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# “Strength Shed by a New and Terrible Vision:” The Organic Evolution of the Blues and the Blues Aesthetic in Richard Wright’s 'Uncle Tom’s Children'

## **Abstract**

An exploration into the development of the "blues aesthetic" in the African-American literary tradition.

## **Keywords**

Blues, Spiritual, Richard Wright, Music, Literature

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Cultural History | English Language and Literature | Ethnomusicology | Literature in English, North America | Music | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

English Senior Thesis

This paper was written for Professor McKinley Melton's senior seminar, *ENG 304: 19th and 20th Century American Literature: The Bible and African-American Literature*, Spring 2015.

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Professor Melton

English 403: African American Literature and the Bible

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“Strength Shed by a New and Terrible Vision:” The Organic Evolution of the Blues and the Blues Aesthetic in Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*

“From ancient times,” writes A. Yemisi Jimoh, “music and storytelling have been closely tied among the peoples of oral cultures worldwide.” “Quite frequently,” she continues, “a person comes to understand her life and the world in which she lives through the tales of the bards, troubadours, jongleurs, and fili, among others” (Jimoh 1). This excerpt from Jimoh’s *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction*, is invaluable insofar as it demonstrates how music functions as a means of understanding one’s contemporary place in society, and how music represents an artistic manifestation of cultural inheritance. Music not only comes to reflect the victories and struggles of modern cultures and their people, but it also catalogues and conveys a people’s history of victory and struggle.

It also must be noted that, while music and storytelling are culturally inherited art-forms, they are also organic art-forms that grow and change in accordance with the ever-changing demands of the culture they speak to and represent. This paper will ostensibly focus on the genre of Blues music and the literary aesthetic it inspired, exploring how blues organically grows out of the rich cultural tradition of the Black spiritual, and how this evolution catalyzed the emergence of African-American literature modeled in the spirit of a blues *ethos*. I contend that the blues necessarily grows out of the spiritual when the turbulent, post-emancipation landscape of the Jim Crow South demanded a musical form more conducive to confronting that society’s characteristic social and political injustice. While the spiritual, which had long been embraced

by the Black community in general, pre-emancipation slave communities, and the community of the Black church, represented an extension of the biblical liberation narrative that promised deliverance to the patient, the blues represents a more politically proactive musical genre.

Finally, by evoking the short stories “Big Boy Leaves Home,” “Fire and Cloud,” and “Bright and Morning Star,” which make up, in part, Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*, as a critical paradigm, I examine how Wright’s narrative aesthetically reflects the aforementioned musical evolution of the spiritual into blues. My investigation is predicated upon Jimoh’s differentiation between the spiritual-gospel literary aesthetic and the blues literary aesthetic, which I consider at length herein. Moreover, I demonstrate how music functions as a formal device in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, guiding the narratives of the short stories that constitute the collection. One will come to see how the specific music evoked in each short story I consider is consistent with the respective story’s sentiment. In other words, as the overall narrative progresses, it becomes more political, as do the implications of the songs and hymns that guide it. Ultimately, I contend that *Uncle Tom’s Children* represents a literary exercise in the aesthetic of blues music. Understanding that Wright, who was heavily influenced by blues music, believed in the necessity of forming a more politically active Black church (as Timothy Caron suggests), I further contend that Wright believed in the necessity of applying a more political musical aesthetic to literature in an effort to combat the cruel reality of Jim Crow. To this end, I suggest that Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” is a *de facto* endorsement of blues writing. Placed in its historical context, then, *Uncle Tom’s Children* suggests that the progressive and organic musical evolution that begat the blues was not only conducive to an African-American society that he felt had been too complacent, but also absolutely essential to that society’s goal of transcending the evils of Jim Crow.

Of course, no musical form is born in a vacuum. As I have already suggested, blues music is the product of a causal chain of cultural and artistic inheritance, the roots of which are firmly embedded in the soil of slavery and European colonialism. The scholar Richard Allen Waterman speaks to this fact when he writes, “in the United States as in other New World areas controlled by English-speaking Europeans, folk tunes and hymns stemming from the British Isles were often seized upon by African slaves and their descendants and, after suitable remodeling, adopted as American Negro tunes” (19). “The remodeling process,” continues Waterman, “was one of Africanization, and the tunes which emerged are best to be interpreted as European-inspired African music” (19). Waterman’s analysis speaks to New World “Negro” Music’s (that is, Negro music born in the Americas) tendency to borrow from various cultures and traditions, appropriating elements of these traditions, and fusing them into new musical forms. For our purposes, I begin, naturally enough, with how the oral tradition of slave music becomes infused with elements of the Christian *ethos*. Just as enslaved blacks frequently “seized upon” elements of the European folk tradition, so also did they embrace select spiritual elements of their oppressor’s faith as a means of cultural survival. Slave religiosity constituted an amalgamation of traditional African religious beliefs and New World Christianity, often loosely bound together by a Christian framework. As Lawrence Levine writes in *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, “They [the enslaved] extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament” (33). Quoting the anthropologist Paul Radin, Levine claims:

The ante-bellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted God to himself. In the Christian God he found a fixed point and he needed a fixed point, for both within and outside of himself, he could see only vacillation and endless shifting...

There was no other safety for people faced on all sides by doubt and the threat of personal disintegration, by the thwarting of instincts and the annihilation of values. (Levine 33)

Here one sees how Old Testament Christianity represented the rock upon which the slaves could build their church and form their community. The community that emerges is that of the Black church, the predominate musical form of which is the spiritual. That being said, the Spiritual did not occupy a purely religious position in slave society.

“Neither the slaves nor their African forebears,” writes Levine, “ever drew modernity’s clear line between the sacred and the secular” (30). Consequently, “[spirituals] were not sung solely or even primarily in churches or praise houses but were used as rowing songs, field songs, works songs, and social songs” (Levine 31-2). Spirituals and songs of a religious nature, therefore, were able to transcend purely sacred connotations and came to embody the zeitgeist of slave society more broadly. One sees this exemplified in the spiritual “You Got A Right,” which reads, in part, “De every time I thought I was los’ / De dungeon shuck an’ de chain fell off. / You may hinder me here / But you cannot dere, / ‘Cause God in de heav’n gwinter answer prayer” (Hill 225). While the song is definitely framed around a Christian conception of the divine, the message of liberation, emblemized by the unshackling of chains, and of a promised land, be it a Biblical Heaven or a more open-minded northern state, could be universally appreciated by even secularly-minded slaves, and used as a means to give voice to their struggle.

Because many of these spirituals incorporated religious themes that resonated with the average slave on a secular level, the songs eventually came to define the slave experience. Among the most prominent of these themes was the biblical liberation narrative of Exodus, where God promised to deliver his chosen people from bondage. “The most persistent single

image the slave songs contain,” writes Levine, “is that of the chosen people” (33). James H. Cone, in his article “Black spirituals: A Theological Interpretation,” substantiates this claim when he writes, “The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals... Just as God delivered Moses and the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage... so also he will deliver black people from American slavery (18-9). Among the many examples of spirituals that utilized this trope are “There’s a Better Day a Coming,” which promises that “Ere the winter will be over,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” which is promised to “come for to carry me home” (Hill 236-7). As one can see, the promise of deliverance, even when divorced from its theological origins, was doubtlessly embraced by slave society.

Ultimately, what one sees when one studies the substance of slave spirituals is that they served to unite an otherwise fragmented community, and provide that community with a beacon of hope moving forward. They represent the reconfiguration of white Christianity into an art-form conducive to chronicling the complexities of their unique black struggle. In Levine’s words, the emergence of the spiritual represents the point at which slaves actively rejected attempts by their masters to “reduce Christianity to an ethic of pure submission” (Levine 45). Instead of submission, the spirituals, what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “the Sorrow Songs,” motivate the slave community to endure, convincing them that deliverance will come. “They [spirituals] are the music of an unhappy people,” Du Bois writes in *The Souls of Black Folks*, “of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (123). Nevertheless, while the spiritual did much to establish both the community of the Black church and the zeitgeist of slave society, in the decades following emancipation many, including Richard Wright, became impatient. Tired of

simply longing for a truer, better world, they instead desired to achieve one for themselves. In so doing, they affected the creation of a quintessentially “blues aesthetic.”

As the social and political landscape changes after emancipation, so too does the demand for art-forms that reflect contemporary struggle. To this end, the spiritual became increasingly anachronistic. The spiritual was a musical form born of slavery, and while it represents the artistic soil from which evolving musical forms like the blues organically grew, the ostensible struggle to end slavery was no longer contemporary. This is not to say that American Negroes were no longer oppressed, but instead suggests that they demanded a new music to chronicle the shifting nature of their oppression. “While the spirituals tell the stories of enslaved Africans’ movement from slavery to freedom,” writes Jimoh, “Blues tells the stories of a second inefficacious promise” (23). Here Jimoh is referring to the “failed promise of the United States as a nation of opportunity and freedom,” which became all the more infuriating after the Civil War when slaves were technically liberated only to confront another hurdle in Jim Crow (23). Blues music’s explosion onto the scene in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century represents a fundamental change in the aesthetic of African-American music catalyzed by the discontentment of a new generation of oppressed blacks. The emphasis on the generational aspect of this evolution cannot be overstressed, for while the essence of the spiritual was conducive to documenting the struggles of older generations of slaves, the new generation of emancipated yet still oppressed blacks demanded a new artistic aesthetic to capture the evolving zeitgeist of their time. What comes about is the “blues aesthetic,” which manifests in the form of both African-American music and literature.

The burgeoning “blues aesthetic” that evolves out of the spiritual at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century differs from its progenitor in the sense that it assumes a more personal, individual *ethos*.



Jimoh describes this evolutionary process when writing, “the spirituals are a collaborative effort of the individual and the forged communal-group, without an emphasis – as in blues – on a personal voice” (26). Whereas a communal voice conduced to music produced by slaves who lived lives, in Jimoh’s words, of “forced communalism,” the changing face of American life post-emancipation allowed for more individualized forms of artistic depictions of struggle (25). Inherent to this transformation is an emphasis on “lived reality,” which becomes the keystone theme of blues music and blues-inspired art. Jimoh writes:

Lived reality in a blues life locates African Americans in a shared condition of socially imposed limitations that restrict the movement of black bodies, which are no longer owned by individual enslavers but now are controlled by laws and social policies that are complicit with White Supremacy. This condition of relative freedom allows black people to establish alliances in which a person’s discretion about her or his lived reality, instead of necessary collectivity, is the basis on which connections with others are made. (26)

This is not to suggest that the notion of community is forsaken with the transition to a “blues aesthetic,” but instead that African-American art begins to approach the communal element of the black experience from a new perspective. Whereas historically enslaved Africans experienced a forced communal existence, the music of which placed a philosophical value on liberation and freedom (as we have seen), Blacks living under the law of Jim Crow had the newfound ability to project their suffering through the lens of their individual, lived experience. “If the dominant idea in the spirituals is that they illustrate a communal response to lived experiences with a call for ubiquitous freedom and justice,” writes Jimoh, “then this idea is expanded in blues so that group-informed yet self-reflexive, personal solutions in the face of

continued disappointment, pain and oppression are the dominant ideas” (28). Levine echoes this sentiment, writing, “The blues were solo music not only in performance but in content. The persona of the individual performer entirely dominated the song which centered upon the singer’s own feelings, experiences, fears, dreams, acquaintances and idiosyncrasies” (Levine 222).

One witnesses the personal element of blues music firsthand in the song “Ain’t it Hard to Be a Nigger,” which, alien of any sacred connotations, reflects the struggle of leading a Black life in a world where freedom and upwards mobility are illusory. The song writer, clearly channeling his own lived experience, writes, “Nigger an’ white man / playin’ seven-ups; / Nigger win de money - / Skeered to pick’em up / “If a nigger git ‘rested, / An’ can’t pay his fine, / they sho’ send him out / To the county gang” (Odum 143). This blues song evidences the oppression that Blacks living under Jim Crow experienced, always having to be sure they stayed in line and didn’t draw the displeasure of white men. Moreover, the humorous elements of the song reflect the cathartic nature of blues music that Ralph Ellison addresses in his *Jazz Writings*. “The blues,” he writes, “is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism” (Ellison 103). As one can see, in divorcing their art from the Christian tradition, Black songwriters and performers of blues music were able to express their unique struggles in highly personal ways.

With the historical changes that catalyzed the rise of the blues aesthetic, many oppressed blacks began to embrace self-expression at the expense of anachronistic institutions and art-forms. James Cone, in another of his articles titled “The Blues: A Secular Spiritual,” suggests why many American Blacks found the spirituals to be insufficient as a vehicle for social

deliverance. “To be sure,” writes Cone, “a significant number of black people were confident that the God of Israel was involved in black history, liberating them from slavery and oppression” (231). Nonetheless, Cone continues, “not all blacks could accept the divine promises of the Bible as a satisfactory answer to the contradictions of black existence. They refused to adopt a God-centered perspective as the solution to the problem of black suffering. Instead, they sang, ‘Got them blues, and too dam’ mean to cry’” (Cone 231). Again, one sees how the blues aesthetic entails a more personal, individualized expression of the struggles of lived reality. Cone suggests that the many living in the shadow of Jim Crow grew tired of waiting on the religious deliverance promised by the spirituals and the Black church. Instead, they sought a more political, active, and independent musical form, which manifests in the genre of the blues.

Like Jimoh, Cone believes that the emergence of blues and the blues aesthetic must be understood in its post-emancipation historical context. “During slavery,” writes Cone, “the social movement of Black people was limited, and the church served as the primary social unit for black expression,” whereas, “after the Civil War, the social mobility of blacks increased, and the church became only one of several places where blacks could meet and talk about the problems of black existence” (“The Blues” 234). Because of a newly achieved autonomy, non-religious blacks were free to chronicle the black struggle in new and revolutionary ways, many of which struck much closer to the bone than the spirituals had. Levine suggests that, in many cases, the blues came to embody a form of protest, not as political as the protest called for by Richard Wright (understanding that Wright is informed by the political ideology of Communism), but protest in the sense that they were actively seizing upon liberties that had been long denied them by the White oppression. Levine writes:

To state that black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it necessarily led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candor to others whom they would in no other way be able to reach, and, in the face of the sanctions of the white majority, could assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being. (240)

This notion of “protest,” which entails an aesthetic of freedom and self-expression, is not only characteristic of blues music, but also of the African-American literary tradition that evolves alongside and is motivated by the blues aesthetic.

Richard Wright is one of the many African-American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who embraced elements of the blues aesthetic in their work. As a social commentator Wright was among those who believed that the attitude of the spiritual and the Black church were fundamentally lacking the dimension that could make tangible freedom and deliverance a reality. As his biography and philosophy suggest, Wright’s upbringing in the Church (which happens concurrently with his introduction to blues music and the blues aesthetic) endowed him with a great deal of optimism concerning the potential of the Church as a collective, while also making him realize the importance of political activism. As Timothy P. Caron notes in his “The Reds are in the Bible Room,” Wright’s earliest experiences of the Black church came when he was a child while attending his Grandmother’s Seventh Day Adventist Church (47). By all accounts, the young Wright did not enjoy his religious upbringing. “Wright grumbled about the numerous church services he was forced to attend,” Caron writes, “resented the required family prayers and Bible readings, and resisted every attempt made to save his soul” (47). While much of his early

animosity can likely be attributed to the restlessness of youth, Wright's discontentment with the shortcomings of the Black church began to be drawn from a different spring as he aged.

As he became more political, Wright came to regard the principle failure of the Black church as squandered potential. A fervent believer in the potential of the community established by the Black church, Wright felt that the Church itself lacked the political dimension necessary to winning any substantive victory against Jim Crow. Caron writes:

“As an African-American from the violently Jim Crow state of Mississippi [Wright] certainly did recognize the vital role the church played as a bulwark against the tide of white racism in the lives of Southern blacks... and, moreover, he came to recognize the radical potential of the black church and its ability to equip Southern blacks with an indigenous belief system for hastening and contributing to their own liberation.” (Caron 46)

Nonetheless, Wright frequently criticized the church for not tangibly capitalizing on the promise it represented. Caron continues to write, “[Wright] quickly realized that such a conversion-oriented theology did not make for very effective doctrine for social revolution. Despite the compelling images and drama of Sunday morning services, Wright longed for a politically responsive church” (48). One sees this sentiment expressed firsthand in *Uncle Tom's Children*, where Wright seizes on the blues aesthetic in an effort to show where individual action is necessary to maintain and motivate a community to political action. Nonetheless, Wright's political demands for Negro art and the Black community in general are explicitly fleshed out in “A Blueprint for Negro Writing,” a philosophic manifesto which prescribes the demands for Black literature that one sees carried out in *Uncle Tom's Children*.

For Wright, the failures of the Negro Church were mirrored by the failures of the Negro writer. Juxtaposing these institutions with that of the Negro Worker, who he celebrates for his political activism, Wright writes in “A Blueprint for Negro Writing:”

That Negro workers, propelled by the harsh conditions of their lives, have demonstrated this consciousness and mobility for economic and political action there can be no doubt. But has this consciousness been reflected in the struggle to free Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, in the drive towards unionism, in the fight against lynching? Have they as creative writers taken advantage of their unique minority position? The answer decidedly is no... An emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook. (98-9)

This excerpt, when coupled with Caron’s assessment, suggests that Wright believed that the Black church had likewise “failed to take advantage of their position.” It had failed to stand shoulder to shoulder with the politically minded Negro workers. Despite the fact that Wright attributes the genesis of the Negro Culture to the rise of the “Negro church; and the folklore, blues, spirituals, folk tales, vernacular, and work songs” of the Negro people, he accuses the then contemporary Black church of contributing to complacency and stasis (99). “It [the Church] remained a relatively revolutionary struggle,” Wright argues, “until religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial” (99). Insofar as the American Negro became reliant on the promise of salvation and deliverance, that element of the religious that was “fixed and admired” instead of fought for, the Negro people, Wright contends, had been held back.

This reality is addressed thematically in *Uncle Tom's Children*, as the respective short stories demonstrate the necessity of fusing the political with the spiritual in order to affect social change and to achieve social justice. In Caron's words, "Each of the collection's stories demonstrates either the tragic consequences of life without a church committed to revolutionary politics, or the victorious results of a Christian praxis driven by a Marxist demand for social justice" (Caron 46). With this in mind, it finally comes time to embark on a close reading of *Uncle Tom's Children*, paying particular attention to the ways in which the spirituals and lyrics that guide the respective stories reflect the political shortcomings or political victories thematically implied by the works, and how the work itself embodies a blues aesthetic.

*Uncle Tom's Children* is a collection of short stories in which the work's overall theme of the necessity for a politically active community is established as the respective stories progress. Keeping in mind that Wright advocated for the transcendence of complacent religiosity, the further understanding of *Uncle Tom's Children* as a work that embodies the aforementioned blues aesthetic hinges on an understanding of what Jimoh refers to as "a blues philosophy in literature" (35). This aforementioned philosophy is distinct from the aesthetic of literature inspired by spiritual-gospel philosophy insofar as the latter "instantiates earthly survival as a transitory state [and] does not emphasize human agency" (Jimoh 34). Furthermore, fiction born of the aesthetic of the spiritual suggests that "all fortuitous events occur through the will of God" (Jimoh 34). Considering the animosity with which Wright regarded complacently waiting on God's will, it should come as no surprise that he embraced the alternative aesthetic. Literature such as Wright's, which seizes upon the blues aesthetic, celebrates the individual and grants him or her a great deal of agency. In blues inspired texts "one's internal resources (emotional strength, spiritual belief, intellect, wit, and so on) are not bracketed," writes Jimoh (34). "These

resources are required to traverse the new terrain of modernity and its newly shaped twentieth-century processes for delimiting black people” (Jimoh 34).

The first short story of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” represents a work of blues fiction in the sense that, after circumstances force the protagonist, Big Boy, to kill a white man, it is only the exercise of his aforementioned “internal resources,” along with the help of his community, that allows him to “traverse the terrain” of the violent Jim Crow South and make it to Chicago without being lynched. Early in the narrative, Big Boy and his ill-fated friends listen to the whistle of the northbound, “number fo,” train, after which they break into a rendition of the folk / Gospel song “Dis Train” (Wright 6). From the beginning of his volume Wright sets up what will become a glaring condemnation of liberation songs such as “Dis Train,” which present a false-promise of freedom. The song reads: “Dis train boun fo Glory / Dis train, oh Hallelujah / Dis train boun fo Glory / Dis train, oh Hallelujah / Dis train boun fo Glory / Ef yuh ride no need fer fret er worry...” (Wright 6). Of course, the train is wholly inaccessible to either Big Boy or his black friends. Much like the spiritual and the Black church, the train in the song represents a vehicle for deliverance that proves to be ineffective at actually delivering the oppressed from the bondage of Jim Crow.

Big Boy becomes painfully aware of the inaccessibility of the northbound train when he is forced to leave home after killing a white man in self-defense. Pursued by a lynch-mob, Big Boy naturally looks to his parents for help. Wright, in an effort to evidence the potential of the Black church as a body equipped for collaborative action, has the local Church fathers assemble to help Big Boy. “Go t Brother Sanders... Brother Jenkins... n go t Elder Peters,” shouts Big Boy’s father upon learning what happened, “n tell im Ah said c mere” (Wright 35-6). Big Boy, without choice, acts in a manner consistent with the reality that Wright presents in his “Blueprint



for Negro Writing,” falling back on a “social institution (the Black church) of the Negro that is imprisoned in the Jim Crow political system of the South” (101). Hiding Big Boy in the Church is out of the question because, as Elder Peters says, “if they ketch im there itll ruin us all” (Wright 43). Despite the fact that acting as accessories to Big Boy’s escape could easily result in death, the church fathers, as a collective, are able to formulate a plan to get Big Boy out of town. “Mah son, Will,” says Elder Peters, “the one whut drives fer the Magnolia Express Comny, is taking a truck o goods t Chicawgo in the mawning. If we can hide Big Boy somewhere till then, we kin put im on the truck...” (Wright 43). What’s most significant about this scene is that the Church fathers are able to affect Big Boy’s escape without relying on religion whatsoever. On the contrary, Big Boy’s escape is made possible by practical, collective action. In this sense, the fortuitous escape of Big Boy reflects another of Jimoh’s criterion for Blue’s inspired fiction. “In blues music as a metaphor in fiction,” writes Jimoh, “the religious doctrines that the twentieth-century brings into spiritual-gospel music do not necessarily affect one’s blues solutions; such solutions can be found without resort to institutionalized religions” (33). Ultimately, Big Boy’s escape is made possible by his own triumph of the will and the collective agency of a religious group acting in a non-religious way. In “Big Boy Leaves Home” the reader witnesses first-hand the efficaciousness of a proactive Church, and the potential of the Church as a body equipped to make politically-minded decisions.

Beyond the thematic significance of “Big Boy Leaves Home,” relative to the *ethos* of Black literature that seizes upon a blues aesthetic, Wright’s use of language and symbolism in the story also reflect a formal commitment to blues writing. The blues aesthetic emphasizes human agency where the gospel-spiritual aesthetic does not. Moreover, Wright’s goal in drafting the “Blueprint for Negro Writing” is to emendate Negro literature by expressing it in terms of the

“deep folk tradition and vernacular” that first allowed the Negro to express himself, among his own people, as a human agent (“Blueprint” 99). In this sense, the “Blueprint for Negro Writing” is, in part, a blueprint for blues writing. Understanding that *Uncle Tom’s Children* represents an exercise in the kind of writing Wright calls for in his own “Blueprint,” and that through the evocation of the folklore and vernacular of the Black experience the writer is able to “be recognized as the valued agent he is,” the inclusion of folkloric symbols and Black vernacular in *Uncle Tom’s Children* firmly establishes the work as an example of Blues fiction (“Blueprint” 102). Steven Tracy, in “A Wright to Sing the blues,” evidences this claim when he contends that “proper role” of Negro writers in Wright’s vision is “as agents of cultural reclamation” (203). Tracy also points out the ways in which “Big Boy Leaves Home” specifically evokes folkloric symbols such as the train and “folk song hero Casey Jones” (203). Moreover, the use of Black dialect or “vernacular,” evidenced in the afore-listed dialog of the Church fathers’, reflects Wright’s commitment to live up to his own standard.

Wright’s demand for political activism and embrace of the blues aesthetic is arguably most evident in the fourth story of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Fire and Cloud.” Like in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the narrative opens with its protagonist singing a song, but instead of the song presenting a false promise of liberation, the lyrics bitterly describe a harsh reality. “A Naughts a naught... N fives a figger,” sings Reverend Taylor, “All fer the white man... N none fer the nigger” (Wright 221). The significance of this song is later understood in the context of the narrative, where Taylor is forced to decide between endorsing a communist organized march on City Hall in an effort to undo the *status quo* described in the song, or to appease the town’s white power structure and use his position as preacher to quiet the masses. In a not-so-subtle move Wright creates a narrative in “Fire and Cloud” in which a religious figure must consciously

choose either to wait complacently on God's deliverance or to rally his depressed community to political action. This struggle is emblemized by the scene in which "Hadley n Green (the Reds) [are] there in the Bible Room," as Taylor must choose between his political commitment to the cause and his religiosity (Wright 233). Taylor's choice is ultimately made for him by circumstance, for in not flat-out assuring the Sheriff that he will instruct his congregation not to march, Taylor is savagely beaten and whipped by a lynch-mob. It is in this scene that "Fire and Cloud" comes to embody the blues aesthetic, for in depriving him of his human agency with the beating, the mob inspires Reverend Taylor's willful reclamation and assertion of his own agency.

The scene in which Taylor is beaten is powerfully violent, with Taylor's "face against a cold tree trunk... a roping cutting into his wrists, and his feet tied together," each whipping blow results in a feeling fire across his back (Wright 284-6). Most powerful, however, is that the mob, having discovered Taylor to be a preacher, makes him pray. "Well," says one of the attackers, "lets hear you pray some" (Wright 284)! At this moment Taylor becomes agonizingly aware of the inefficaciousness of prayer alone as a means of liberating oneself, literally, from bondage. As Caron suggests, "Taylor begins to realize the necessity of undertaking his own liberating mission" (55). Taylor comes to terms with this fact when he awakens in the woods after the lynching. Having experienced what Caron describes as "a metaphorical 'death and rebirth,'" he has made up his mind that action is better than inaction. "Sistahs n Brothers," Taylor says the next morning when addressing his congregation before the march, "the reason Ah didn't say nothing is cause Ah didn't know whut t say. N the only reason Ahm speakin now is cause Ah do know. Ah know whut to do..." (Wright 312). Ultimately, Taylor tells his people to "git close t one ernother and t ack," and, like Moses, he delivers his people from white bondage (Wright 314).

Like in blues music, Reverend Taylor relies on his own, unpleasant, “lived experience” to catalyze his will to act. Once he rallies the crowd a woman begins to sing the hymn “The Cloud and Fire,” an explicitly religious song that, paradoxically, seems to advocate waiting on deliverance. Nonetheless, this song, too, must be understood in context. By narrative’s end, Taylor, in asserting his own agency and liberating his people through the vehicle of political action, has become a Messianic figure. Though the verse isn’t stated in the story, the second stanza of “The Cloud and Fire” hymn reads, “For the Lord our God in his own good time, / Shall lead us to the light at last” (Hymnary.org). While God himself doesn’t make the call to march, Reverend Taylor, by empowering himself and reclaiming his agency, acts in God’s place. Of course, it must be noted that Reverend Taylor understands his realization as being the product of his spiritual communion with God. “Gawd’s done spoke!,” he shouts before leading the march, “Gawd’s done sent His sign. Now its fer us t ack...” (Wright 314). This exclamation reflects another of Jimoh’s characteristics of fiction inspired by a blues aesthetic. “Blues in African American fiction,” she writes, “recalls an antebellum spiritual idea that uses the internal resources of one’s individual will – some of which may be spiritual – to find solutions” (33). Religion is a resource of Taylors, and he uses it actively to win his people bread. Broadly, the story “Fire and Cloud” almost literally exemplifies Jimoh’s definition of “literary blues” as “an artistic mechanism for depicting how an understanding of the group informs a person’s strategies for moving forward through fire and chaos into triumph” (34).

The final story of Wright’s collection, “Bright and Morning Star,” begins with an explicit rejection of the Christian spiritual. The story’s protagonist, Aunt Sue, is unlike the protagonists of the collection’s other stories in the sense that she has already forsaken Christian religiosity for Communism. Nonetheless, the reader meets Aunt Sue while she is singing the Gospel song

“Lily of the Valley” (Wright 323). Sue feels guilty for singing the song, and muses on how she “jus cant seem t fergit them ol songs no matter how hard she tries” (Wright 326). Aunt Sue’s desire to forget the spirituals is predicated on the belief that they entail an ethic of submission, teaching her “to love hardship with a bitter pride” (Wright 327). Eventually the reader learns that Aunt Sue has left the spirituals behind in favor of a “new vision,” in which “the wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross” (Wright 328). The new vision that Aunt Sue has embraced is one of a post-racial, Communist utopia, and, as the narrative plays out, the reader realizes the degree to which she is willing to give herself up for this vision.

In mocking the effectiveness of the spiritual in the opening pages of the story Wright unambiguously revisits a theme he has been building towards throughout. Furthermore, in making a protagonist who, based on one’s perspective can be read as either a matriarch or a stereotypical “mammy” figure, evoking the imagery of doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning houses, Wright is able to both posit the story in the language of the folkloric tradition that he lauds in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” and demonstrate how centuries of struggle waiting for God’s deliverance have failed to really further the social situation of Black people. As the narrative progresses Aunt Sue learns that her son has been captured by a lynch mob while attempting to inform other committed communists that their planned meeting had been compromised by the authorities. She is beaten by members of the same mob and, in her confusion, accidentally reveals to an informant the names of the members of the Party. At this key moment in the text Aunt Sue makes a conscious and willful decision to abandon the ethic of submission entailed by the spiritual “Bright and Morning Star,” instead cloaking her shotgun in a sheet and going out to kill Booker, the traitor, before he can reveal the names to the others.

Knowing that she will find a beaten, tortured, and possibly dead Johnny-Boy [her son] upon reaching the mob, Aunt Sue commits to making the ultimate sacrifice. Manipulating another folkloric stereotype of the dutiful mother, Aunt Sue reaches the mob and is taken to Johnny-Boy under the guise that she was told by the Sheriff to bring a sheet to cover his dead body.

Immediately, Aunt Sue is told to convince her son to talk. “Ah promise we wont kill im ef he talks,” says the Sheriff. “We’ll let im git outta town” (Wright 376). Nonetheless, Aunt Sue won’t say a word, saying, “There ain nothin Ah kin tell im” (Wright 376). In this moment, both Johnny-Boy’s and Aunt Sue’s characters, despite their lowly state, achieve an agency and humanity consistent with the blues *ethos*. Aunt Sue refuses, through triumph of her individual will, to acquiesce in the face of the white mob, knowing that the cause is bigger than herself or her son. Moreover, in not making a demand of Johnny-Boy, like the Sheriff does, Aunt Sue assure that her son retains the same freedom.

Aunt Sue’s final act of willful, conscious rebellion comes when she successfully shoots booker before he can reveal the communist’s names. In so doing she saved the cause and, despite affecting her own immanent death, “she was suddenly at peace” (Wright 382). Like in “Fire and Cloud,” Aunt Sue’s politically motivated act of defiance represents an act of death and rebirth where she attains the agency-granting ability to make decisions on her own terms. “Yuh didn’t git whut yuh wanted!,” she says in her final moments. “N yuh ain gonna nevah git it! Yuh didn’t kill me; Ah come here by mahsef...” (Wright 384).

What this analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Children* shows is that music informs this narrative in a variety of ways. While music, specifically the spiritual, formally punctuates and guides the respective short stories constituting Wright’s work, one now also sees how the text embodies a musical aesthetic. This aesthetic, which I have called the blues aesthetic throughout, represents

one way in which the rich philosophical underpinnings of the Black struggle transcend one art-form and motivate another. As I suggested in the very beginning of this paper, artistic forms must be understood as the consequences of an organic and evolutionary causal chain of culturally inherited experiences and influences. Of course, as *Uncle Tom's Children* demonstrates, the socio-political landscape heavily influences the shape taken by mutable artistic forms. Just as the post-emancipation landscape of the Jim Crow South fundamentally changed the way in which people approached liberation narratives, resulting in the emergence of the more individualized and proactive blues from the then anachronistic spiritual, the pro-Communist literature of Richard Wright, brought about by further changes in American political landscape, appropriated the artistic aesthetic of the blues in an effort to unite and empower an oppressed people. Ultimately, the emergence of the blues and the blues *ethos* in African American music, literature, and culture more broadly, marks an active and, in some cases, highly political attempt to reclaim one's humanity in the face of an oppressive society that has fundamentally denied one's agency.

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