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"A Dramatic Picture . . . of Woman from Feudalism to Fascism:" Richard Wright's "Black Hope"

In February 1940 Richard Wright sent to his literary agent, Paul Reynolds, the 961-word manuscript of an untitled novel for which the working title was "Slave Market." He would later title the manuscript "Black Hope." Apologizing for what he acknowledged to be the "over-written and redundant, too vague and abstract" nature of the text, he noted that its present state was no worse than the "same crude condition" of the original typescript of Native Son, which was then on its way to publication. Wright summarized the plot of his new novel as "a dramatic picture . . . of woman from feudalism to fascism." Only briefly alluded to in the scholarship on Wright, and never reproduced even in excerpted segments, "Black Hope" is indeed an unwieldy novel. It warrants far more attention that it has received, however, and ought to find its way to publication. The novel demonstrates that Wright, who is often viewed as oblivious to gender issues—if not outrightly misogynist—was in fact deeply interested in the condition of women as an issue in its own right as well as in its broader social and political connections with racism, capitalism, and fascism. The novel further illuminates Wright's concerns—as a political thinker, a student of psychology, and a creative artist—in the intensely productive period when he was working on not only Native Son but also "The Man Who Lived Underground" and 12 Million Black Voices. In this essay I will describe what Wright was attempting to accomplish in "Black Hope;" examine the novel's significance in Wright's political and artistic odyssey; and suggest the text's relevance to the mid-twentieth-century left's attempts to link Marx with Freud in a formulation of the necessary connections between women's liberation, the defeat of fascism, and the fight for egalitarian communism.1

1 Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, 6 February 1940, "Black Hope," Box 18, F. 292, Richard Wright Papers (henceforth RW), Beinecke Library, Yale University. While Reynolds advised Wright to cut his original manuscript by 50% and to undertake extensive revisions, he encouraged the novelist, opining that "Black Hope" was "a larger and deeper book than Native Son" (Reynolds to Wright, 13 April 1942, quoted in Hazel Rowley, Richard Wright: The Life and Times [New York: Henry Holt, 2001], 264). Wright continued to work on "Black Hope" on and off for many years, substantially abandoning it when he started working hard on Black Boy (American Hunger) in 1943, but dropping it "for once and for all" only in 1948 (Rowley 354). The locus classicus of feminist commentary targeting Wright's negative attitudes toward women is Maria Moors, "Bitches, Whores and Woman
A summary of this complex novel is rendered difficult by the fact that Wright produced not only three different drafts of the first version but also a second version, apparently composed about a year later but left incomplete. The second version, which I will call "Black Hope 2," begins in North Carolina and features the experiences of Maud Wilson, a light-skinned African American woman who is entrapped by Ed Basin, a trafficker in indentured labor who transports young—and usually illiterate—black women to the urban North, where they are coerced either into low-wage domestic work, prostitution, or some combination of the two. His practice of keeping them indebted, unable to escape his grasp, establishes a clear parallel with the economics of sharecropping. Basin first rapes Maud, but then, realizing the value of her skin color, subjects her to arsenic poisoning which, while nearly killing her, bleaches her skin. Although Maud is deeply ambivalent about her newfound whiteness, after her ordeal she glimpses herself in a mirror and imagines new possibilities for herself—possibilities that, it is implied, will bring her into conflict with the criminal use that Basin plans to make of her. The manuscript breaks off here. Drawing upon journalistic exposés of the so-called "slave markets" in the Bronx and Brooklyn where middle-class housewives would drive to busy intersections seeking domestic labor on a daily or weekly basis, Wright supplemented this information by over 150 interviews of his own with Negro domestic workers. It is to be regretted that Wright did not complete this version of "Slave Market," "Black Hope," since his detailed research had prepared him to write a proletarian novel focusing on the experiences of a segment of the U.S. population—African American women workers—rarely portrayed in literature of the day.2

Because "Black Hope 2" is incomplete, the discussion will focus primarily upon the first version of the novel that Wright sent to Reynolds in early 1940. I will call this text "Black Hope 1" when it is necessary to distinguish between the two versions. Set in the late 1930s—there are a number of references to the military buildup toward impending war—the novel takes as its protagonist Maud (alternatively named Eva) Hampton, clearly an early version of Maud Wilson. Although Maud presumably was born in the South, she is introduced as a sophisticated college graduate (hailing from the University of Chicago) living in Harlem and used to northern urban life. Ailing from overwork and frustrated by her racially glass-ceilinged job taking arsenic (an entire line. She does this over the writer, and a political rac millionaire widow, Cle from his bed (the Freud feminized job category, as Ollie Knight, a woman v the nefarious Basin) to w infatuated with Maud; of his estate; on the night woman.3

But the living is Lily (Wright's version of through witnessing her f also has to contend with Negro and has murdered passing, she struggles wit Freddie but also in Fredc cook for many years and. Also working at the Spn whom Maud has recruits

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Hatans: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright," in Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 117-127. See also Tara T. Green, "The Virgin Mary, Eve, and Mary Magdalene in Richard Wright's Novels," CLA Journal 46 (December 2002): 169-93. Because of stringent prohibitions surrounding the Wright estate, I am constrained in my ability to quote directly from the manuscript; paraphrase and summary will have to bear much of the burden of my commentary on the text.

1 "Black Hope," Box 21, F. 323-327, RWP. The "Slave Market" at the corner of 167th Street and Jerome Avenue in the Bronx was first exposed by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke in "The Slave Market," Crisis, 42 (November 1955): 330-31. From 1940 the many such sites of labor exchange had become the object of a government investigation, the report of which is among Wright's notes for his novel (Box 21, F. 322 RWP). While Wright appears to have completed "Black Hope 1" before he left for Mexico in March 1940, he evidently worked on "Black Hope 2" while south of the border, since he wrote to Ralph Ellison from Mexico requesting assistance in tracking down information about the conditions of domestic workers in New York. Ellison sent back the municipal report and the name of a contact, as well as his own observations on the conditions of domestic labor with prostitution; "Hope this is food for your imagination," he wrote (Ellison to Wright 14 April 1940, RWP). See also Ellison to Wright 22 April 1940; and Wright to Ellison, 23 March 1940, and n.d., Box 76, Ralph Ellison Papers (henceforth RWP), Library of Congress. A number of Wright's interviews detailed sexual harassment of black maid and cooks by white husbands/fathers: this material evidently supplied the basis of Wright's comedic short story, "Man of All Work," which treats a black man who "passess" as a black female housekeeper and is subjected to the sexual aggression of his white male employer (Eight Men [Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961]).
the fact that Wright
in a second version,
condemns the actions of a woman who
serves as a social worker, however, she decides to lighten her skin by
taking arsenic (an entirely voluntary activity in this version), thereby passing over the color
line. She does this over the objections of her lover, Frédéric—an intellectual, an aspiring
writer, and a political radical. Maud is hired to be the housekeeper of an invalid elderly
millionaire widower, Cleveland Spencer, who likes to discharge his pistol at the wall across
from his bed (the Freudian symbolism is not far to seek). Not paid adequately in this
feminized job category, Maud appropriates some of the wages of the still more exploited
Ollie Knight, a woman who has been brought North by a Mr. Downey (an early version of
the nefarious Basin) to work for a low-wage employment agency. Old Spencer becomes
infatuated with Maud; she entices him into promises of marriage and is named as inheritor of
his estate; on the night of their first sexual intercourse she kills him and becomes a rich
woman.

But the living is not easy. Maud has to deal with Spencer’s insane adult daughter,
Lily (Wright’s version of the madwoman in the attic), who apparently has lost her mind
through witnessing her father’s abuse of her mother and his subsequent mistresses. Maud
also has to contend with Spencer’s lawyer, Henry Beach, who, having discovered that she is
a Negro and has murdered the old man, blackmails her. While Maud has no regrets about
passing, she struggles with her racial conscience, which is embodied in not just Ollie and
Fredrick but also in Maud’s deeply Christian mother Clara, who has worked as Spencer’s
cook for many years and, like the rest of the Negro staff, knows of Maud’s racial subterfuge.
Also working at the Spencer mansion is Dot, a selfish, somewhat frivolous white woman
whom Maud has recruited to take care of Lily.

The plot thickens as Beach gets involved in catastrophic gambling on Wall Street
and gradually drains Maud’s fortune. Beach’s son, Henry Beach Junior, comes on the scene
as a dissolute, alienated, and violent young man who fills the void of his life with petty
crime. At first delighting in shooting out streetlamps (the phallic parallel with old Spencer is
explicit), Beach Junior moves on to joining a gang and committing a murder, for which he is
sentenced to death. His son’s impending execution traumatizes Beach Senior, who founds a
fascist organization named NAUR (National American Union Rehabilitation) that attempts
to co-opt the appeal of proletarian solidarity in support of a Wall Street-financed militaristic
movement aimed at taking over large portions of the globe. That white women are open to
the appeal of NAUR is shown in Dot’s eroticized attraction to NAUR’s doctrine of
“American manhood.” NAUR also founds a Harlem chapter whose all-male constituents are
drawn by the promise of their serving as the shock troops in an invasion of South America
(to which, once it is conquered, Beach secretly plans to deport his black supporters). Since
the United States is, Beach asserts, a “nation of minorities,” racial doctrines need to be
molded to coexist with pluralism. There will be no need for genocide; sectors of the
population—“the picker . . . the kike . . . the pope-lovers . . . the crazy modern women taking
jobs from honest men”—will simply be manipulated and turned against one another, leaving
NAUR free to amass wealth and prepare for global conquest. Beach even attempts to recruit

2 “Black Hope,” Box 19, F. 305-305, RWP.
3 “Black Hope,” Box 19, F. 305-305; Box 10, F. 310-311, RWP.
4 Embodying the organization’s opportunistic propaganda, the NAUR anthem is titled “Sing a Song of Struggle.”
Freddie's cause, praising his leadership potential and quoting Stalin to the effect that "Reds [are] the engineers of the human soul." Maud is selfish and unprincipled, but even she is repelled by Beach's present activity and future outlook. She had killed, she ponders, because she felt "shunted out of the world" and wanted to get back in; Beach and his associates wanted to kill "not to get back into the world but in order to feel alive." The novel approaches its finale when Maud, refusing to continue bankrolling Beach's schemes, is ousted by him as a Negro murderer and commits suicide. Lily, bent on revenge on the male sex, attacks and decapitates Beach, causing the collapse of NAUR. The grieving Freddie goes off to write his novel. It is Ollie who emerges as the hero of "Black Hope I," since she becomes an organizer for a multiracial union, Domestic Workers Union Local 567 (a fictional stand-in for Domestic Workers Local 149, which by 1940 had become an active force among New York's superexploited domestic workers). Maud, we learn, has left the remains of her fortune, as well as the Spencer mansion, to the union; so there is a glimmer of light at the end of this otherwise doleful tale.7

Wright was entering new territory in "Black Hope I" in several ways. Although in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" he had ruthlessly lampooned writers of the Harlem Renaissance who, as protagonists members of the Negro middle class, portrayed Maud required him to address the ways in which capitalism affects African Americans other than those on the lowest echelons of society. Maud is hardly as comfortably situated as Clare Kendry, the wealthy, thrill-seeking protagonist of Nella Larsen's Passing; Maud's actions are motivated largely by economic insecurity. But neither is she caught in the degrading poverty that entrap Bessie or Bigger's mother in Native Son, or the constrained situation of a proletarian housewife that is the lot of Lil Jackson in Launder Today--much less, of course, the violent and degraded conditions endured by the women inhabiting the Jim Crow South of Uncle Tom's Children. Moreover, as in Larsen's novel--and other novels of the 1910s and 1920s such as James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man and Jessie Redmon Fauset's Plum Bun--Wright placed front and center the psychological consequences of racial passing. However he might wish to subvert them, then, he was engaging with the conventions accompanying the figure of the tragic mulatto.8

"Black Hope I" also shows Wright making his first serious foray into the genre of the novel of ideas. The long conversations between Freddie and Maud, Maud and Beach, and Freddie and Beach display the influence on Wright by philosophical novelists from Feodor Dostoevsky to Thomas Mann to Andre Malraux (whose Man's Fate in fact is directly quoted in the novel) and antiyoutu. Beach discourses modern life and couches the ag consciously crafts her career as dominated capitalism. The key Wright's idealized (and somewhat identified as a Communists': Negro Congress and expatriates question, the "Negro question" the human need to assert the v Thomas and Jake Jackson in n was capable of creating an intelle leftist; he did not need to embolden character who could dub him's life. If James Baldwin had eno Wright in "Everybody's Protestor as incapable of delineat

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Indeed, in a note to conveyed by his working title Maud's story. The title signifies domestic labor--"the most cc biology" in her status as "wife the compulsive role of the ot and physical limits of life," as for living." While these vague to make the various meanings

6 "Black Hope," Box 18, F. 290 and 291, RWP.
7 "Black Hope," Box 17, F. 289, RWP. The five-page synopsis of the plot of "Black Hope I" that Wright sent to Reynolds corresponds with the manuscript in most of the particulars about Maud as inheritor of Spencer's estate, but it contains very little about Beach and NAUR--material which must have been added to later drafts (Box 21, F. 329, RWP). An addendum to the synopsis added still more material--including Dor's killing Lily and Maud's choking Clara to death--as well as a bizarre scene in which Freddie sees Maud's body "turning back to her old color now" after she has committed suicide (Box 21, F. 331, RWP).
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February 1940 letter to Reynolds, Wright wrote that he intended to "cut down ... the long stride of Freddie," as
well as "insert a foreshortened flashback of Maud's early life" (Box 18, F. 252, WRP). At the 1936 National Negro
Congress, Wright chaired a session on "Negro Writers and Artists in the Changing Social Order"; he reported in the
New Masses that the Congress had sparked "new hope" for African Americans ("Two Million Black Voices," New
the novel was to take the alienation of its female protagonist as a means of getting at fundamental problems in modern life. As Wright remarked in another fragmentary note, the novel would explore, through Maud's act of murder, her "deep and consuming sense of estrangement"; this in turn would symbolize "how man gets cut off from his fellow man because of the 'breaking images' in capitalist society. ... The girl was cut off in the break up of feudal ties, and each new move is an effort to become at home." Wright evidently intended for Maud's situation as a woman to figure metonymically in a historical, political, and philosophical commentary on modern alienation.10

Wright hardly neglects the racialized nature of Ollie's and Maud's subjection to men. Maud can be successfully blackmailed by Beach because she is passing over the color line while Ollie, in one particularly horrific scene, is shown being forced to have sexual intercourse with a dog while Downy watches and pleases himself. But Wright was most interested in the shared features of female experience. According to the biographer Hazel Rowley, Wright, as he worked on the novel, was strongly influenced by his first wife Dhimmie Rose Meidman and her mother, two Jewish women who made him aware that white women shared many of the same experiences as black women. His goal in having Maud exchange racial identities was, Wright wrote to Reynolds, not so much to explore the racial aspects of passing as to find a way to feature "the personality and consciousness of any modern woman"—a comment which, while suggesting Wright's acceptance of the notion that whiteness equals universality, nonetheless indicates his interest in gender in a transracial register. In this context, Ollie's transformation into a class-conscious organizer for a multiracial union of female domestic workers takes shape as not just an individual triumph but as an affirmation of the leading role played by African American women "so situated in this system," says Freddie, "that their fight for their rights will be a fight in defense of all women." And, perhaps, all people: Wright ended his five-page synopsis of the novel's plot with the remark that his novel was to "reveal in a symbolic manner the potentially strategic position, socially and politically, which women occupy in the world today."11

"Black Hope" thus requires that we reorient the lenses through which we view and assess Wright's understanding of the relationship of gender oppression to racism and capitalism. In *Laud Today* Wright treated the male supremacist attitudes of Jake Jackson and his friends as central to their entrapment within capitalist ideology; Al's delight in imagining soldiers' freedom to commit rape facilitates his own participation in the strike-breaking militarism of the National Guard while Jake's view of his female co-workers as "cunts" displaces his rage at his own position in the plantation-style hierarchy of the post office. In *Native Son*, Bigger's economic and social emasculation figures centrally in his violent attack on Gus, his spiraling antagonism toward Mary, and his rape of Bessie. In neither of these novels, however, did Wright allow the reader entry into the thoughts of the women who are used and abused by the male characters. In "Black Hope," Wright may not have featured a praiseworthy protagonist. But, perhaps more significantly, he entered the consciousness of a complex, bold, and intelligent woman who faces against her confined condition as "a Negro and a woman and a worker" and decides to do something—however misdirected—to change it. Maud Hampton is, arguably, the entire oeuvre.12

To be sure, in neither reified gender dualisms of trava and the stereotypes of airhead and his women is "conditioned" Rape insistently declares that women dualisms he presumably rejects encourages a pornographic gaze on young black woman's body. I, however, in "Black Hope" W. material and psychological, of only undertook to view gender to anchor this standpoint in the the economics of housekeeping—hard labor performed by Ollie's contemporaneous leftist disco such texts as Grace Hutchins' *Defense* (1940). Moreover, his abandoning femininity, as we worship at the shrine of ph internalized sexism as were set "Women and Communism."13

Perhaps the most important elaboration of women's emancipation situation of women in the US women's full emancipation at bourgeois feminism, with its fear that in capitalist society women are inseparable from the "global's this country live, so women lived as property in capitalist count: and ideologically. The Soviet significant strides toward won

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10 Black Hope synopsis and notes, Box 21, F. 329 and F. 382, RWP.
11 Wright to Reynolds, 6 February 1940; "Black Hope," Box 18, F. 291, Box 21, F. 339, RWP; Rowley, 188. The scene in which Ollie is abused by the man with the dog is based upon one of Wright's interviews with domestic workers (Box 21, F. 332, RWP).
12 "Black Hope," Box 17, F. 284. For empowerment in Wright's fiction, *between the Wars: A New Pantheon in Bi*.
means of getting at other fragmentary note, the consuming sense of it from his fellow man was cut off in the break up" Wright evidently y in a historical, political, d Maud's subject to is passing over the color forced to have sexual If. But Wright was most o the biographer Hazel ed by his first wife Dhimah m "aware that white i's goal in having Maud much to explore the racial consciousness of any acceptance of the notion st in gender in a transracial i-conscious organizer for a ust an individual triumph can women "so situated in a fight in defense of all nopsis of the novel's plot er the potentially strategic rfd today." through which we view and sion to racism and attitudes of Jake Jackson and y: A's delight in imagining i in the strike-breaking co-workers as "cunts" urchy of the post office. In ntually in his violent attack iessie. In neither of these ghts of the women who arght may not have featured a tered the consciousness of a defined condition as "a Negro ever misdirected—to change it. Maud Hampton is, arguably, the most complex woman character to appear in Wright's entire oeuvre. 12

To be sure, in neither of its versions does "Black Hope" show Wright transcending reified gender dualisms of various kinds. Dot and Lily hardly escape the respective stereotypes of airhead and hysteric. Although Freddie insists that men's subordination of women is "conditioned" rather than "natural," in what appear to be valorized assertions he insistently declares that women are closer to the natural world than men, thus affirming the dualisms he presumably rejects. The scene of Ollie's sexual degradation with the dog encourages a pornographic gaze even as it condemns Downy's vicious appropriation of the young black woman's body. Despite these and other manifestations of abiding sexism, however, in "Black Hope" Wright was clearly attempting to explore the complexities, material and psychological, of women's oppression. In creating Ollie and Maud, Wright not only undertook to view gendered and raced identities from the standpoint of women but also to anchor this standpoint in an analysis of capitalist political economy. In his awareness of the economics of housekeeping—whether the supervisory work performed by Maud or the hard labor performed by Ollie—he would appear to have been familiar with the contemporaneous leftist discourse about women's reproductive labor that was set forth in such texts as Grace Hutchins' Women Who Work (1934) and Mary Inman's In Woman's Defense (1940). Moreover, his portrait of Maud's conviction that assuming power entails abandoning femininity, as well as of Lily's fear that all men are rapists and Dot's willingness to worship at the shrine of phallic militarism, suggest his acquaintance with such analyses of internalized sexism as were set forth in Rebecca Pitts' 1954 New Masses article titled "Women and Communism." 15

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Wright's engagement with the left's theorization of women's emancipation consists in Freddie's various comments about the situation of women in the USSR, as well as, more broadly, the necessary connection between women's full emancipation and communist egalitarianism. Criticizing the limitations of bourgeois feminism, with its fixation on legal equality and voting rights, Freddie proposes that in capitalist society women live under a "dictatorship," their fight for liberation is inseparable from "the global struggle for freedom." Indeed, he posits, "Like [sic] Negroes in this country live, so women live all over the world." Freddie asserts that the view of women as property in capitalist countries shores up the regime of private property both materially and ideologically. The Soviet Union, where "millions have found [the good]," has made significant strides toward women's emancipation. As of yet, however, "nowhere does the

12 "Black Hope," Box 17, F. 284. For more on the links between emancipation, sexism, and black male disempowerment in Wright's fiction, see Anthony Dauhaze, Nationalism, Marxism, and American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).
15 Grace Hutchins, Women Who Work (New York: International Publishers, 1934); Mary Inman, In Woman's Defense (Los Angeles: The Committee to Organize the Advancement of Women, 1940); Rebecca Pitts, "Women and Communism," New Masses 14 (February 19, 1934): 14-16. Inman's book, which would spark a significant intra-party debate in the 1940s over whether or not housework should qualify as "productive" labor, was serially published in the CP's People's Daily World in 1939 and, according to Kate Weigand, was used in Communist Party schools around the country...as a textbook in their courses on the women question" (Red Feminists: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001], 36). Michel Fabre indicates the Wright owned a copy of Inman's book (Richard Wright: Books and Writers [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990], 78).
ideology of woman prevail, coexist with that of man, interpenetrate with that of man, fuse with it." Evidently speaking through Freddie, Wright proposes that only by means of "woman's modifying intuition...will the race [not] be narrowed down to just owning things." Women and men alike will attain full freedom, in other words, only with the abolition of exchange value. Wright's abiding embrace of essentialist gender dualisms thus coincides with a commitment to transcending not just capitalism but also socialism—as an intermediary social formation—in order to achieve a classless social order free of exploitation of all kinds. In its meditation on what such an emancipated future might look like, Black Hope is, in some respects, the most radical novel Wright ever wrote.¹⁴

While Wright's preoccupation with "the woman question" makes "Black Hope" distinct in its oeuvre, the novel's imaginative investigation into the nature of fascism is an equally intriguing feature of the text. In *Laud Today, Native Son*, and "How Bigger Was Born" Wright had already evinced his fascination with the possibility that a native-born US fascism could, however paradoxically, appeal to the most disenfranchised and dispossessed segment of the population, African Americans. In this concern, Wright was hardly alone. As early as 1919, the Jamaican-born leftist W.A. Domingo had warned the Socialist Party that its failure to fight racism would result in antagonizing black workers toward their white counterparts and enlisting them in the ranks of the capitalist class as strikebreakers and thugs. As the Communist movement gained in numbers and influence in the course of the Depression decade, its commitment to fighting for class-based multiracial solidarity was intertwined with its recognition of the links between fascism and Jim Crow, as well as the threat posed to the revolutionary movement by the appeal of Japanese fascism as a challenge to global white supremacy. But most Depression-era scenarios linked the possible growth of black fascism with the anticommunist black nationalism articulated by the Garveyites—Garvey had, after all, claimed that he and the UNIA were the "first fascists"—as well as by various Harlem organizers as Sufi Abdul Hamid and Randolph Wilson, the latter of whom dubbed himself the "Black Hitler." Although Ralph Ellison's Ras the Exhorter somewhat soft-pedals the anti-Semitism characteristic of these organizers, he conveys a vivid composite portrait of one such black reactionary.¹⁵

In "Black Hope," however, Wright pushed the possibilities of black fascism further by postulating that a white-organized fascist movement, complete with anti-Semitism and anti-black racism, could flourish among the very people against whom it was largely, if not exclusively, targeted. The most famous white Depression-era American writer who had prophetically imagined the growth of a native American fascism—Sinclair Lewis, in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*—had stipulated that the movement would be so overtly racist (aimed in fact at black victims. The only novelist white-led fascist movement Offord, whose 1943 novel *least temporary success in embedded in black alienat* Yet Wright's ancillary historical plausibility. After 1930s, Lawrence Dennis—*Dynamics of War and Revol* over the color line and, in Herman Goering, and Jos Dennis envisioned an Am movement and conjoining feature white supremacist suffer the slings and arrows would be best served by a alienation from American of "Black Hope," Wright might look like in the stre

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(aimed in fact at black re-enslavement) that it would garner no support among its black
victims. The only novelist besides Wright who would attempt to treat the phenomenon of a
white-led fascist movement with a black popular base was the African American writer Carl
Offord, whose 1943 novel, The White Face, represented Nazi-led organizing as having at
least temporary success in Harlem. Evidently Wright and Offord discerned a fascist potential
embedded in black alienation that was inconceivable to Lewis."

Yet Wright's and Offord's portrayals of a white-led black fascism were not without
historical plausibility. After all, the premier fascist theorist in the United States during the
1930s, Lawrence Dennis—author of The Coming American Fascism (1936) and The
Dynamics of War and Revolution (1940)—was a light-skinned black man who had passed
over the color line and, in the late 1930s, hobnobbed with Benito Mussolini, Rudolph Hess,
Herman Goering, and Josef Goebbels. As the historian Gerald Horne has pointed out,
Dennis envisioned an American fascism that would be premised upon smashing the labor
movement and conjointing big business with the state, but that would not prominently
feature white supremacist doctrine. Nonetheless, the fact that a man who had seen his family
suffer the slings and arrows of Jim Crow racism could theorize that American capitalism
would be best served by a state modeled on Nazi Germany speaks volumes about black
alienation from American "democracy" during the Depression years. In the closing sections
of "Black Hope," Wright dared to extrapolate what a movement led based on Dennis's goals
might look like in the streets of Harlem."

Like a number of other Marxists of his day—the psychologists Reuben Osborn and
Wilhelm Reich, the critics Kenneth Burke and Harry Stackhouse—Wright was absorbed by
the project of articulating psychoanalysis with historical materialism. These cultural
Marxists agreed that the left's theorization of fascism as the brutal class rule of finance capital in
or was adequate to describe its material underpinnings. Indeed, in "Black Hope I," Wright
makes it clear that fascism is a ruling-class-instigated movement. Not only is Bech a munition
of Wall Street, but old Spencer, alert to his class interests in a time of economic crisis, turns
out to have been investing for several years in steel production in the expectation—indeed,
the hope—that he would profit from the burgeoning armament industry in the coming war.
Wright's portrait of NAUR thus adheres to current leftist doctrine about the links between
finance and industrial capital, the state, and right-wing mass movements. At the same time,
Wright, along with other Marxists working in the spheres of psychology and culture, felt that
the psychodynamics of fascism, while hardly autonomous, required understanding in their
own right. Wright had previously explored the racial and gendered appeal of fascism to
oppressed African Americans. In Later Today, Jake's frustrated sexuality is intimately linked
with his vision of black warships attacking—indeed, symbolically raping—a helpless (and
very white) Statue of Liberty. In Native Son, Bigger's attraction to Hitler is presented as
integral to his felt need for community. Where the issue of fascism figures marginally in

Sinclair Lewis, It Can's Happen Here (New York: Collier and Son, 1935); Carl Ruthen Offord, The White Face

Lawrence Dennis, The Coming American Fascism (New York: Harper and Bros., 1936); Dennis, The Dynamics of
War and Revolution (New York: Worldly Foreign Letter, 1940); Gerald Horne, The Color of Fascism: Lawrence
Press, 2006). I examine the connection between Lawrence Dennis, Invisible Man's Rethinking, and Jürgen Habermass's
Blatt/Blattkraft in Wielding with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2010).
Wright's two earlier novels, however, "Black Hope" allowed him to place the issue of fascism front and center, focusing upon its potential psychological appeal to all sectors of the population—even those whose material interest should lead them to reject it most passionately.\(^8\)

The core of this appeal, Wright proposes, is fascism's function as an antidote—at least an apparent antidote—to alienation. The Beaches, Junior and Senior, most fully exemplify the impulse to fill the inner void with external destruction. The son, nihilistic, overindulged and undisciplined, organizes a gang that descends into sociopathic violence. The father organizes NAUR in large part out of a need for "something" to lift him out of the "valley of dry bones" that he feels his "life of fragments" has become. As a servant of Wall Street, he organizes a movement that will advance the general interests of American capitalism; as a hollow man of the modern world, he seeks fullness in the mindless chanting of an apocalyptic mass movement over which he wields demagogic control. The eroticization of aggression plays no small role in compounding the thrall of authoritarian power. Beach Junior's obsessive shooting out of the globes of lampposts, like the millionaire Spencer's spraying bullets on his bedroom wall, displays the link between phallic propulsion and fascist domination for both the young man and the old. Doc's attraction to NAUR's militarized masculinism displaces and sublimates his sexual longings, returning her to a state of "clapping her hands like a baby." While these patently Freudianized portraits are somewhat cartoonish in their exaggerated outlines, they aptly illustrate Wright's preoccupation with the psychological soil where the seeds of fascism can germinate and take root.\(^9\)

Alienation is not the preserve solely of the novel's neurotic antagonists, however. Maud decides to cross the color line not just because she seeks a more comfortable life, but also because she feels the need to be "in unison with others;" she identifies with male power because otherwise "she was an atom flying about in cold space." Freddie views himself and Maud as "outsiders" to mainstream political and cultural life. Indeed, his proposition that men need the oneness presumably embodied in women reflects his sense of separation from himself; his romantic yearning for Maud expresses a desire at once concretely fulfillable and abstractly infinite. But while fascism supplies one answer to alienated modernity, communism supplies another. Fundamentally at issue in the debate between Freddie and Beach is the type of collectivity that will satisfy the human hunger for a meaningful social identity. Beach holds that NAUR, with its deft scapegoating of "others," answers the human need for recognition and affirmation. Freddie, while acknowledging that Beach, in his "queer, warped way" was reacting against the reduction of life to "bread grubbings," declares that he is "for workers taking power and reconstructing life on earth" because only in this way will humanity find meaning in life.\(^{10}\)

While "Black Hope" communism and fascism, both of that proposed in the 1953 totalitarianisms," groups fasci jointly counterposed with the Damon and his double/neme "outsiders" derives from their by contrast, pits communism refuse to settle for the restricted seek rather than flee from a a social organization speak to that but one contains the potential descent into atavism and still

The somewhat melancholy conviction—at least in the era succeed in attracting more that soldiers disband once the relationship leader to follow. The de the novel, indicate Wright's native U.S. fascism. It is a major into a tailspin. It is the "crazy wonder whether she is in fact taking over the Spencer man of resistance to exploitation. The action by the novel's end will not remain. Indeed plot of "Black Hope" suggest oppressed people consists in are to be principal articulate is, after all, contingent upon liberatory project.

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\(^9\) "Black Hope," Box 17, F. 289, Box 18, P. 280, RWP.

\(^{10}\) "Black Hope," Box 17, F. 287; 18, P. 291, RWP.
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While “Black Hope” resembles The Outsider in its long disquisitions over communism and fascism, being and nothingness, its political standpoint is thus the obverse of that proposed in the 1953 novel. For The Outsider, articulating the thesis of “two totalitarianisms,” groups fascism and communism as psychological/authoritarian twins, to be jointly counterposed with the existential doctrine of individual freedom espoused by Cross Damon and his double/acme, Ely Houston. These two characters’ joint status as “outsiders” derives from their shared antipathy to authoritarian group-think. “Black Hope,” by contrast, pits communism against fascism. Freddie and Maud are “outsiders” because they refuse to settle for the restricted state of existence that is required by capitalist reality; they seek rather than flee from a meaningful collective identity. In “Black Hope,” both systems of social organization speak to the loneliness and dislocation experienced by modern humanity; but one contains the potential to negate and sublate alienation, while the other promises a descent into savagery and still greater existential loneliness.21

The somewhat melodramatic trajectory of the plot of “Black Hope” limns Wright’s conviction—at least in the early 1940s—that a native-born American fascism could not succeed in attracting more than passing support from ordinary people. The ranks of NAUR’s soldiers disband once the charismatic leader is killed; the easily seduced Dot is left without a great leader to follow. The determining roles played by most of the novel’s women, moreover, indicate Wright’s positive estimate of women’s potential leadership in defeating a native U.S. fascism. It is Maud’s refusal to go along with Beach’s fascist project that puts him into a tailspin. It is the “crazy” Lily who then murders the demagogic Beach, leading one to wonder whether she is in fact so crazy after all. And it is the proletarian Ollie who ends up taking over the Spencer mansion and turning it into a site of women workers’ collective resistance to exploitation. The estimable Freddie, by contrast, is relegated to the margins of the action by the novel’s end. Women may be drawn into the fascist web, it seems, but they will not remain there. Indeed, the pivotal actions performed by Maud, Lily, and Ollie in the plot of “Black Hope” suggest the rationale for Wright’s chosen title: if the “hope” of all oppressed people consists in the egalitarian future that Freddie imagines, and if blacks people are to be principal articulators and agents of that hope, then women—whose emancipation is, after all, contingent upon “the global struggle for freedom”—will figure centrally in this liberatory project.

We will recall Wright’s statement to Reynolds that he wished his novel-in-progress to “reveal in a symbolic manner the potentially strategic position, socially and politically, which women occupy in the world today.” Women were—at least “potentially”—the vanguard of antifascism. “Black Hope” reveals a radical appreciation of women’s positioning in the struggle for a better world that must be taken into account in overall assessments of the politics and ethics of one of the most important revolutionary writers of the past century.
Works Cited

51 While scholars disagree about the nature and extent of Wright's embrace of existentialism in The Outsider, there is general accord about his endorsement of Hannah Arendt's thesis of "two totalitarianisms" and his identification with the figure of the embattled, individualistic "outsider." See Jeffrey Atchberry, "Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright's Critique of Marxism and Existentialism," Modern Fiction Studies, 51 (Winter 2005): 873-95.


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Rachel Watson
The Living

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He looked swiftly having been in the knob... No: he too clean, the pc the door.

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