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RICHARD WRIGHT'S REVISION OF THE JIM CROW MYTHOLOGY IN UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

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RICHARD WRIGHT'S REVISION OF THE JIM CROW MYTHOLOGY IN *UNCLE
TOM'S CHILDREN*

By

Michael Denny Martin

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

RICHARD WRIGHT'S REVISION OF THE JIM CROW MYTHOLOGY IN *UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN*

By

Michael Denny Martin

Richard Wright was born in Mississippi, in 1908, during the rise of Jim Crow – a racially segregating system implemented in post-slavery, U.S. Southern states. The norms of Jim Crow culture, like any other culture, were disseminated to individuals living in the South by a language system in which symbolic meaning of concrete units is derived from the traditions of the politically dominant group. Roland Barthes refers to this phenomenon as a mythology. Wright's 1937 work, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" recognizes that, in order to fully liberate the oppressed, a revision of the standing mythology must be publically submitted. He points out two driving forces of Southern African American culture: folklore and religion. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright submits his version of this revision, presenting five novellas. These five novellas are heavy in the symbolism of folklore and a religious backdrop. Wright shows African Americans as subjects living within a cultural mythology constructed of a language system structured to objectify them. The proposals set forth in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" are demonstrated in *Uncle Tom's Children*.

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Michael Denny Martin
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This work is dedicated to my wife Jennifer Jill Martin and my mother Joan
Worrell for their patience and dedication.

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez Mississippi in 1908 – the height of the Jim Crow era. The discriminating Jim Crow social law was commonly upheld by frequent occurrences of white mobs lynching, burning alive, and tar and feathering blacks. Wright also witnessed severe racism in the formal legal system when, during his mother’s plea for financial assistance from his estranged father, a white judge dismissed the case on Wright’s father’s defense that he simply could not do any better than he was doing – which was nothing (Washington 130). As a result, Wright developed a deep understanding of the legal and social problems associated with being black in the Jim Crow South. Upon reading literature that challenged popular politics and society like Leo Tolstoy, Joseph Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Mark Twain, Wright realized that words can be used as a formidable weapon against established oppressive political and social forces (Wright, *Black Boy* 272). This conclusion suggested an attack at the very heart of institutionalized oppression: the mythology by which the language system governs social action and ideas of the dominant self and the oppressed other.

Roland Barthes defines “mythology” as a system of organizing symbolic meanings (language) from socially constructed relationships of concrete representations (a color, a picture, a written or spoken word, an animal et cetera); mythology arranges

concepts (signifieds), mental images (signifiers), and concrete representations (signs) into unified wholes (109-114). Signifiers within a mythology develop meaning through a series of dialectical “traces” (i.e. vague historical representations) situated in a dialectic based on a hierarchical, ideological chain (Derrida 287; Barthes 107). The object of the sign is never present, hence, the user of a given mythology can never be fully aware of the historical evolution of the signifier’s association with the signified; therefore, language meaning is profoundly derived from a tradition that is based on a shared cultural epistemology (Derrida 291; Lacan “The Instance” 448). In addition, mythology remains flexible as language is constantly subject to change due to several possible environmental factors. The metaphysical absolute of a mythology offers motives, justifies actions, and provides modes of expression based on perceived social knowledge held by individual social agents – the self and the other (Lacan 31). Functional elements of language are known by their differences; identity is constructed through language; therefore, the self is known by dialectical differences that construct the other (Derrida 283; Gilroy 106; Lacan 31). For the most part, this social self is assumed to be, to some extent, natural, absolute, and the desire of an imagined metaphysical entity (i.e. God).

Identity of the dominant self is socially constructed according to the language of a given mythology. Therefore, the self is known by a fictional representation that is impossible for the individual alone to simplify. Like language, the self is trapped in the notions of communal agreement (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 445). As a result, where two human groups bearing observable characteristic differences (skin color, language,

religious practices etc.) cohabit, the mythology generally favors the culture and tradition of the dominant group, creating social disharmony. This social disharmony is especially characteristic of colonial mythologies of white supremacy. Within this disharmony, Richard Wright asserts that, during the Jim Crow era, national liberation for African Americans required an amended national mythology to redefine the African American self.

In his 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" ("Blueprint"), Wright proposes a method of reconstructing the mythology that drives Jim Crow culture. He suggests that Negro writers challenge, question, and, therefore, politicize the existing depoliticized caste system inherent in Jim Crow. He determines that the duty of the black writer is to do "no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die" (102). Socially, this would involve a re-mythologizing of the national culture; blacks would no longer be thought of and described as an object by whites, but would be seen as a subject of social discourse. Wright also advises black writers to view society as "becoming," not "fixed" (99). "Blueprint" outlines a move towards national identity for blacks based on the various perspectives of black writers. This was revolutionary in the literary field since, during that time, almost all stories published about blacks were written by white authors and, hence, described blacks from a culturally foreign point of view. This is typical of all colonialist societies because, linguistically, they erase the history of the oppressed and, through its mythology, attributes a past of barbarism to the oppressed group (Fanon 213). Wright points out, however, that the culture of African Americans

has existed and been passed from generation to generation through the black church and the folklore of the people (Wright, "Blueprint" 99). In 1938, Wright set an example of his instruction offered to black writers by publishing *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Uncle Tom's Children is a series of novellas situated in such an order that they remember a black cultural past and imagine a future social movement for black national liberation. There are five stories: "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," "Long Black Song," "Fire and Cloud," and "Bright and Morning Star." All of the tales take place in a single southern town. Scenery such as a cornfield, railroad tracks, and a grassy slope indicate that, though the town goes unnamed, all of the stories take place in the same geographic location. Leaving the town unnamed, however, perpetuates the idea that the name of the specific town doesn't matter; it suggests that racism is a problem everywhere. This realization is necessary to the perspective of all writers expressing facets of social oppression. Wright specifically calls black writers to this task arguing that the "[perspective] for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something" ("Blueprint" 104).

This thesis will examine how Wright uses *Uncle Tom's Children* as an exposition for rewriting the racist mythology that drives Jim Crow which was prevalent to some degree in every part of American culture up to the mid twentieth century. Postcolonial theories are used to analyze relationships between language, mythology and cultural

construction in four of the narratives presented in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* is shown to be an example of the challenges he offers to Negro writers in "Blueprint." Each story is analyzed in the order it is presented in the text to show how the author illustrates the possible growth of the African American liberation movement. The last story, "Bright Morning Star," is excluded from this analysis as the subject matter is very similar to the story that precedes it, "Fire and Cloud." Wright also points out that the "social institutions of the Negro are imprisoned in the Jim Crow political system of the South" (101). Therefore, prior to the aforementioned literary examination, the evolution of the colonial mythology on which Jim Crow is based will be described with the intention of revealing the role of literature in cultural and social construction.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE COLONIAL/JIM CROW MYTHOLOGY

The characteristics of the mythology of American slavery are so similar to colonialism in Africa or Asia – with the exception of the mass forced migration – that the psychological effects on all members of the social groups involved are identical. In order for colonization anywhere to be perceived as legitimate to the colonizing population, a language evolves that leads the colonizer and the colonized to act according to the hierarchical structures set forth in a mythology. As a result, the often brutal subjugation of the colonized is rationalized; the colonized and the colonizer have to behave as if they are under a common understanding of reality to maintain this form of social homogeneity (Memmi 89; Gilroy 106). Literature is an efficient and effective way of maintaining this strict type of homogeneity. Literature uses language, as described above, to infuse a common mythology among a social group; ergo, language (the socially constructed meaning given to any concrete image) is the primary vehicle of mythology. In *Wretched of the Earth*, France Fanon writes:

In capitalist societies the education system, whether lay or clerical, the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal service, and the affection which springs from harmonious relations and good behavior – all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the

established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing [the colonized] considerably. (38)

The “education system,” “Moral reflexes handed down from father to son,” the “medal after fifty years” and “the affection” adheres to an ideology disseminated by the symbolic meaning of a language system – a mythology. As noted in the introduction, the distinct meaning or signifiers of myth is known by its relation to other signifieds within a dialectic chain; in other words, the *truth* of a signifier is determined by a web of signifieds and, in communication, becomes a concrete sign. The first verse of the poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” shows one way of how the sign “white man” attains its distinct meaning from the colonial mythology’s dialectical chain.

The opening verse of English poet, Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem, reads:

Take up the White Man's burden,
Send forth the best ye breed,
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild,
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child. (Kipling)

The first line designates the subject, a concrete sign, the “White Man,” from all other subjects. Signifiers are placed in the web to develop a cohesive mythology. By declaring that a “White Man’s burden” exists, a signified is evoked that brings forth the idea of a natural, metaphysical signifier of superiority associated with the subject – the “White Man.” The directive, “Send forth the best ye breed/Go bind your sons to exile” attaches a signifier of great sacrifice making colonialism a divine cause. The next two lines declare that this is a service to the “captives” signifying that colonization is a responsibility of benevolence; overall, these two lines portray the subjugation of non-whites as a duty instead of exploitation. Finally, the non-white, “new caught...peoples” (the colonized other) are designated by abstract negative descriptors: “fluttered,” “wild,” “sullen,” “[half-devil],” and “half-child.” Assigning negative descriptors to the colonized further identifies the “white man” through negation by signifying that, ontologically, white men and non-white others are absolute opposites. This part of the colonial mythology assigns negative behavior patterns to non-white others by suggesting that such intangibles as personal conduct or intellectual potential are relative to skin color and, therefore, natural. Ergo, the sum of the signifiers presented in “The White Man’s Burden” is the mythology that (1) white male superiority is an unalterable, absolute, and natural circumstance; and (2) colonization is a paternal duty for *all* white men and is divinely designed for the good of all non-whites. No mythology is ever fixed but is subject to changing perspectives of human histories, and social and physical environmental factors (Farrell 238; Barthes

110). This speculation introduces the value of understanding the racialized mythology of Jim Crow.

Much of the discourse of American race relations is more a matter of economics than biology, or divine right. Earl Conrad states that the “economic voice has always spoken the loudest” (Conrad 27). American race relations are not as defined by slavery as commonly believed. At the outset of the establishment of colonies in the Americas, little, if any, of the American English language designated race as a specific color group. Up to the eighteenth century, blacks and whites forced to migrate to the New World as contract workers or indentured servants, who were taught skills during their period of servitude, flooded the job market as cheap labor. Job competition between white immigrants, native born white workers, and freed black skilled laborers rose sharply in the mid-eighteenth century (Webster 130; Conrad 29). In spite of several formal and informal complaints of white workers against the importation of slaves, rich merchants continued to sell slaves. As a result, many working class whites, in an attempt to curb occupational competition, began to use language that held that the black workers were “unreliable; the blacks were dangerous, they stole, they were capable of rape of white women, they were insurrectionary, they would not fight the Indians.” Also, the daily witnessing of the sale of African slaves along with other commodities, generation after generation, perpetuated the idea among the dominant culture that blacks were not, idealistically, people, but chattel (Conrad 30).

The U.S. representative democratic system for choosing political leaders saw many children and grandchildren acclimated to the perception of blacks as not-quite-human, dangerous others rise to positions of power. Many of these leaders used their power to reinforce the racist ideology asserting that the U.S. should be exclusively white. The combination of European epistemologies, traces of the colonial mythology, such as “The White Man’s Burden,” and legislated and social organization have been used to maintain economic advantages by creating, what George Lipsitz calls, “the possessive investment in whiteness” (4). Such political rhetoric was largely based on the social fear that the inclusion of blacks into white society would degrade the society as a whole. Speeches from political leaders indicated that they shared this fear with their constituents. An example of one of these political leaders was Senator Peter Van Winkle of West Virginia.

In 1913, Lyman Trumbell (IL) introduced the first civil rights bill proposed since the ratification of the 13th amendment in 1865. The purpose of the bill was “to protect all persons in the United States in their civil rights and furnish means of their vindication” (Miller 364). Senator Peter G. Van Winkle (WV), exaggerating the legal scope of the bill, argued against it using symbols of white superiority and manipulating the white fear that the very presence of non-whites could, somehow, ruin white society:

It involves not only the negro race, but *other inferior races* that are now settling on our Pacific coast, and perhaps involves a future immigration to this country of which we have no conception, for a bill has been

introduced at the other end of the Capitol to strike out the word ‘white’ from the naturalization laws, so that we may expect to have an influx here of all sorts of people from all countries. I need not pause to say that this *would be detrimental* to the best interests of *our country*. I am willing to receive among us, and always have been, *those* from other countries *who are calculated to make good citizens*. I am not and never have been willing to receive, if the discrimination could be made, *those whose mixture with our race*, whether they are white or black, *could only tend to the deterioration of the mass*; and I avow myself now as opposed to the amendment which is now before the Senate. (Miller 366, *italics mine*)

The presuppositions set forth in public orations such as Senator Van Winkle’s contributed a great deal to popularizing a racist mentality among the whites; especially in the south.

The delivery of Senator Van Winkle presupposes an agreement on the mythological assumption that whites are inherently different from non-whites in that they are naturally superior. He overtly asserts that, not only is the *white race* superior to the black race, but to all other races as well. He deduces that the danger is that “*those* [non-whites] *whose mixture with our race... could only tend to the deterioration of the mass.*” In the context of this statement, the “mass” can only be assumed to be the white race, in turn excluding any other racial group from the “mass.” Van Winkle furthers his argument for a white America by adding that allowing social intermixture “*would be detrimental to the best interests of our country.*” Since the topic is those persons designated as being

other than white, “*our country*” can only imply that this country belongs to white people and that all others are “*detrimental*.” On the surface of reason, this statement is illogical; but in the realm of mythology, the illogical is rationalized before it even enters the scope of conversation simply because language is prepared for the user; ergo, each person is born into a standing mythology (Barthes 140).

Such racialized language as Senator Van Winkle’s used in mainstream culture served to dehumanize, pluralize, and stigmatize non-whites and increase the value of whiteness rationalizing the exploitation of all non-whites; moreover, black skin developed into a signifier of any characteristic considered “savage” or unbecoming of a civilized person and white a signifier of the absolute opposite of black and, therefore, deserving of certain social and economic advantages (Lipsitz 3; Memmi 79; *Wretched* 36). This has serious consequences. From language, belief systems become social norms. Social norms guide cultural behavior. The language system of the colonial mythology reflects the dehumanizing pluralization of the colonized other. The colonial mythology develops a belief system in which the colonized are rarely described as by negative, imagined attributes which are applied to all members of the group; according to the language of the colonial mythology, the actions of racial discrimination and exploitation become white cultural norms (Memmi 81). Pluralization requires a general categorical name to linguistically and cognitively separate the dominant subject from the objectified other. “Negro,” “black,” “African American,” “nigger,” and “colored” are all names of the same category used in America to designate and exclude blacks as individual human

subjects. In the social mind, naming removed all shades of individuality from every black person making them a sign of a pluralized object bearing only the characteristics assigned to them necessary to serve the dominant mythology. Abdul R. JanMohamed refers to the pluralizing affect used in literature by authors seeking to advance the idea of absolute difference between racial groups as the “Manichean allegory” (59). The relative social spaces of the white and the black are ascribed by a Manichean discourse (Fanon 42).

Race “becomes ‘common sense’ – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (Omi and Winant 60). This is a characteristic of the United States. Therefore, in most U.S. cultures assumptions about race or persons belonging to a racial group are assumed to hold particular positions in socially constructed institutions. Using such a vehicle shows that in order for a cultural assertion to be socially accepted and acted on, it does not need to be believable or logical. It only needs to be shown to be part of or an affront to the established cultural epistemology (Cherwitz and Hikins 115). As the nineteenth century saw the end of slavery, Black equality was symbolized as a threat to the White Christian ethic. Jim Crow grew from these roots of the colonial mythology (Conrad 96). Wright attacks this colonial mythology by articulating a cultural history for blacks founded in the church, presenting an African American folklore, politicizing the colonial mythology by challenging standing power relations, and by, overall, creating a folklore of a future movement towards the national liberation of blacks.

BLACK LIBERATION AND THE BLACK CHURCH: “BIG BOY LEAVES HOME”

Dis train boun fo Glory

Dis train, Oh Hallelujah

Dis train boun fo Glory

Dis train, Oh Hallelujah

Dis train boun fo Glory

Ef you ride no need fer fret er worry

Dis train, Oh Hallelujah

*Dis train... (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 19)*

Between 1820 and 1860, in the southern United States, the black Christian churches served as hubs of hope as African Americans struggled to maintain cultural dignity under the brutal rigors of American slavery (Wright, “Blueprint” 99). This is where the cultural history of the African slave in America begins. In the first story in Wright’s collection, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” he establishes the role of the black church in the African American movement from a dehumanized, pluralized social group to a recognized, self defined, national identity. The use of a Big Boy, a thirteen year old, black child, as the main character and the church as the sole center for social solutions signifies the historical importance of the church to African American culture. Wright uses the allegory of Christian salvation, which he describes as an “archaic morphology,” to

illustrate that a historical understanding of one's own culture is necessary to overcoming the oppression inherent in the colonial mythology ("Blueprint" 99). As noted in the last section, a mythology dictates perceptions of reality and is guided by the tradition of the dominant group; therefore, the colonizer invents the colonized (*Wretched* 36). As a result, all members of the colonized group enter a colonial history *in medias res*, having no historical awareness independent of the colonizer. This is especially made evident by the influence of the black church.

From the outset of the discovery of the Americas at the end of the sixteenth century, a heavy Western European colonialist Christian influence perpetuated religious debates (which communicate, almost exclusively, through symbolic meaning) aimed at determining the spiritual potential of the natives. Theologians argued over whether these natives are included in the family of man and, hence, "children" of the European idea of the Christian God, or if they were others whom God created for the use of His chosen ones – namely, Christian Europeans (Omi and Winant 62). Although the enslavement of non-whites was reconciled to Christian ethics, outspoken opponents to the idea of repressing and/or enslaving non-whites persisted and perpetual slavery was unaccepted until the middle of the eighteenth century (Conrad 11). Pro-slavery religious leaders argued for the stern repression of blacks on three grounds: (1) white represents purity and black represents evil, (2) biblical verses support slavery, and (3) the Hamitic argument that all blacks are descendents of Ham and, therefore, required (often by law) to act out the role of a servant condemned to torment by God whenever in the presence of whites

(Starke 5-7). These religious arguments, shared through the mediums of the orations or literature, directly contributed to polarizing of white male superiority and black male inferiority. This virtual deification of white men, under the law of slavery, entailed, by extension, that the black slave's ability to ascend to or even think about heaven depended on the charity of the white man (Fanon, *Wretched* 3). In spite of this, the African American Southern Christian church served as one of the epicenters of African American organization and government.

Wright points out that “[it] was through the portals of the church that the American Negro first entered the shrine of western culture” (“Blueprint” 99). By social and legislative law, blacks were excluded from participation in white churches, society, and government. During and after slavery, the black church in the South – run by and for blacks – served as a center for black cultural development. The church provided leadership, society, culture, and organization for the black community (Du Bois 121, 122). W.E.B Du Bois observes three characteristics unique to the black church: the “preacher, the music, and the frenzy” (120). He illustrates the role of these three units in the struggle against the colonial mythology by alluding to them throughout the text. Wright advises black writers to write to imagined black audiences focusing content on the real needs and aspirations unique to African American culture (“Blueprint” 104). The author is realistic about the authority the church still holds for many blacks and this is illustrated by the use of the church as an underlying, unifying current in *Uncle Tom's Children*.

In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Big Boy decides to skip school with three of his friends in favor of a hot afternoon skinny dip. After scaring a white woman who happens upon him and his three friends, still naked from the swim, the young main character shoots a white man who, in the woman’s defense, had already murdered two of the boys and was pointing the gun at another when Big Boy grabbed it (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 29, 30). Big Boy has to escape this southern town or be killed by a white mob. When Big Boy arrives home he frantically tells his parents what happened. His father’s immediate response is to gather members of the church which suggests that the black church was the first line of defense (40, 41). In addition, a deep religious faith is displayed as Big Boy’s mother sends him off repeating, “Pray, Big Boy, cause thas all anybody kin do now” (45); Big Boy remembers the advice his mother had given him as he sat hiding in a hole that he and his friends had dug a week before, frozen with fear (53). As the lynch mob approaches, Big Boy peers out to see them tar, feather, and burn alive his young friend Bobo, whose life he’d saved from the gunman less than twelve hours ago. He crouched in fear believing that the men would find him next, but it starts to rain and the mob disperses. Further, an allusion to a Christian resurrection is presented at the end of the story when Big Boy rises from the hole in the morning to catch the ride planned for his escape that would take him to Chicago (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 59). As “archaic” as Wright may believe the faith of a Christian to be, it proves helpful to the young African American fugitive. His faith helps him maintain the composure necessary to escape the injustice of the lynch mob.

The relationship between the church and the social movement is illustrated by the use of music. As the boys lay in the grass, under the hot sun, they could hear the whistle of a train heading north. The boys begin to sing “Dis train boun fo Glory/Dis train, Oh Hallelujah” (19). The train signifies social mobility. The north carries a double signified. Materially, for blacks it was idealized as a liberated haven and spiritually it idealized as heaven. After the boys finish their swim, the text reads:

Far away a train whistled.

“There goes number seven!”

“Headin fer up Noth!”

“Blazin it down the line!”

“Lawd, Ahm goin Noth some day.”

“Me too, man.”

“They say colored folks up Noth is got ekual rights.”

(Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 28)

Wright does not assign these lines to any of the characters in particular imitating the frenzied communication of the church, using call and response – a traditional feature of the black church. Finally, Messianic signifier is attached to Big Boys exodus.

As Big Boy comes to the hill where he has already dug out his hiding place, he finds a snake occupying the hole. After deciding to kill the snake, he takes up a stick and beats the snake to death. Wright overtly uses Christian reference writing, “He beat till the snake lay still; then he stomped it with his heel, grinding its head into the dirt” (Wright,

Uncle Tom's 47). This is very close to the wording used to describe God's judgment against the serpent that is often described as a snake: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy *head*, and thou shalt bruise his *heel*" (*King James Bible*, Genesis 3:15). Big Boy enters the hole which signifies a grave. In the morning, he rises from the hole, which implies resurrection. After his resurrection, he escapes the South hidden in a delivery truck of a fellow Christian head for the north or, as shown above, heaven – an ascension, the base ideology of Christian salvation. The north is associated with liberty from racial oppression as seen in the dialogue of the boys (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 28). Hence, the movement towards black liberation begins.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE FLOOD: “DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE”

Ahm gonna lay down mah sword and shiel

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Ahm gonna lay down mah sword and shiel

Down by the riverside

Ah ain gonna study war no mo... (Wright, Uncle Tom's 73)

The majority of religious cultures include a tale of a great flood that serves as an allegory for renewal or awakening (Frazer 46; Gaster 82; Patten 3). In “Blueprint,” Wright speculates that the unique folklore of a people is an integral part of their national identity. He writes, “a nationalist character of the Negro people is unmistakable. Psychologically this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore” (Wright, “Blueprint” 100). In “Down by the Riverside,” Wright provides a flood story for the movement towards a realization of a black national identity. This folktale’s hero, Mann, sets out against a rising flood to get his family to safety. His only available mode of transportation is a “white boat” stolen from, Mr. Heartfield, the postmaster, by Mann’s brother. Before taking his family to safe, high ground, though, he

attempts to get his wife to a Red Cross station where she can be seen by a doctor. Lulu, Mann's wife, is dying from the labor of child birth. He sets out against a rising, rushing current with his son, Pee Wee, his mother-in-law, and his dying wife. Spotting lights, Mann stops the boat to ask for help. Ironically, the lights he sees are those of, Mr. Heartfield's. In spite of Mann's repeated, loud pleadings, "Mah wifes sick! Yuh gotta phone!'," Mr. Heartfield's repeated response is, "Nigger, where you steal that boat?" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 79). Soon, Mr. Heartfield goes back into the house and returns with a gun and immediately begins to shoot at Mann and his family. Mann, who also has a pistol, returned fire and killed Mr. Heartfield. After this episode, although shaken up, Mann continues. In the course of his journey, he loses his wife, saves the lives of three white women, including Mrs. Heartfield, and two white children. In spite of his heroic deeds, however, Mann cannot escape the harsh justice of the Jim Crow mythology.

When the story begins, the rain has stopped, but the water has risen to six feet. Mann waits anxiously in his house which is deteriorating from the flood and his family who are deteriorating with the stress of waiting and the threat of death looming over his wife and unborn child. "Two days ago he had told Bob to take the old mule to Bowman's plantation and sell it, or swap it for a boat, any kind of boat" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 62). Wright intensifies this signifies a temporal isolation writing, "For a moment [Mann] had the illusion that that water had always been there, and would always be there" (64). A spatial isolation is illustrated by Mann's hope in the humanism of whites who he shows through his heroic deeds he believes are his fellow countrymen. Wright expresses Mann's

false hope writing, “The white folks would take [Lulu] in. They would *have* to take her in. They would not let a woman die just because she was black; they would not let a baby kill a woman. They would *not*” (66). This is one of a three expressions of Mann’s initial faith in the compassion of all humans – even whites. As Mann soon learns, however, the whites in this narrative care very little for the serious situation of his wife. Mann’s naivety implies a confusion between his perception of how people should act and how their actual behavior. This creates a conceptual (i.e. spatial) isolation. Overall, the reason for Mann’s isolation is shown to be due to his high hopes, determination to work, and deep attachment to home.

In the first paragraph, Wright shows the hero’s attachment to his home writing, “The morning before he had seen his only cow...pushing through three feet of water for the hills...Sister Jeff had said that a man who would not follow a cow was a fool...[Mann] had not figured it that way. This was his home” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 62, 63). Though this description is literally localized, the symbolic meaning of the flood stories found in religions around the earth indicates a mass catastrophe (Frazer 48; Patten 3). Ergo, Mann’s dedication to his home is a dedication to a specific location within a larger geographic picture. In this way, Wright challenges the notion that black people are disloyal to the country set forth in the Jim Crow mythology.

One analysis of “the negro” presented in a 1908 edition of *The American Journal of Sociology* indicates that the natural character of blacks is marred with an *intellectual* incapacity for the degree of national loyalty expected of American citizens. It does this

by submitting that generally blacks remain in a state of perpetual childhood throughout the course of their lives. By doing so, the author questions the humanness of blacks in general:

Like the child, many of [the Negro's] virtues are negative. He is neither grasping, nor malicious, nor vindictive. He is naturally confiding, and is easily controlled by those who have won his confidence. He is generous warm hearted, cheerful, and, for the most part, happy-tempered and obliging. He is (also like the child) entirely without foresight and absolutely irresponsible. For him the future is not; the present alone exists.
(Belin 518, 19)

The passage illustrates applies three methods of language use popular among white intellectuals, consciously or subconsciously, to rationalize repression, simplify this notion by pluralization and, as a result, dehumanize the blacks. This is done using three dialectic weapons.

The first language use is categorization. The pronoun "He" refers to all blacks – men and women, young and hold, northern and southern. This form of dialectic pluralization is repeated throughout "Down by the Riverside," as well as the rest of the text, as blacks are rarely referred to by whites as individuals. Instead, the general name for all blacks is "nigger." In addition, in the sample above, this use of the pronoun "He" when referring to blacks implies a single gender. It simultaneously makes the black female non-existent and places the readers focus on the black male exciting the fear and

speculation of the black male social and biological competitor inherent to the Jim Crow mythology.

The second language used in the passage is opposition by inference. The writer questions the humanness of the other. In the five sentence passage, the phrase, “Like a child,” is used twice. This phrase suggests that the object is not a child, but the object cannot also be like an adult. If the writer is describing something that is not a child or an adult, the reader reasons that all humans – meaning “whites” – are either children or adults, the object referred to by the author must not be human or is *some other kind of* human; this infers that blacks are not like whites, ergo, not human.

The third mode of language operating in this passage is the most consequential in the Jim Crow mythological: dehumanization through pluralization. This is done by applying like characteristics to a mass of individuals. The author declares that blacks, like children, are “neither grasping, nor malicious, nor vindictive,” are “naturally confiding,” “easily controlled,” “without foresight and absolutely irresponsible” (Belin 519). These descriptors, all signifying childlike behavior position the sign of blacks in the mythological web as a signifier for inferior beings. Therefore, they cannot truly serve the country or enjoy the fruits of citizenship. This isolates blacks spatially. Frantz Fanon points out that the oppressor “is right when he speaks of knowing ‘them’ well. For it is the [oppressor, i.e. Jim Crow white] who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence” (*Wretched* 36). Wright shows the perpetuation in the dialogue of the white men in this story.

When Bob returns with the stolen boat, he reports, “They done put ever nigger they could fin on the levee by the railroad, pilin san n cement bags. They drivin em like slaves. Ah heard they done killed two-three awready what tried t run erway” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 69). This forced labor is relegated to blacks and, therefore, the immediate reaction by the white, dominant, culture group is to reinstitute forced labor or slavery. By nightfall, the heavy rain had returned. Under the auspice of martial law and threat of a crumbling levee, a state of slavery is immediately reinstated. After Mann’s battle against the raging current in the small, white row boat, and the death of his wife and unborn child, when told by an army colonel that he has to go and help the other blacks at the levy he replies, “Capm, please! Ahm tired!” to which the colonel retorts, “This is martial law... Give this nigger some boots and a raincoat and ship him to the levee!” While several armed white soldiers stood by, twenty or thirty blacks piled bags full of sand and cement in an attempt to help the levy hold back the rising river. As Mann continued voicing his physical exhaustion, a white soldier says to him, “Aw, c mon, nigger! What in hells wrong with you? All the rest of the niggers are out there, how come you don’t want to go?” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 92). What is implied in the white soldier’s last question is if all “niggers” are alike, why shouldn’t one of them want to do what the rest of them are doing at even given time, regardless of other experiences? The Jim Crow mythology provides the language that describes all blacks as lucky and happy to be servants or slaves to whites. While Mann’s heroic deeds on behalf of white women he saves make him a clear exception, in the end he is treated like every other negro. He is

tried for the crime of stealing a boat and murdering Mr. Heartfield, denied due process in which he could have made an argument for self defense, and killed by a white mob. While, in this case, they are white soldiers, in Mann's perspective, as shown in the dialogue of the text, they are a white mob nonetheless. The allegory of the flood in "Down by the Riverside" offers black writers a perspective from which to view the world and the struggle for black liberation.

Richard Wright defines perspective as "that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people (Wright, "Blueprint" 103). Using Mann as the point of view gives the audience the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of a repressed man who, regardless of the harsh repression he faces under Jim Crow, he still has an innate sense of right. The reader also gets to witness the lack of mutual treatment ordinarily guaranteed to one who has performed the services of a hero under the common and formal law of white men. Repetitions of "white" – the "white" boat that kept him afloat in the flood, Mann's faith in white men, the white mob signifying the community, and the white soldiers as a signifier for the government are all symbols. Together with the context of the life threatening flood, as a black mythological web which offers perspective, they signify that the white role in the black liberation movement is generally adversarial. The white boat, however, carries a different, though related, symbolic message: any whites that try to help will be considered stolen regardless of motive and eventually taken back to the white side.

The allegory of the flood in “Down by the Riverside” maintains the religious fever while showing the futility of using it alone to perpetuate the black culture. It offers constant prayer, corporate and individual, and the singing of hymns. Wright makes it clear that his faith drives his desire to use his strength for the good. In the end, however, spirituality does nothing to improve his social situation – he is still black. Alain Locke writes that “the Old Negro [the mythological black] had long become more of a myth than a man” (“The New Negro” 21). Wright’s, “Down by the Riverside,” illustrates Locke’s point, challenging the black writer to revise the existing national mythology to exclude the “Old Negro.” But, as Wright displays in this work must be recognized, the Jim Crow mythology’s perception of the “Old Negro” must first be reckoned with.

SIGNS OF PASSING TIME: “LONG BLACK SONG”

Go t sleep, baby

Papas gone t town

Go t sleep, baby

The suns goin down

Go t sleep, baby

Yo candys in the sack

Go t sleep, baby

*Papas comin back... (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 125)*

In “Blueprint,” Wright points out that the “relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple. The imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality. Image and emotion possess a logic of their own” (105). “Long Black Song” provides an example of this idea imagery to show conceptual spatial and temporal historic relationships. Lateral and centered spatial relationships are denoted in juxtapositions between mother and child, and black and white. Antecedent and modern temporal relationships are signified in modes of transportation and the sounds attributed to them – “tinkle,” describing the sound of Silas’ wagon and “throb” describing the white man’s automobile. In addition, Wright illustrates the social consequences for the black man seeking to conform to American economics

within the Jim Crow system. In this case, both the Silas' knowledge of the technology of business and the Jim Crow system are trapped together in an antecedent temporal relationship.

The story begins as Sarah, the main character, sings the song quoted above as she rocks her baby, Ruth, in a cradle. Ruth, incapable of freeing herself from the imprisonment of the wooden cradle, cries loudly drowning out the song of material promise out. Sarah's attempts to pacify the child are superficial; she checks her dry diaper and offers her water. She picks Ruth up in an attempt to make the baby more comfortable – she continues to cry. Sarah offers the baby water and food, but Ruth will not be comforted. As Sarah holds Ruth close to her body, the infant struggles against her mother's grasp. Finally, Sarah puts the crying baby on the floor. "As soon as the little fingers touched the floor the wail quieted into a broken snuffle" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 125, 126). The baby cried out, craving freedom. This struggle between Sarah and Ruth in the opening scene exemplifies the cultural language barrier that exists between the dominant white culture and the silent culture of the objectified blacks.

Throughout this portion, the baby is referred in the narration as "it." The use of the pronoun "it" dehumanizes Ruth as an individual human; hence, a logical conclusion is that Ruth represents an entity – a thing. "It" can refer to an inanimate thing – such as a car or a bicycle – or it can refer to a concept – such as a mythology or a social movement. In that Wright imputes a conscious desire to this "it," Wright's uses his discussion concerning Ruth as an attempt of the black generations to communicate in a language

foreign or unheard by the culturally dominant. Within the contact zone, communication between the dominant and dominated (in this case, Sarah and Ruth respectively), the idea of paternalism objectifies the dominated by assuming that the desires of the dominated are subject to or like those of the dominator. “Yo ma cant hep yuh less she knows what yuh want” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s*). Sarah’s intentions are for the best of the child; yet Sarah is the authority. In the contact zone described by Mary Louise Pratt, all criteria of analysis, especially language, is governed by the authority figure. Anything falling outside of the specified criteria is invisible to authority (615). The inequality created in the contact zone, not by intention of the authority, but as a result of concrete issues such as language barriers are spatial differences of power are called lateral. In other words, the authority gives the subjugated a voice, but because of the criteria set by the authority, the voice is very difficult to use. Participants in a colonial society learn to express themselves according to the mythology of the authority. The colonized can never hope to return to a pure historical space, but the mythology will provide enough language to form a self for the oppressed that is a cultural hybrid (Tiffin 95). However, if the subjugated culture mingles with the dominant culture, a total hybrid culture will arise. Du Bois states that this is the desire of the blacks – not to change the myth, but to become part of it (11).

Through poetic language, Wright expresses Sarah’s daydreams and hopes for a hybrid harmony between black and white. She constantly imagined “the white bright days and the deep desire of dark black nights” signifying contentment (129, 132, 137, 153). But, in men, she recognized the strife between black and white: “White men killed

black men because they could and black men killed white men to keep from being killed” (147, 153). Sarah’s speculation illustrates the circumstance of the colonized to constantly be on defense. The space in this contact zone is centered on the authority figure creating a centered spatial difference of power. This is what is meant by a depoliticized contact zone – authority determines that its voice is the only voice – and is most common in colonial mythologies. Wright describes, through Sarah’s reflections, what was the black/white relationship when the power difference was decentered, lateral and politicized: “Somehow, men, black men and white men...were all a part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow, they were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were. She felt it when she breathed and knew it when she looked. But she could not say how” (154). This point of view defuses the ideology of absolute opposites within the colonial mythology. In seeing black and white as partners in a larger picture, the Manichean ideology of colonialism is dismantled (Fanon 45). Unfortunately, in literature presented by white authors concerning blacks of the time were inherently centered, even if the intent was a lateral approach because of the paternalistic attitude of the colonial mythology.

Discussions by white authors concerning the “negro problem” show this paternalistic distortion. One such article is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s, “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem,” published in *The American Journal of Sociology* in July of 1908. Gilman opens the article: “Transfusion of blood is a simple matter compared with the transfusion of civilization; yet that is precisely what is going on between us and the negro

race” (78). “Blood” serves as a symbol of kinship, so Gilman’s assertion is that if white civilization continues in the present direction, eventually white people will share kinship with blacks. Further down she writes: “On the field of economic competition into which the negro was so suddenly thrown he does not, as a whole, in fifty years, show equality with us – which is not remarkable” (79). This statement assumes that “the field of economic competition” is level for all those involved. It is illogical in suggesting that African Americans have been free to function in the national economy for fifty years. This article was published in 1908. Fifty years from this date, at least in the South, blacks were still living in bondage. However, as Fanon points out “truth is the property of the national cause” (*Wretched* 50). As previously mentioned, a mythology need not be fully supported by empirical, factual, or observable information. Finally, the author’s “suggestion on the negro problem” is to:

Let each sovereign state carefully organize in every county and township an enlisted body of all negroes below a certain grade of citizenship...the whole body of negroes who do not progress, who are not self-supporting, who are degenerating into an increasing percentage of social burdens or actual criminals, should be taken hold of by the state. This proposed organization is not enslavement, but enlistment. The new army should have its uniforms, its decorations, its titles, its careful system of grading, its music and banners and impressive ceremonies. (80, 81)

Within the one-sided, isolated point of view of Jim Crow mythology, this may appear to be a reasonable solution or at least an attempt to approach the perceived problem from a lateral spatial relationship. But the passage shows the depoliticization of the colonial text from which Jim Crow mythology evolves. For example: Who decides the criteria by which to judge whether or not individuals meet the standards of “a certain grade of citizenship”? Who will establish the rules of conduct and allegiance for this new army? Will whites who fail to meet established criteria by which “a certain grade of citizenship” is judged be subject to the same “enlistment”? As is, Gilman’s proposal is fully based on the mythology that favors Jim Crow and, ergo, purports a centered spatial difference of power. It implies, at best, paternalistic attitudes associated with White supremacy that requires an adherence to the ideology of group pluralization.

The location of “Long Black Song” represents a bridge of historic maturation in the black mythology Wright proposes in “Blueprint.” Wright uses concrete imagery through the repetition of words and phrases to signify the relationship between the past and the future and how a new history that sees the necessity of blacks and whites exist in imaginative space of those who dream about a future society of equality. The strong use of concrete imagery as signifiers of elements that mark temporal change suggests the continuity of technological and ideological development. “Tinkle” and “throb” are used to signify modes of transportation; transportation is associated with social mobility. The word “tinkle” always used in relation to Silas, his wagon, and night (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 139, 142). The temporal relationship signifies an antecedent formation as it is

associated with mechanisms of the past presents is only heard at the end of the day. “Throb” is used to describe the sound of the engine in the car of the white salesman that visits Sarah during the day. In addition, his motive is to sell her the then recently invented gramophone (129,138). The fact that the sound, “throb,” is associated with the day, by extension (linguistic signifier), implies new beginnings or modernization. These sounds represent movement through history which is marked by technology. This literary analysis of the concept time makes these signifiers temporal; i.e. if humans were unaware of today, they would have no firm concept of yesterday or tomorrow. While both the “throb” of the car engine and the “tinkle” of Silas’ wagon indicates mobility, the wagon represents a time when little social mobility was available to blacks. This is a clear example of Wright’s intent to rewrite the mythology since the antecedent temporal relationship of difference cannot be known absent the modern. This theory is further affirmed as Sarah sees the clock as unimportant. When questioned by the salesman about how she keeps time without a clock, Sarah replies, “We git erlong widout time” (131). Wright’s presentation of the character of Silas connotes the material consequences of the colonized exempt from a past history.

In “Blueprint,” Wright theorizes that “the petty bourgeois sections [small land or business owners] of oppressed minorities, assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie [in this case, rich whites] in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere” (98). In Jim Crow culture, technological advances are few and far between. This is because it is designed around a “plantation-feudal” economic system (101). Silas’

only example of the norm, however, is the white farmer of the Jim Crow town. This position is reflected in Wright's narration concerning a memory of Silas: "Always he had said he was as good as any white man. He had worked hard and saved his money and bought a farm so he could grow his own crops like white men. Silas hates white folks! Lawd, he sho hates em!" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 147). This passage serves as an example of how Silas, a member of the new black middleclass or "petty bourgeois section," imitates the oppressor. He sets their business practices and social ideology of separation as the standard and works to surpass it. Silas imitates the white man in two practices: business and social. In business, Wright's character points out that, "'Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs got do just like they [white people] do.'" (140). In social ideology, Silas exclaims, "'Gawd, Ah which alla them white folks wuz dead! *Dead*, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em *all!*'" (152).

FROM BEHIND THE VEIL: “FIRE AND CLOUD”

The theme of “Fire and Cloud” is the inevitable fusion of the black church and countering the colonial mythology that serves as the backdrop of Jim Crow. There is no song before this story. There is little symbolic language; the narration is concrete and straightforward. The story is told in a third person narrative, but follows the footsteps and thoughts of the Reverend Dan Taylor. Through this character, Wright is able to amply illustrate Du Bois’ theories of double consciousness, the veil, and the color line. Wright offers a speculation on how brutality, disenfranchisement, and hunger move the oppressed to break the veil. In breaking the veil, the colonial mythology is politicized in that it forces a social space in which the objectified other becomes a subject with its own voice. The black church morphs into a vehicle for the political unity of the black and white oppressed. Wright uses a dialogue between Reverend Taylor and May, his wife, to show the dynamics of living behind the veil.

Du Bois describes double-consciousness as a “two-ness” created by the black man’s innate sense of self and the white man’s idea of the black self. He writes that America is “a world which yields [black people] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other [white] world...One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, tow unreconciled stirrings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (11). The colonial mythology protects the

racial fantasy by enforcing a color line. A color line is a geographic division of color groups. Groups are ghettoized into two separate worlds and, therefore, almost totally isolated from personal and/or social contact with other groups (Du Bois 66; Fanon, *Wretched* 38, 39; Lipsitz 3). A social aspect of the color line exists as well. The other is forced by threat of violence to behave according to the colonial mythology (Fanon, *Wretched* 36; Wright, "Blueprint" 100). In *Uncle Tom's Children*, black compliance is further reinforced by the creation of the fear of being labeled a "bad nigger" which could be the result of any black person that fails to act according to the pluralizing character traits (i.e. stereotypes) of the colonial mythology (160). Hence, when May warns Reverend Taylor of the sin of lying, he replies, "'We gotta lie t white folks! Theys on our necks! They *make* us lie t them! Whut kin we do but lie?'" (170). This is not surprising considering that, as mentioned in the previous discussion on mythology, it was noted that no factual bases is necessary to the "truths" mythology sets forth. This is apparent in the dialogue of the white men that come to try to convince Reverend Taylor to instruct his congregation not to protest.

The white visitors are the mayor, the chief of police, and the Mr. Lowe, the head of the industrial squad. The mayor's approach feints political negation asking the Reverend about his family, explaining the problem, and implying a united front of blacks and whites against the problem of hunger that plagues this town. When the Reverend points out that the people are demonstrating because they're hungry, the mayor reminds the Reverend of political favors saying, "'Dan, youre a leader and you've got great

influence over your congregation here...I helped you to get that influence by doing your people a lot of favors through *you*” (“Fire” 184). The mayor’s previous acts, disguised as benevolence, reveal themselves as purely political vehicles of social control. The mayor uses double talk in this negotiation. First he says, “After all, *we are all human beings*, aren’t we?” (181 *emphasis mine*). Upon trying to convince Reverend Taylor to comply, the mayor says, ““These *niggers* around here trust you, Dan”” (184 *emphasis mine*). Does the mayor mean that “niggers” are “human beings” and, thus, included in “we”? If so, than how does the mayor justify the brutal subjection of “niggers”? It is made clear that the reason for hunger among the blacks is that the mayor has outlawed black farming (186). Would the mayor pass a law to prevent “all human beings” from feeding their families through farming? The answers to these questions are obvious, but this is an example of the doubletalk that takes place within a mythology; the words necessary to support the ideology are used at all times with little regard to objective, observable reality. This inherent flexibility in colonial language creates the veil and the survival technique of living with a double-consciousness for the black man. During this meeting, the Reverend does not agree to the demands of the three whites. Instead, he simply tells them the truth: ““mah word don go so fer in times like these, you Honah. These folks is lookin t me fer bread n Ah cant give it t em. They hungry n Ah cant tell em where t eat. Theys gonna march no mattah whut Ah say”” (185). For this, the Reverend suffers a brutal whipping. It should be recognized that there is not only an ideological motivation for the maintenance of the colonial mythology, but there is a material one as well.

The covert material motive of colonialism to exploit the natural resources, especially labor, of colonized lands is cloaked in an overtly interposing a dialectic designed to rationalize colonialism (JanMohamed 63; Fanon, *Wretched* 189). This rationalizing dialectic is displayed in the aforementioned conversation between Reverend Taylor and the mayor. Discussion of the “negro problem” often centered on how blacks affect whites economically. For instance, in 1900, *The Century* published an article called “Paths of Hope for the Negro: Practical Suggestions of a Southerner.” In the article, the author blames the economic problems of southern whites on the blacks among them. He writes, “the low standard of living among the blacks keeps down the wages of all classes of whites. So long as the Negroes are content to live in miserable huts, wear rags, and subsist upon hog fat and cowpease, so long must the wages of white people in the same kind of work be pressed toward the same level” (Dowd). Dowd’s opinion illuminates Wright assertion that, “[there] isn’t any Negro problem, there is only a white problem” (qtd. in Lipsitz 1). How can the laziness of mythologically superior whites be blamed on mythologically inferior blacks using the language system of the same mythology? However, the equal distribution material goods is only the skeleton of considerations for the black writer. Once the reality of unequal distribution is expressed, the black writer has to make the expression lifelike (Wright, “Blueprint” 102).

After being severely whipped and beaten by four white men and being thrown out of the church, Reverend Taylor cries to his son, “Ah done lived all mah life on mah knees, a-beggin n a-pleadin wid the white folks. N all they gimme wuz crumbs! All they

did wuz kick me! N then they come wida gun n ast me t give mah own soul! N ef Ah so much as talk lika man they try t kill me” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 209). This marks a turning point, though. After hearing that he’s lost his position as the church leader and his whipping marks the end of his ability to ask white people f or things, for Reverend Taylor, there is no place left in the veil but out. Here Wright expresses a revelation in Reverend Taylor that alters the perspective of the black church from a spiritual position to a political one:

“Its the *people!* Theys the ones whut mus be real t us! Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us! We cant hep ourselves er the people when wes erlone. Ah been wrong erbout a lotta things Ah tol yuh, son. Ah tol yuh them things cause Ah thought they wuz right. Ah tol yuh t work hard n climb t the ttop. Ah tol yuh folks would lissen t yun then. But they wont son! All the will, all the strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people! (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s* 210)

This is a direct affront to the colonial mythology. What Reverend Taylor actually suggests is that the signified of the sign “human beings” be altered from the way the mayor used it, and amended to fully include blacks. Further, when the poor black marchers meet the poor white marchers at the park, the signified of “white” changes from a biological, racial classification to a socio-economic classification. Wright represents a mass breaking through the veil in two ways: first, the geographic color line is crossed when blacks join with whites at the “park that separated the white district from the black”

(Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 219); when Reverend Taylor meets the mayor, the Reverend asserts himself as a subject, not as subjected. The mayor orders Taylor to “tell them they can get food if they go back home peacefully,” to which Taylor replies, “Yuh tell em, yo Honah!” The mayor turns away and stands up on the back seat of his car trying to silence to crowd. This politicizes the mythology in that the crowd refuses to be silenced; the white mayor has to address the needs expressed by the people for the good of the people.

All the while the people sing:

So the sign of the fire by night

N the sign of the cloud by day

A-hoverin oer

Jus befo

As we Journey on our way (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 220)

CONCLUSION

Wright's work in *Uncle Tom's Children* follows the advice he sets forth in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." "Blueprint" reminds black writers of the lack of attention to black people. In this essay, Wright points out that as the church's moral authority has declined and it is up to black writers to "do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die" ("Blueprint" 102). He suggests that black writers have the ability to do this as they have the power over symbolic meaning and myth (100). This is evident as the colonial mythology manifest itself through a racialized language; social norms that favored whites and oppressed blacks developed according to this mythology. As a result, Jim Crow rose in the South within little opposition and a lot of community support. The brutality that Richard Wright witnessed during his childhood in Mississippi created a spirit of liberation through literature. Wright seeks to dismantle the colonial mythology at the base of Jim Crow by rewriting the mythology. *Uncle Tom's Children* provides all of the elements of a black liberation movement. It provides a cultural background in the uniqueness of the black southern church, it uses common heroes to develop such as Mann and Reverend Taylor to empower common blacks, through symbolic representation, rewrites the colonial mythology to include the African American as a subject of discourse in American society.

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