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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, and 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 RWP), 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 Mootry, “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 exposes 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 build-up 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

Haters: 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): 168-93. 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.

² “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 1935): 330-31. By 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. 332 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 conjunction 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 REP), Library of Congress. A number of Wright’s interviews detailed sexual harassment of black maids 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 “passes” as a black female housekeeper and is subjected to the sexual aggression of his white male employer (*Eight Men* [Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961]).

racially glass-ceilinged job 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, Freddie—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. Downy (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.³

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 Freddie but also in Freddie'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.⁴

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.⁵ 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 nigger . . . 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

³ "Black Hope," Box 19, F. 302-305, RWP.

⁴ "Black Hope," Box 19, F. 306-309; Box 10, F. 310-311, RWP.

⁵ Embodying the organization's opportunistic propaganda, the NAUR anthem is titled "Sing a Song of Struggle."

Freddie to his cause, praising his leadership potential and quoting Stalin to the effect that “Reds [are] the engineers of the human soul.”⁶

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 outed by him as a Negro murderess 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 1,” 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 1” in several ways. Although in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” he had ruthlessly lampooned writers of the Harlem Renaissance who featured as protagonists members of the Negro middle class, his portraiture of 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 dire poverty that entraps Bessie or Bigger’s mother in *Native Son*, or the constrained situation of a proletarian housewife that is the lot of Lil Jackson in *Lawd 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 1” 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

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 1” 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 murders—including Dot’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).

⁸ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” *New Challenge* (1937), rpt. in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 45–53. For more on racial passing and hybridity in novels of the Harlem Renaissance, see Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).