *washingsoda*, *porkbutcher* and *sausagepink*. Such elisions lend a rarified shade to the objects they describe, affirming reality’s inaccessibility in the increasingly specified combinations offered by catenated words. Collation introduces suspicion for a purportedly specular referent, chasing infinitely precise depictions with infinitely indexed terms. With each emergence of composite signs, the reader is reminded of the malleability of language and the indefinite extensions possible when word reaches towards reality. These strange portmanteaus of Joycean design are a wink to the inadequacies and excesses of language; the total enterprise of the text becomes, in the space where representation fails, the task of assimilating this paradox.

*Ulysses* offers a superlative example of semiotic enjambment in the notion of *contransmagnificandjewbangtantiality*, a state which, despite the hyperspecificity given by its farragoed form, is nearly unparsable. The paradox of pointed singularity communicated by multiply-adjectivized composites is summarized by hyperbole’s obsession with supernumeracy that does not service precision: as words are added, sense seems to recede. This particular word invokes the “divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial” (32), surfacing a textual mythos preoccupied with a metaphysics of primacy. If paternity is figured precisely as a relationship of
primacy, *contrasmagnificandjewbangtantiality* is the interrogative of this dilemma. This term invokes discombobulated genealogy and troubled lineage; these themes are manifest in the enjambment of vying conceptual paradigms, which connote various literal and metaphorical figurations paternity lends itself to. In *Ulysses*, paternity is not merely a question of ancestry, but also one of artistic provenance. Stephen Dedalus struggles to imagine an autonomous literature of Irish nationhood, divested of imperialist Anglicizing influences, which he alone could sire. Fantasies of paternity merge obsessions with originality, ethnic nationalism and creative authority, proposing this fraught juncture as the site of a revolutionary art.

*Contrasmagnificandjewbangtantiality* synthesizes *Ulysses*’s modernist conceit, recapitulating its query into elemental origins—in this word is contained both root and derivation, both begetter and begot. It elides the concepts of consubstantiality (the co-materiality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and transubstantiality (the hierarchic arrangement of the trinity), instead proposing mutuality—a perpetuity of parentage, a non-hierarchical genealogy. Herein, it disrupts creative and interpretive strategies that affirm “reality” as the source of representation, and assume its trace is recoverable from text. *Ulysses* contests a deterministic ontology which imagines that reality precedes the stories by which it is rendered *real*.

The middle term of this leviathanic compound lends critical insight: *Magnific(at)* invokes the metaphor of Jesus’s conception as Word-made-flesh. This affirms the precedence of *word over flesh*, professing the autonomous power of creation immanent to the Word. Each element of this compound conjures from a different angle and with different implications the question of origins; but the
conclusion it draws are the same. Originality, like paternity, is a fallacy scaffolded upon an obsession with primacy; yet “fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man” (170). In the discourse of *Ulysses*, the limit is abolished, the origin is destroyed, and signification enters back into the limitless process of equivalences internal to the text from whence it emerged…

*Intent to Signify*

Joyce constructs a formal vocabulary where signification (or, *representation*) accumulates—indeed, recognizably and traceably, as the reader can adduce moments where a sentence or phrase re-emerges from the cacophony of discourse surrounding it—though *sense* does not. The arrangement of signs into a hypertrophic amalgam of text works relentlessly to *indicate* meaning, to affirm that meaning *exists*; the produced effect, however, displaces the reader, sabotaging her grasp on the textual traffic of sense. *Ulysses* recognizes the modernist exigency to appropriate the sign as a form—an *intent* to signify—rather than a specific and immediate content, present in the letter of the sign. *Ulysses* mobilizes hyperbole towards exposing the mimetic fallacy, contesting a hegemony of representation authorizing itself on this basis by an illegitimate metaphysic of primacy. Hyperbole, Roger Grant attests,

has the effect of re-scripting aesthetic engagement…It requires that you ask what is being inflated, what is being diminuted, and why? Hyperbole therefore involves its audiences in a collective examination of hierarchy and value, which…are embedded in aesthetic forms. (15)
The world, for the characters of *Ulysses*, is already hierarchical, already hyperbolic: modern capitalism affirms this. The defamiliarized scene of modern subjecthood finds egress in hyperbolic parataxis and fanciful fabulation. “God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain” (41) Stephen Dedalus philosophizes. This strange catalogue of life, submerged in imagination’s discourse, offers a pseudo-teleological account of existence. This determinism—man becoming fish becoming barnacle—affirms the enunciation even as it invites accusations of ridiculousness. This illuminates the freedom of the modernist sign and its paradoxical constitution as a ludicrous undeniability; as Bloom’s dead father allows, “From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step” (419).

Stephen’s musing is a superlative example of the way the asyndeton of inner monologue makes its way into *Ulysses*, leaving the reader to infer the fringes of consciousness the text omits. The ontogenetic and semiotic drift caused by capitalist configurations invite endless speculations on this unfixity. Absent a syntax separating the terms of the list, each entity blends into the next, becoming semantically interchangeable. The relationships of meaning punctuation establishes are lost to the flow of signification in a radically de-structured semiotic environment; meaning is negated, then reestablished, in the tautology of Joyce’s prolific prose.

Ultimately, the telos reverts itself—the syntactically bereft *barnacle goose* is the pivot that, refusing to make *sense*, reroutes the telos away from meaning and back into language itself. The more signs hyperbolic parataxis adds, the more apparent it becomes that such elaboration could continue indefinitely. Accumulation begets accumulation; capitalism again reveals itself as hyperbole’s aesthetic provenance.
Ulysses is responsive to this mandate: in Stephen’s strange string of speculations, the conjunction is established by a mere relationship of proximity, which autonomously generates its own semantic link. The items of the list are interchangeable, though ineluctable, propelled into the “limitless process of equivalences” Barthes imagines. Ulysses reverses the terms of textual engagement: bypassing the question of whether representation suits reality, it asks, rather, if reality is adequate to its representations. The vectors of interpretive practice are reoriented towards poiesis; Ulysses points back into language, affirming it, not reality, as truth’s gravitational center.

Ulysses proposes the transcendence of language through itself, adducing terms in an endless articulation that waxes and wanes between sense and nonsense, between contingency and freedom. Within the folds of this paradox, the aim of Joyce’s work materializes. The justification of Ulysses’s protracted textuality is the project of a linguistic radicalism that recovers language for text, and lets reality adhere where it may. Ulysses creates a vocabulary that intensifies the effect of Jakobson’s “poetic function;” it insists upon confounding the analytic exigency of making-sense, submerging the referent in a wasteland of semiotic cyphers and destroying, as it were, language’s purported origin. Language, emancipated thus, ceases to hold reality as its source and telos, and refers only to itself.

A Semiotic Flânerie

Yet the structuring paradoxes of modernism remain. Even while Ulysses, as a catalogue of literary style, revives its generic roots, it projects its conclusions into a future not-yet-arrived, perhaps not-yet-anticipated. Its characters are unrooted, horny flâneurs lost amidst scenes of socio-sensual profusion. In “Eye-Swiping London: Ian
Sinclair, Photography and the Flâneur,” Kirsten Seale provides a providential connection. She writes, “In Sinclair’s texts the flâneur, tracing Jacques Derrida’s thought, is a paradox, a presence that is comprehensible only by acknowledging an absence” (1). Herein is manifest the modernist conceit, which mirrors the effect of the hyperbolic trope and resonates with the idea of a radical textuality. *Ulysses* is a work that situates itself on a brink: where modernity and its literature seek the affirmation of temporal-historical continuity, they alternately revile and delight in the present as insupportable, ungovernable chaos. Historically and formally, *Ulysses* embraces ambivalence, placing itself at the edge of a vortex of modernist anxiety, offering solutions simultaneously progressive, reactionary, reformist and revisionist.

The flâneur—as the protagonists of *Ulysses* and *Laud Today!* might convincingly be described—becomes visible as a modern anachronism, already-displaced, already-paradoxical, emerging upon the industrialscapes of metropolitan life as a seeker and a wanderer. “Palimpsest-like,” the flâneur registers historical drift, the relentless continuum of time aimed into a future he does not recognize; his body is a “material memory which is only understood by looking away from the future, by reading retrospectively” (1). The modern black subject of Wright’s fiction emerges as a specific sort of flâneur, an emblem of this discombobulated temporality. Nyong’o concurs, attesting that “blackness can rearrange our perceptions of chronology, time, and temporality” (4). To recall Barthes’s dyad, the black flâneur might be imagined as an avatar with capacities both signifying and indexical. As a fundamentally modernist trope mediating readerly access to the superabundant conditions of modernity, the flâneur inhabits an interval. Distant but immersed, out-of-sync but
indubitably of his moment, the flâneur eulogizes lost time. This figure becomes a full absence, an empty space, a lacunae in history’s comprehensive sweep, marking the place of an invisible seam in time.

And indeed, it is the body of the flâneur itself which registers these paradoxes. Simultaneously elegiac emblem and modernist prognosticant, the flâneur himself is the scene of the break. “The flâneur’s movement creates anachrony,” Seale proposes, in how “he travels urban space, the space of modernity, but is forever looking into the past” (1). The practice of flânerie, spatialized and temporalized, recalls a condition of the past that the flaneur watches metastasize into the unfamiliar modern present. Ulysses and later Lawd Today! embody a literature attuned to this psychology.

The “spatio-temporal illogic” the flâneur occupies is an inhering feature of modern life: Joyce and Wright imagine characters marked by this inconsistency, the discontinuity of a present severed from a past to which it cannot return. The presence of the flâneur testifies of this longing; “he reminds us of Walter Benjamin’s angel who finds himself driven by the storm of progress ‘irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned’” (Seale 1). The figure of the flâneur thus recapitulates the paradox of blackness as the pathologically modernist NEVER-NOW. This no-time, no-place is the province of black realization, a space which has been annexed from signification as an aporia, but which can thus be recovered to speculate on a future of perpetual presence. “The critical poetics of afro-fabulation,” Nyong’o reminds, “are a means of dwelling in the shock of an [anti-black] reality without ever becoming fully of it” (26). The never-nnowness which was the elision of black subjectivity becomes fertile territory for covert signification, ripe for resitution and radical refiguration.
In Excess: An Excursus

Wright’s Lawd Today! assimilates Joyce at the level of content and form; it emerges, powerfully, as a black proletarian version of *Ulysses*. Perhaps this is proof of Gillian Johns’s suggestion that “black writers have mastered Western genres but also that they have masterfully ‘signified’ on and molded them into verbal vessels in which the black experience could find fuller expression” (250). Indeed, this accords with a theory of genre Wright himself offers in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” which imagines genre as a site ripe for ideological snatching: “Lenin,” Wright conveys, “makes the observation that oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than the bourgeoisie themselves” (98). Wright takes up Joyce’s aesthetic influence to explore the same fundamental problems; both authors are preoccupied with the paradoxes of modern life as experienced by the elegiac emblems, modern wanderers, and rootless specters of cosmopolitanism.

In both treatments of urban quotidian reality, there are immanent theories of the relationship modernity bears to antiquity; this is fundamental to the formal and thematic orientations of modernism. Wright’s work preserves “in the historical record a set of fabulous resources and stratagems” (*Afro-Fabulations* 8). The discombobulating modernist instinct becomes, for Wright, one such resource, an aesthetic province wherein he is able to trace the disorientations of black existence while resisting the reactionary wish fulfillments of white modernist ethos; hyperbole is another strategy. Wright’s texts thus become palimpsestic, revealing absent representations and recovering moments of lost time.
When, *Ulysses* and *Lawn Today!* ask, does hyperbole shimmer between real possibility and rhetorical self-circumscription, belying its own impossible overstatement? The paradox, the semiotic aporia the logic of hyperbole proposes, is that an excess of signs, *exceeding* the depicted reality, approaches the ontological epicenter of this reality…the same reality it ultimately *overthrows*. Herein are the revolutionary proportions of hyperbolic discourse revealed: hyperbole overcomes sense and representation, moving towards a reality created new from the wreckage of plausibility it leaves in its wake. A system of stable signification and the “reality” to which it ostensibly corresponds become collateral damage of hyperbole’s rhetorical overthrow; reality and signification mingle, fading into a twilight of simulacra which receives the semiotic refuse of hyperbole’s discursive path.

Hyperbole accomplishes a formal and rhetorical revision of what reality purports itself to be, reconfiguring this reality as thoroughly as it reconfigures the schemas of representation by which reality is conveyed. Where *Ulysses* shows the deep disappointment of modern existence in order to turn at last to a possible synthesis, an escape hatch left open by history, Wright imagines no such resolution. Yet Wright turns to the promise of art, to the specific discourse of a fabulist mode which “engages the philosophical position…that the irreversibility of the flow of time is the paradoxical source of freedom” (*Afro-Fabulation* 3). Wright’s revolutionary politic emerges as a regime of textual-temporal representation, affirming hyperbolic fabulation as the only transcendent possibility a radical black praxis might yet claim.
Anachronistic Narrative & the Perpetual Present-Tense

*John Brown’s body lies amouldering in the grave, / His soul goes marching on!*

--folk song, *Laud Today!*

A Brief History

For the characters of Wright’s 1963 text *Laud Today!*, time appears in confounding and insidious proportions. Temporal confoundment is, already, a feature of the text’s publication narrative—it was written over a period spanning 1933-1937, though it did not meet its audience until a quarter of a century later. *Laud Today!* was consistently inconsistent with the formal pathos and literary templates of its time; this remained true until the novel’s eventual publication, where it was met with a “mixture of confusion, qualified praise, and disgust,” Brannon Costello writes. Costello, author of “Richard Wright’s *Laud Today!* and the Political Uses of Modernism” contextualizes the novel as both a piece of modernist fiction and a venture in proletarian literature. Costello notes, elaborating *Laud Today!*’s strange birth, that “readers have long considered *Laud Today!*...an anomaly—when they have considered it at all” (39). Published more than two decades after *Uncle Tom’s Children* and the magnum opus that was *Native Son, Laud Today!* was a confounding revelation delivered to a small and incredulous readership. Yet, its peculiar situation as Wright’s first-written, last-published novel has the effect of presenting it as an archive of ideological and authorial evolution; this work circumscribes Wright’s published corpus and brings the apotheosis of its development back to its beginnings.

*Jake’s Prophetic Dream*
*Lawd Today!* opens on a dream-sequence: the reader is introduced to Jake, Wright’s central character, from within the folds of his sleep. Jake’s dream depicts, paradoxically, the imperceptibility of the top of a set of steps which he compulsively climbs. Orienting himself in sleep, Jake “stopped and looked to see if he could tell where the steps ended, but there were just steps and steps and steps” (9). As he climbs, Jake thinks, “Hell, there just ain’t no end to these steps!” He realizes, dimly, that no matter how quickly he scales, he “ain’t moving a peg.” This sequence emblematizes the trajectory of temporal advance throughout the novel, anticipating its characterization of time. Time and its passage, in *Lawd Today!*, are constantly doubling back, refusing to facilitate meaningful moments of transformation.

The steps Jake climbs in his dream unfold upwards towards an invisible terminus, indicating novel-time as compounded *iteration*, a repeated step-after-step-after-step that never reaches its destination. The trajectory of Jake’s movement, upwards but not onwards, both hyperbolizes and makes literal the adage of “running in place”; Jake exclaims on this hopelessness as he climbs towards a vanishing horizon, thinking “Jeeesus, all that running for nothing” (9), but continuing to climb nonetheless. The image of endless steps presages the tempo of time—metronomic, repetitive, constant—and mandates the metaphoric and literal movement of characters—running breathlessly in place—in the development of *Lawd Today!*. The effect of temporal return upon the characters’ psyches is not relief, but rather an emptiness, an absence, a mendacious forgetfulness. The cyclicality of this pattern—the lapses in memory which prompt compulsive repetitions, falling perennially into dissatisfaction—is vaguely felt by the characters as a “wide gap
yawn[ing] in [their] minds” (10). The memory of modern life’s monotonous logic is suppressed, diligently mis-remembered; this amnesia becomes, in the context of a pathological modernity, the very condition of survival. “What was I dreaming?” Jake asks himself later on; “it seemed very, very important that he should remember…but the dream steps were drowned in a vast blackness, like a slow movie fadeout” (10).

As the browbeaten subjects of modernity and the victims of white supremacy, Jake and his cohort are historically decontextualized, dispossessed of a meaningful passage through time. Characters recollect only the sense of having “been thirsting, longing for something” (10) otherwise ineffable, otherwise lost to time. A (pre)destiny to repetition catches Jake and his black modernist kin in a temporal matrix that stretches up along the synchronic axis of a perpetual present-tense, compounding itself in the transitory moments of existence Jake snatches back from time.

_Perpetuity as Modernist Synchrony_

The characters of _Lawd Today!_ are forever out-of-time, though inescapably in and of time—they are the anachronistic subjects of a double-displacement visited upon them by both their modernist heritage and their blackness. This thesis is expressed symbolically in the ill-fated progress Jake makes up the steps of his dream, towards something which continually recedes before his efforts to reach it. In dream-time, “He was flying up steps, mounting whole blocks of steps, miles and miles of steps, but even at that end was not in sight” (9). The speed of Jake’s progress can never catch up with the automated and indifferent passage of time. _Lawd Today!_ describes this impossible advance; Jake experiences, in the course of the single day
the narration spans, the full range of human experience, the echoing and elliptical emptiness of a historically paralyzed lifetime.

Jake’s relationship with time’s passage is that of one subjected to the unbearable eternities contained in the modernist everyday. The quotidian becomes imperishable, an iterative infinity constraining life to a rhythm of endless perpetuity. For the black modern subject, temporal compoundment comes devoid of the narratives of progress and lines of flight traced by a stable social history. Though time accumulates, it is amnesiac; its flow is constant but not fixed to some point in the past which would allow its effect to become cumulative. As Jake’s friend Al sagely says, “Ain’t no use of a black man rushing, cause we ain’t going nowhere” (103). The startling lucidity of this knowledge does not recover time, but rather banishes it entirely; nor does it negate the mandate of a life lived cursorily in time.

Jake has a recurring thought: “Gawd, how slow the time passes!” (129). He becomes mechanized by it, trapped by it, “fallen into the rhythm of the thing” (130). The monotony of his experience is in accumulation without advance. Moments of time compound, in Jake’s life, into a distinctly modernist synchronicity which is forever out-of-time. Jake feels time slow around him, narrowing to the effect of a centrifugal present, concentrating him towards an atemporal omphalos by keeping him spinning in place, like a “squirrel turning in a cage” (131). Destiny rests in the spin of the wheel where Jake plays the lottery, or in an infinite row of steps. Rather than mend this rift, rather than smoothing the wrinkled fabric of time, the machinery of narrative offers no synthesis, instead widening the gap between representation and
reality. Time, in *Lawd Today!*, is subjected to Wright’s modernist hyperbole, which manipulates and extends it, casting it beyond its own rational limitations.

_Fate’s Wheel_

Discursive dilation, in *Lawd Today!*, becomes a many-layered game with time. The effect of extending the space of the telling—which Wright accomplishes by massaging the hypertrophied account of a single day—is to emphasize the dilatory quality of time, which for Wright’s characters becomes unbearable. Policy, the form of lottery Jake plays, perpetrates this spontaneous entrapment in time: hours and days are lost to its endlessly spiraling wheel. Jake “would play it consistently for about a week and lose consistently…But a vivid dream would be the signal for his answering again the call of the numbers” (42). Dreams, steps, spinning orbs: motion without movement surfaces in each image. These themes, in turn, presage more of the same in the gambling game—more temporal fixity, more lost luck. It is Jake’s dream that calls him back to the Black Gold Policy Wheel House where he plays; endless steps find their interpretation as the numbers Jake will bet his bucks on. (“And who would not take a chance like that?” he asks.) As bets are placed and books are closed, “the Wheel [is] brought to the center of the floor” (45) where it sits in judgement, an indifferent ellipse, tool and teller of Jake’s fixed fortune.

Worktime, like leisure time, passes for Jake in an interval of lost time. Jake’s post office shift is a superlative experience of temporal entrapment: as his foreman surveys the room, Jake is filled with guile. “You sonofabitch!” he rages silently, “It ain’t always going to be this way!” (124). But then, “His mind went abruptly blank. He could not keep on with that thought, because he did not know where that thought
led.” The thought’s thread, along with its threat, is lost. Indeed, the way it is will always be the way it is... Jake is afforded no escape, and his imagination is fatally constrained by the framework of a perpetual present. “The feeling that he could do nothing doubled back upon him,” enforcing abrupt return to an exhausting, exhausted immediacy, “fanning the aches of other dead feelings of not being able to do anything” (124). The experience of impotence and powerlessness is an abiding reality, doubling (upon) itself and fulfilling its own prophecy; the perpetual present is Jake’s inescapable black pit. The forgetting of lost time, of time already denied, attends Jake’s confounded existence in-yet-outside-of-time. “What [Jake] was trying to remember hovered on the tip of his tongue; it seemed that in a moment he would speak it. But he could not” (41). This paradox resists formulation, as there is a shortage of terms to describe the memory of a past which never, yet, existed.

**The Omphalos of Time**

Gerard Genette’s insistence on the constitutional necessity of a narrative “zero-time” figures here. Discursive orientation marks out a territory for time to fill; this zero-point emerges as that which narrative ostensibly represents but in fact circles endlessly around, situating itself in perpetual reference to. This is but one of Genette’s “self-consciously futile” attempts to “capture time’s passage...to get ahold of what will not remain still: the protean experience of life lived in and through time” (258), as Kent Puckett describes. Genette’s zero-time cannot be directly represented; rhetorical tropes merely orbit around its empty hole. Time, by Genette’s account, is predestined to a negative constitution where it is both absent and referential: incongruous with itself, narrative time is doubly unsituated, doubly undone. Valerie
Rohy, in *Queer Narrative Theory*, quotes Genette, proposing that “anachrony is neither a rarity nor a modern invention. On the contrary, it is one of the traditional resources of literary narration” (175). Temporal representations emerge from a logical fallacy: these are never synchronous, never literal: they indicate the immanence of a paradox, existing always laterally, somewhere *else* along the horizontal axis of narrative’s and history’s continuum.

In *Lawd Today!*, this is especially so. Jake and his cronies are always “somewhere else,” both temporally and psychologically. Jake faces a workday where “eight long hours loomed ahead like a series of black pits” (114) upon which he “tries not to think” and into which he insists not to fall. But “As the first two hours dragged by he began to feel a vast emptiness, a sort of black, resigned peace” (115). Jake’s psyche is projected elsewhere, and he withstands boredom because he daily “clings to the vertical surface of a wall so long by his fingernails…that he [grows] used to it.”

Jake, constrained by an insupportable present to which he must become reconciled, *embodies* narrative’s zero-time, the symbolic tether to which representation adheres. Jake is emplaced in a no-time, no-place that neither touches nor invokes history—it has no trajectory, no memory, no genealogy—except where history touches *it*.

Wright represents herein the condition of an artificial reality, revealed by the farce of modern signs. These, in Jake’s world, accumulate without effect, accruing meaninglessly and exhaustively. Hyperbole, a compulsion of representational effect replicating an inescapable present, is a trope Wright applies to the experience of characters in time. Strangely, illogically, hyperbole becomes *mimetic*, deployed as a discursive strategy to lower the scrim of purported “reality” from which Wright’s
black characters are categorically excluded. Hypertrophy—the hyperbolic, spectacular growth—of the syntagmatic axis of Jake’s life collates him on a vertical plane of temporal accumulation that lacks history and directionality. Per Val Rohy, “literary modernism offers myriad examples of nonlinear temporality” (175) suited to capturing the historical paradoxes of modern subjectivity, and responsive to the afflictions of black subjects. Modernism’s anachronistic logics affirm the double-bind of temporal representation as another zero-time, a necessary point of reference which itself remains empty, but by which other histories are oriented by. The characters of Lawd Today! populate the fringes of sociopolitical life and are excluded from real time; hyperbole is the only “reality” they know.

The black subject of Wright’s fiction *is* the self-contained present, thrust into accretive immediacy, which is emplaced on a vertical axis of multiple simultaneity. This syntagmatic plane represents the direction of temporal accumulation, the hyperbolic illogic of time unfolding upwards. The horizontal axis of historical development is compressed into an endless superimposition of immediacy, beneath which Jake is submerged. Wright’s characters are subjects of time, *subjected* to it though not in it or of it in a historical sense. “Life” as a narrative category is lost; the principle of gradual development, the concept of *bildung*, becomes meaningless for such characters, divested of the evolutionary promise of time.

*An Ambivalent Black Nationalism*

In the continuum of history, each moment experienced as “present” necessarily contains a past and refers to a future; time is necessarily a deictic phenomenon. Yet, for the characters of Lawd Today!, figured as a discursive “zero-
time,” the present is dissevered from its past, forever running-in-place towards a receding future. Temporal dislocation is a theme embedded in Wright’s work, evident in his modernist tendencies; the native anachronism afflicting his characters rushes to the fore in Lawd Today! as his most explicitly modernist formal enterprise.

Spectral past and absent future emerge symptomatically in Lawd Today!, addressed in Wright’s figuration of black nationalism. As Jake and his friends slowly make their way through the day that is the parable of their lives, they come upon a parade of black nationalists marching under the banner of Zionism. The banner reads: “ONWARD TO AFRICA” (92), announcing the future-oriented and location-specific intentions of the black nationalists, and claiming a quantifiable account of their progress towards a future African Republic. This moment evidences a strange blending of time, the collation of a “recalled” past not properly the province of biographical memory onto ethno-nationalist visions of futurity. Confronted with the possibility of such a return, “they nuts as hell” (95) Jake decides. Modernist anxieties surface similar paradoxes, fabricating strange and unlikely figurations of Futures remade in the image of spurious pasts.

Zionist-brand black nationalism purports to supply Afro-Americans with visions of a reclaimed national heritage; a mantra proclaiming ONWARD implies the material dimension of a vanished, but powerfully restituted past alongside an imminent future. But to some modernists, this formulation is unconvincing. “And if we went back to Africa, what would we do?” (95) asks an incredulous bystander. Onward is not a concept that makes sense to temporally-entrapped characters, as there is no referential time outside the present by which such a line of flight might be
oriented. The trajectory invoked by black nationalism acts reparatively, recovering
the sense of linearity and historical continuity whereby a future might materialize out
of the fragments of the past. Some black Americans are susceptible to this promise;
others, like Wright, remain unconvinced. “The significance of ideology,” Lukács
whispers, “is that it provides the possibility of viewing the contradictions of life in a
fruitful, ordered context” (“Narrate or Describe?” 143). The black nationalist parade
bears witness to this, supplying a manufactured reality that answers the fallacy of
white supremacy in its own hyperbolic rhetoric.

A discombobulated account of the history of black life in America gives view
to other incompatibilities plaguing the moment of which Wright’s work is born.
Garveyite nationalism of the type rendered here is prototypically modernist: it
surfaces the fascistic tendency towards spectacle, evoked in the machinations of
hyperbole. The black nationalist parade indeed betrays such shades, evident in its
authoritarianism and obsession with the spurious phantasy of heritage and homeland.
Wright declaims such pageantry, but acknowledges the pathos it holds for people like
Jake. Wright’s stance is ultimately ambivalent: he approves the power and allure of
collective mobilization, while entertaining the possibility that it might become
fascistic. Still, this scene exemplifies a longing—Wright’s and his characters’ own—
for collective intention to be powerfully actuated towards revolutionary realization.

*Not on Time*

Disordered sequence and disoriented temporality are, equally, themes of
Wright’s work and descriptions of the representational effects he relies upon to
describe the black condition. These same features characterize the conceit of
parochial ethno-nationalist ideology as it is presented in *Laud Today*. Mikhail Bakhtin writes, of its effect as representation, that “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). Narrative, as a product of representation, enforces the comingling of time and space, materializing at the apex of these representational axes. The slogan of the black nationalist parade performs a similar feat, superimposing a spatial displacement—naming a spatial exodus—onto a temporal one. In a Zionist phantasy, time and place become interconnected as two planes along which black history may be relocated in order to recover itself.

The marshals of this fabulist ontology are members of the nationalist spectacle: “These were the supreme generals of a mythical African republic, and the medals of unfought wars and unwon victories clinked against their uniforms” (93). The generals represent the crusade of black America for meaningful historical narratives assuring both an origin and a destiny; they march with all the authority of this dislocated future-past. “Their shoulders were straight, their faces up, and their eyes gazed into the far distance…as though entranced by some strange mirage upon the horizon” (93), Jake observes. The spatial metaphor of the horizon both localizes and abstracts the image of the future towards which the generals march: the assurance of reaching it is the certainty of one who sees a *mirage*. The oneiric vision of a future which resuscitates its past, strangely, bears the construction of an ellipse—the same one which circumscribes Jake and his cohort in atemporal, ahistorical immediacy. (Recall the opening sequence, the steps of Jake’s dream, their zenith as an invisible horizon towards which he frantically climbs…) The endless steps, like the
hallucinatory vision of a primal Zionist future, capitulate to the paradox of black history in America. Their elliptical construction, eliding beginning and end and signaling a constitutional unattainability, circumnavigates the void of nothingness revealed at their center. The shape of the ellipse is the truth of history’s inescapable tautology, imposing deterministic inevitability upon even those to which it is denied.

Specular Symptoms

The motto “ONWARD TO AFRICA” reaffirms a theory of historical continuity and advance, dismissing its present in favor of a spectral future-past that retroactively reestablishes a root, a mythic origin. Zionist ideology contains in equal measure a past which determines it and a vision of the future towards which it marches—these are the vanished province of America’s black nationalist imaginary.

At the site of the parade, Jake notices a spectator covered in white makeup powder, with the effect that “she looked like two people instead of one” (95). The woman is black; her makeup is starkly white. This figure embodies the parallel articulations of black anxiety and modernist disquietude plaguing the psychological terrains of black and white America. Members of each unstable category share in the experience of historical abandonment and communal dissolution. Such subjects seek, in Wright’s view, the will to confront the “dim reaches of one’s own incommunicable life” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 434), a common flame to light the semidarkness of modern existence. Black and white modernists, both, experience “a wild and intense longing…to belong, to be identified, to feel that they [are] alive” (440). The therapy that treats the modern condition and characterizes black yearning for civil and social recognition is being “caught up forgetfully and exultingly in the swing of events, to
feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others” (440). The depth of Wright’s success is in revealing as symptomatic the response of black nationalism to white racism. Wright’s fiction characterizes black life as *specular*, a device for reflecting the maladies of white modernism back to itself.

“Bigger,” for example, “was a meaningful and prophetic symbol” (441), Wright writes. Moreover, “[he] made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white too” (441). As Wright’s sociological investigations deepen, he notes a variance in the typology Bigger exemplifies, issuing startlingly from the “lives of whites [he] met,” and he “began to sense that they had their own kind of Bigger Thomas behavioristic pattern which grew out of a more subtle and broader frustration” (442). Wright elaborates,

In both instances the deep sense of exclusion was identical. The feeling of looking at things with a painful and unwarrantable nakedness was an experience…that transcended national and racial boundaries. It was this intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of a world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity, that made me grasp the revolutionary impulse in my life and the lives of those about me. (443-4)

This names the condition of black modernism, and extends the diagnosis to disaffected metropolitan whites. It is this messianic image, ghostlike, that Jake observes at the site of the parade: the woman is notable because of “the contrast between the overdose of white powder and the natural color of her skin” (95). Wright, through this figure, offers a pathological view of black urban life, which finds its
counterpart in the white modernist psyche. Wright’s fiction thus prognosticates the effect of modernism upon both blacks and whites, offering itself as a tool through which to view the artifice of white society—it, like the woman, is grotesquely made up—and expose the violent fallacy of white supremacy.

The white-faced black woman incubates this paradox at another level. Watching her pass, Jake seems to see “two people instead of one.” This eerie vision is the effect of the layer of white powder covering her black skin. Jake’s unconscious supplies a metaphor: “it was as if her ghost were walking in front of her” (95). The hallucinatory image of the woman’s ghost appearing to precede her indicates the confoundment of ontogeny, the reversal of time, the discombobulation of genealogy that dogs the characters of Lawd Today!. These living anachronisms follow behind the memory of a usurped (or, an already dead) past into a dim and uncertain future, haunted by unrecoverable memories leaving “wide gaps yawning” in their minds.

Jake himself seeks a future contextualized by a past he cannot quite recall; he feels perpetually that it “seems like he done forgot something” (41). The “done” modifies the “forgot”; the memory was already vanished, the past already gone. The finality of the outcome, like other modalities of black time, is fixed and cyclical, anticipating its own ending. This ambivalent temporality is the heritage of black modernism, whose subjects lean towards a future colored by a past of which they have no knowledge. The Zionist slogan—ONWARD—is the truth of a paradox which reaches into the uncertain future to recover an equally unstable past to which it appeals for return. This temporal yearning, for a time not-now, is bidirectional.
Unwon battles, unfought by the Zionist army of a nonexistent black republic, consolidate as the hallucinatory truth of this negated phantasy of return.

Another Note on Time

Time is both vacuum and continuum, the self-contained and self-referential basis of narrative logic and an accretive view of human history. The Zionist slogan powerfully invokes past and future, but the present dissolves into both. This is the paradox of temporal unity-in-disunity, its pretended decomposability where history takes on the character of a patchwork of temporal segments, while time itself rushes on, unbroken and unhalting. Perhaps the relevant distinction is one drawn between time and history: history acts like narrative, constructing itself retrospectively as a narrative diegesis where events and occurrences are strung together along the diachronic axis of its development, borrowing narrative’s logics to institute causality. Time, on the other hand, is an empty and abstract expanse, the mechanical certainty of progress onto which human narratives may be imposed. Yet, time figured thus invites always the experience of anachronism. The present, the temporal there-ness of the subject is a doubtful conceit; the instant of the now, as in the black nationalist’s slogan, is always realized in the future from the vantage of retrospection.

Unlike time, narrative is indeed decomposable into its units. This is the intervention of narrative—upon a “story,” rendered discursively, and equally upon human history—wherein it performs the function of isolating and segmenting spaces of time, categorizing and calling them into relation with one another. The narrativization of these relationships imposes a logic of causality, where before there was only abstraction. “Narrative thus appears as a succession of tightly interlocking
mediate and immediate elements; dystaxia determines a ‘horizontal’ reading, while integration superimposes a ‘vertical’ reading” (122), Barthes speculates. For the characters in Lawd Today!, narration is confined to dystaxia, to the horizontal unfolding of events which refuses to become ratified at a “higher” level. The lives of Jake and his friends are the bare accumulation of events and sequences which resist contextualization and the relief of causality given by their triangulation onto an axis of paradigmatic accumulation. “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; ‘what happens’ is language alone” (124) Barthes maintains. This formulation is scaldingly true in the text of Lawd Today!, which is the protracted sequence of a non-event, a series of uneventful events which, thoroughly inconsequential, are destined to perpetual repetition.

Shklovsky, in The Structure of Fiction, provides an account of narrative with an elliptical (centrifugal) construction applicable to this episodic but non-consequential accumulation of events. In this novel, there remains the “sense of a certain incompleteness, as if [it] were never quite truly finished” (56). Lawd Today! raises the stakes, making ultimately the argument that its characters were never truly begun. This qualifies Lawd Today! as an incomplete or unconsummated narrative, a “combination of circular and step-by-step constructions” (57). Lawd Today! contains, literally, a measure of both; its wayward characters are perpetually returning to their beginnings, resorting to mechanized routine or falling back into inaction like “squirrels turning in a cage.” Self-deceiving immobility is a generalized quality, a psychological and historical condition of the characters populating Lawd Today!.
“There exists in a story,” Shklovsky reiterates, “a structure analogous to a ring or, rather, a loop” (52). Where Shklovsky sees this structure as the means by which narrative enforces closure and anticipates its own conclusion, for the characters of Lawd Today!, this possibility is hemmed in by a present reaching towards its own unknown past, and remains unrealized. Characters’ lives are confined to a syntagmatic axis and their existences cannot be historically ratified. The barrenness of the present is the emptiness around which the story, as narrativized continuity, orbits. But still, there is no movement “from a false recognition to a revelation of the true state of affairs” (56). Rather, the “formula” remains that of a loop, but one which does not ratify the meanings or solve the enigmas proposed at the narrative’s outset.

Instead, the characters are furnished with the “false ending” Shklovsky outlines, the evasive move to “a description of nature or the weather” (56). This, in Lawd Today!, is the sound of an icy wind that goes “whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit” (189), an image which also doubles back, effecting a diegetic return. The novel closes on this motif of the pit in which Jake is symbolically caught, filled with the obfuscating blackness of an unshakable present-tense.

How to End Things

Narrative gives symbolic registration to the end of representation, to the extinguishment of time; narrative is always oriented towards its ending. But narrative, and especially those falling within the modernist aesthetic paradigm, engages the paradoxes of temporal play, delaying an inevitable ending and prolonging (its own) time. Initiating a final night of debauchery, “[We] got a good chance to make up for lost time tonight” (171), Jake proclaims. Jake is continually involved in prolonging,
recovering and *making up*—he compulsively artifices to compensate for the loss of biographical, historical and future-imaginary time. Time, as Gerard Genette posits in his *Narrative Discourse*, is a constitutional feature of both story and discourse—the space of the story’s telling—but it exists also somewhere outside the text, somewhere inaccessible to narrative, somewhere in *life*. Temporality is embedded in text out of necessity, but it is also a paratextual fallacy, Genette contends. To be a modernist subject is to recognize the state of being unrecoverably lost to time.

Jake’s reclamatory intent perceives the *lost* quality of time, the slipperiness of living within it, and the absence of the promises uninterrupted temporality allows. Modernists like Jake live, as Frank Kermode describes in *The Sense of an Ending*, “in the middest,” uneasily cognizant of the absence—or the artifice—of historical destiny and narrative design. These, each, are reliant on a theory of time to adjudicate their claims of inevitability, to imagine a predestined purpose for communal life, and to posit its possible fulfillment. In *Lawd Today!*, the awareness that life is but disordered chaos and history’s causal conceit is retrospectively applied is clear to Afro-Americans. Lukács holds that “in narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events” (“Narrate or Describe?” 133). Causality, in fact, is a narrative hypothesis. Wright’s characters are removed from this and denied the satisfaction of inclusion in its myth of causality; further, they are prevented from accessing the possibility contained in Lukács’s claim that “only the experience of causality can communicate the sense of a real, chronological, concrete historical sequence.”
Denied equal membership in America’s national community, the subjects of Wright’s fiction are elided from a whitewashed auto-narrative. Denied the status of full citizens, blacks are precluded from recognizing themselves in accounts of collective self-realization. Equally, Wright’s characters are divested of a sense of historical destiny and condemned to live in a binding present-tense; crushed by inescapable perpetuity, these figures endlessly “make up for lost time.” Jake and company “dance the time down,” taken in by the “promise of an unattainable satisfaction [and] lured to a land whose boundaries receded with each step [they] took” (175). The oneiric territory towards which Wright’s characters wade, through the stickiness of suspended time, retreats before their approach. The future and the past, those tethers of the present, fall away precipitously as Jake and his cohort try to claim a present which is perpetually claiming them.

The conclusion of Lawd Today! is, literally, a return. Wright leaves Jake fading into unconsciousness, as “outside, an icy wind swept around the corner of the building, whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit” (189). The symbolism of the final image performs an enveloping diegetic return, signaling another revolution of fate’s wheel, another destination reached, then found to be commensurate with its beginnings. The final line recalls an earlier instant, when time seems to stop and the present conglomerates into a “series of black pits” appearing hallucinatorily to Jake, who “tries not to think of them” (114). The end of narrative returns it to somewhere in the middle, muddling sequence and causality and trapping the reader in the perpetual present-tense of its telling. In Queer Narrative Theory, Rohy comments on the conceit of narrative closure: “the end of the story is already in
the beginning of the story; the teleological movement goes into reverse at the very moment when it reaches its goal” (177). Narrative logic, also, is a circle—the beginning presupposes the ending, anticipating itself and fixing intervening moments between brackets of inevitability. The purported end of narrative, figured thus, is the beginning of something else, though that something else is naught but more of itself, superimposed compulsively upon empty time. For the characters of Lawd Today!, time is the paradoxical effect of history’s incompatible valences, contained vertiginously in a present which remains unratted, unrealized, and decontextualized. The present-tense skates over time on its journey backwards into its future, and forwards—ONWARDS—into its unrecoverable past.

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“I’m just wasting time!”

--Jake, Lawd Today!
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