Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

Grandt, Jurgen E.

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For Jean Toomer, it was the spirituals—what W. E. B. Du Bois had famously called “the sorrow songs”—that resonated with the spirit of the black experience in the New World, a spirit imperiled by the onslaught of modernity and urbanization. Strangely enough, although they have every reason to, Toomer’s Semptrites do not sing the blues. The closest they come is in “Blood-Burning Moon,” the story of an interracial love triangle that ends in tragedy. Louisa finds herself caught between Tom Burwell, the black field hand, and Bob Stone, scion of a prominent white family in town. The lyrics she sings at the opening of the story echo the AAB form of the classic blues stanza: “Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning

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I’m gonna pack my suitcase, moving on down the line.  
Aaah, I’m gonna pack my suitcase and move on down the line,  
Where there ain’t nobody worrying, and there ain’t nobody crying.

—John Peter Chapman, a.k.a. Memphis Slim,  
“Every Day I Have the Blues,” as sung by Joe Williams
moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (Cane 31). However, Louisa’s song is not concerned with the personal dramas of the individual blues singer, as it becomes the collective lamentation of black Sempter, a sorrow song that provides the soundtrack to the tragic violence unfolding in the story (33, 37).

Perhaps this is so because the sorrow songs are steeped in, to quote Du Bois again, “our spiritual strivings” and thus relate more closely to the mysticism that suffuses Cane than the thoroughly and often raunchily secular blues would (Souls 1). Perhaps this is the case also because the blues are a product of the very modernity that Toomer felt assaulted the soul of Sempter, Georgia. Coincidentally, the novel’s most blueslike song not only references “that fact’ry door” but scores the murder of Tom at the hands of a white mob in the “factory town” district of Sempter, in an empty cotton mill modeled after Sparta’s Montour Village (Toomer, Cane 36; Foley, “Jean” 750). Generally, Cane at least is surprisingly silent as far as actual song is concerned; music and singing are reported on by Toomer’s various poems and narrator-observers, but they do not resonate in an unmediated fashion in and from the book. Even “Harvest Song,” for instance, is only purported to be a song when in fact it is a self-conscious exercise in modernist poetics—much like Louisa’s song.

Still, “Blood-Burning Moon,” the song, becomes the soundtrack to one of the most vicious rituals of the American South: lynching. Most rituals, according to Victor Turner, seek to regulate the symbolic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Toomer’s story is a stark reminder that the Turnerian “process of regenerative renewal” in Sempter’s apartheid society claims victims for whom there is no rebirth, symbolic or otherwise (“Process” 158–61). After Tom Burwell cuts Bob Stone in a knife fight over Louisa, the black field hand is lynched in order to ritualistically resurrect white supremacy. That the deadly ritual occurs to the sounds of “Blood-Burning Moon” turns this chapter of Cane into a prelude of sorts to the famous Richard Wright short story “Long Black Song.”

Richard Wright is an author in whose work music is rarely referenced, Ralph Ellison’s famous review notwithstanding. Unlike Toomer, Wright is a writer more often associated with naturalism and realism than with modernism. As Craig Werner has pointed out, however, Wright’s early work especially evinces a literary voice striving to reconcile modernism and social commitment (204). Apropos of Native Son, Werner diagnoses that “[b]oth Wright and Bigger inhabit a world that offers no vocabulary capable of expressing the particular Afro-American experience of the modernist situation. Nonetheless, both struggle to articulate their experience despite profound problems regarding their relationship to their audience, both real and potential” (197). This struggle Wright himself
elucidates in “How Bigger Was Born.” Presaging Mackey’s telling inarticulacy, Wright confesses that for him as a writer, “[a]lways there is something that is just beyond the tip of the tongue that could explain it all,” and that this is the fundamental challenge that links his task as author with Bigger’s struggle for survival (vii). Not only was *Native Son* an attempt “to develop the dim negative which had been implanted in my mind in the South”—and Bigger, of course, hails from Mississippi as well—but “certain modern experiences” made the author himself feel acutely “estranged from the civilization in which I lived, and more than ever resolved toward the task of creating with words a scheme of images and symbols whose direction could enlist the sympathies, loyalties, and yearnings of the millions of Bigger Thomases in every land and race” (xvi, xix).

One earlier attempt at creating with words a reconciliation of modernist estrangement and spiritual yearning, and one among the very few in Wright’s work to enlist music in the process, is the short story “Long Black Song.” The middle selection of the five stories that make up the amended *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Long Black Song” is narrated from the point of view of Sarah and is set, like all the other tales, in Wright’s home state. The modernist dialectic of alienation and yearning is amplified, indeed counted off, by music, as the Methodist hymn “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” pits two distinct realms against each other, the millennial realm of the hymn’s “yonder” on the one hand and the real exigencies of a southern territory marked by the ritual of lynching on the other.

The beginning of the story finds Sarah and her little daughter, Ruth, alone on the small farm her husband has worked so hard to call his own. Silas has been away from their home in the northern hill country for a week to purchase provisions in Coldwater, at the northern tip of the Delta. Sarah’s loneliness is exacerbated by the absence of her secret love, Tom (the namesake of Tom Burwell from “Blood-Burning Moon”), who has gone off to fight in the Great War. Now with Silas away too, she feels lonely, a loneliness that seems to arise out of the very landscape she inhabits: “Sky sang a red song. Fields whispered a green prayer. And song and prayer were dying in silence and shadow. Never in all her life had she been so much alone as she was now” (128). Into Sarah’s evening loneliness drives a black car with a young white man behind the wheel. The man—who from the start impresses Sarah as comporting himself “just like a lil boy”—sells graphophone clocks to help finance his college education and proceeds to demonstrate the high-tech apparatus for her (133). The music, the southern night, the young man’s seeming innocence, and her loneliness all conspire to awaken in Sarah a strong sexual desire of which the salesman only too gladly takes advantage. Afterward, the young man leaves behind the graphophone clock, promising to lower the price from
the usual fifty dollars to forty and hoping to collect the down payment of ten dollars from Silas the next morning. Later that night, Silas returns and discovers what has transpired in his absence. Enraged, he throws the contraption out of the window and threatens to beat her. Sarah, sensing an escalation of violence, seeks to head off the salesman and warn him, but fails; Silas flogs him and his companion with the whip he had meant for her and then shoots one of them fatally. Knowing that the whites will return to avenge the killing, he sends his wife and child away but resolves to stay behind and take his stand. The futility of Silas’s resistance fulfills itself in the most southern of violent rituals, the regulatory killing of the black male in order to ensure white supremacy. In the lynching that ensues, Silas involves a white posse in a prolonged shootout before being burned alive in his home when the whites set fire to it, while Sarah and Ruth escape across the hill into the southern landscape.

The ritual of lynching is provoked by the troika of southern violence, namely love (or sex), ownership, and race. All three elements hark back to Reconstruction as well as to the peculiar institution suggested by Wright’s symbolism: the graphophone clock and its ‘special’ low price of forty dollars sound the twentieth-century echo of the broken promise of forty acres and a mule, and Silas’s use of the rawhide whip, the symbol of white ownership and control of black bodies, is all the more unforgivable in the eyes of the white South because it turns its political economy on its head.

What is unusual in Wright’s short story is how sound and setting conspire to orchestrate the southern ritual of lynching.

The title itself, “Long Black Song,” already impresses the importance of music in the tale to follow, and from the very beginning, sound plays a crucial role. The story’s epigraph consists of a verse from a harmless lullaby Sarah intones to mollify her restless child: “Go t sleep, baby / Papas gone t town” (125). The opening scene shows Sarah and Ruth inside their home, the waning sun “a big ball of red dying between the branches of trees,” while Sarah’s baby beats a broken eight-day clock with a stick. The sound of “Bang! Bang! Bang!” will reverberate throughout the first section in Sarah’s worries about Tom fighting the war, in her memories of their lovemaking, and in the backfiring exhaust of the salesman’s car (126–31). Significantly, the eleventh, final “bangbangbang” occurs not during the climactic gun battle and crackling fire at the end, but during the copulating of Sarah and the salesman: the eleventh tolling of the same sound here foreshadows the eruption of violence—in bitterly ironic contrast to the ceasefire that effectively ended World War I, “the war to end all wars,” at 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918 (137; Pitt 268–71; Sollors 122).
Also from the very beginning, sound and music are linked inextricably to the southern landscape drenched in desire: Sarah “saw green fields wrapped in the thickening gloam. It was as if they had left the earth, those fields, and were floating slowly skyward. The afterglow lingered, red, dying, somehow tenderly sad. And far away, in front of her, earth and sky met in a soft swoon of shadow. A cricket chirped, sharp and lonely; and it seemed she could hear it chirping long after it had stopped. . . . Sky sang a red song. Fields whispered a green prayer” (127–28). Desire, sound, and the distinct landscape all merge in the character of Sarah, turning her into another earth-mother figure, the literary descendant of Toomer’s Fern and the personification of Stephen Henderson’s “Soul-Field.” The linkage becomes particularly explicit when the young salesman demonstrates the graphophone clock:

“Just listen to this,” he said.

There was a sharp, scratching noise; then she moved nervously, her body caught in the ringing coils of music.

_When the trumpet of the lord shall sound_ . . .

She rose on circling waves of white bright days and dark black nights.

_ . . . and time shall be no more . . ._

Higher and higher she mounted.

_And the morning breaks_ . . .

Earth fell far behind, forgotten.

_ . . . eternal, bright and fair_ . . .

Echo after echo sounded.

_When the saved of the earth shall gather_ . . .

Her blood surged like the long gladness of summer.

_ . . . over on the other shore_ . . .

Her blood ebbed like the deep dream of sleep in winter.

_And when the roll is called up yonder_ . . .

She gave up, holding her breath.

_I’ll be there_ . . .

A lump filled her throat. She leaned her back against a post, trembling, feeling the rise and fall of days and nights, of summer and winter; surging, ebbing, leaping about her, beyond her, far out over the fields to where earth and sky lay folded in darkness. (132–33)

To be sure, a desire for spiritual deliverance is there, but, given the imagery with which Wright describes Sarah’s rapture, a significant part of it remains sexual: “she wanted to take the box into her arms and kiss it”
even before the music starts (132). Again, it is the southern landscape itself—or Sarah’s mnemonic perception thereof—that acts in concert with the music. Wright’s use of setting, Joyce Joyce points out, “both reflects the sensuality of Sarah’s character and serves—through repetition—as a rhythmic chord that echoes her arousal until the end of the sex act” (381).

The irony here is that Sarah’s carnal longings are prodded by a religious hymn, namely “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” and sound figures as the ironic catalyst for the entire plot.5 “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” is a Methodist hymn, penned in 1893 by James M. Black. Black, a white Sunday school teacher in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, was calling roll one day only to discover that one of his charges, the daughter of a notorious drunkard, was absent, and Black wrote the hymn to express his hope that she would be present “when the roll is called up yonder.” Before 1919 the only commercial recording of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” on disc was released in Thomas Edison’s Diamond Disc series as 80276-R in 1915 and was carried in the company’s catalogue until 1929, attesting to the song’s popularity (Frow 47; Kenney 7).6 The hymn was performed by the “Edison Mixed Quartet” of tenor John Young and baritone Frederick Wheeler, two veteran recording artists, and the soprano and contralto, respectively, of Florence Hinkel and Margaret Keyes, plus a small orchestra. The disc’s other side contained a version of “Abide With Me,” written by Elizabeth Spencer and Thomas Chalmers. The Edison Quartet was all-white—as were, presumably, the musicians—and their rendition of Black’s hymn doesn’t really qualify as a Du Boisian sorrow song (Inventing). Moreover, the sheet music for Black’s song was marketed almost exclusively to whites: Tabernacle Publishing, who owned the rights to “When the Roll,” also bought the rights to “Leave It There,” a hymn composed by noted tunesmith Charles A. Tindley, Jr., best known for “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.” The music of Black’s and Tindley’s hymns was so similar that Tabernacle was concerned about legal action and so decided to purchase “Leave It There,” licensing it for sale to a black target audience, while “When the Roll” continued to be marketed mostly to whites (Young 459).

Literary critics often gloss or misrepresent the recording Sarah is hearing as a “spiritual,” but it is significant that this particular song is not shaped by black performance practices (Hurd 49; McCarthy 735). Joyce Joyce calls it “music that has the power and intensity of the Negro spiritual” (382). Its effect on Sarah may be the same, but listening to the original Edison recording, it is difficult to hear that kind of rousing “power and intensity” in the conservative arrangement or the studiedly calibrated
voices of the singers. Nor can it, in its performance, be considered one of the black tradition’s “liberation texts that are multi-valenced,” as DoVeanna Fulton defines them (“Singing”). In what Craig Werner calls the gospel impulse, the descent of the spirit occurs within the antiphonal, syndetic context of a collective and a singer, in which meaning arises from a communal process—call and response (218–22). This is clearly not the case in “Long Black Song,” on the contrary: Sarah lives on an isolated farm, and she and her husband rarely interact with members of a larger black community. Like Frederick Douglass’s circle and Jean Toomer’s arcs, “the ringing coils of music” that ensnare Sarah appear to echo the ancient African rite of the ring shout, but the music’s “circling waves of white bright days and dark black nights” that she rides to inevitable disaster indicate that she hears what she wants to hear, not what she experiences as a member of the ring’s collective.

Even so, clearly there are calls and there are responses in Wright’s short story. The quasi call and response between white hymn and black character is the most significant because it informs the story on multiple levels. First, Sarah responds to the music as she recognizes her existence, her dreams and desires, refractured in it. Music, in other words, opens up a territory that welcomes both the white Yankee preacher Black (the irony of his name is palpable) and the black farmer’s wife from Mississippi. This figurative territory where what appear to be experiential opposites meet, this soundscape, is tied inextricably to the southern landscape. The resulting dialectic highlights the paradoxical juxtaposition of the realities of southern violence with the ideal of southern multiculturalism: the playing of the hymn results in the sexual assault on Sarah and the lynching of Silas. And yet, it is while Sarah is anticipating the murder of her husband that her epiphany counters the reality of the southern ritual ground with its ideal, an ideal awakened by the sound recording. On the one hand, there is “that long river of blood” running from the South’s past into its present and future (153). On the other hand, there is Sarah’s realization that somehow, men, black men and white men, land and houses, green cornfields and grey skies, gladness and dreams, were all 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; she could not put her finger on it and when she thought hard about it it became all mixed up, like milk spilling suddenly. Or else it knotted in her throat and chest in a hard aching lump, like the one she felt now. (154)
Clearly, Sarah here is wrestling with a telling inarticulacy not unlike Fern’s “convulsive” spatter (Toomer, Cane 19). The passage is also reminiscent of Louisa’s musings on her black and white lovers in “Blood-Burning Moon”: “Separately, there was no unusual significance to either one. But for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon. And from the jumble came the stir that was strangely within her. Her lips trembled. The slow rhythm of her song grew agitant and restless” (31). Wright’s Sarah, though, is envisioning an ideal South triggered by the gospel impulse, an impulse marked by “its refusal to accept oppositional thought, its complex sense of presence, its belief in salvation,” according to Werner (222). But following the narrative device of ironic inversion and juxtaposition that characterizes the entire text, the image of harmony Sarah conjures up is succeeded immediately by the lynching of Silas. Once again, the southern ritual ground recedes before the narrative mode it has engendered itself.

Sarah escapes the lynch mob also because, as a literary descendant of Fern, she functions as southern earth-mother figure. The question of ownership of her body is contested between white and black, and the modernist fracturing of the oppressive, fatal realities of the South into glimpses of utopia also entails the collision of two distinct versions of time and history linked to a dialectic of presence and absence. Accordingly, the Methodist hymn that prompts both Sarah’s sexual arousal and, ultimately, her fantasy of racial harmony incorporates and orchestrates a dialectic of time and space. As southern earth mother, Sarah embodies the ritual ground she inhabits. Thus she also embodies the dialectic of absence and presence, because her character represents and acts out the conflicting impulses reverberating in the landscape around her. The short story is therefore not so much about love, or sex, as it is about ownership: who ‘owns’ time and history, and with it definitions of and access to progress and modernity.

Sarah and her family live, in a sense, outside of time. Their lives are governed by the cycle of the seasons and by the cycle of the sun. The white salesman is incredulous at Sarah’s disinterest in having the old eight-day clock repaired, but she simply keeps informing him, “Mistah, we don need no clock. . . . We jus don need no time, Mistah” (131). He, in turn, exclaims, “I dont see how in the world anybody can live without time” (131). Thus, the hymn’s dialectic of absence and presence extends into the collision of different conceptions of time: living according to the cycles of nature, Sarah lives outside of history—that is, over yonder, outside of man-made time. She is also the only protagonist in Uncle Tom’s Children who is not embedded in a larger black community. Arriving in
this separate little world as the privileged representative (and a literate one—after all, he is an aspiring college student) of the white South, the salesman makes a pitch that seeks to bind Sarah and her family into a southern concept of time and history. His sales ploy, given the symbolic price of forty dollars, consolidates their status as objects to be regulated and defined by ‘white’ history: “But you need a clock,’ the white man insisted. ‘That’s what I’m out here for. I’m selling clocks and graphophones. The clocks are made right into the graphophones, a nice sort of combination, hunh? You can have music and time all at once. I’ll show you . . . ” (131). And show her he does. The graphophone clock is also a symbol of modernity, hastening the collision between the cyclical time of nature and the ‘mechanical’ time of progress—but this New South, at least, isn’t so new as it symbolically enlists modernity in reinforcing the same historical hierarchy of white dominance.

So, rather than “a nice sort of combination,” music (figurative space, or absence) and the South (historical exigencies, or presence) collude to produce tragedy. The first verse of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” the only one Wright quotes in the short story, links music to a realm beyond time and space:

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks eternal, bright, and fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore
And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.

From the outset, the southern setting in which the song reverberates ironically denies the promise of salvation. The “eternal, bright, and fair” morning with which the hymn announces the hereafter is juxtaposed by the passage of time during which the graphophone plays (actual, mechanical time, in other words), for at the end of the song “[i]t was dark now” (133). Likewise, the tale is populated not by “the saved of the earth,” but by the ones condemned in and by southern history. The only gathering to occur “[o]n that bright and cloudless morning” of Silas’s judgment day is the second coming of the white South in the shape of the lynch mob; and for Sarah, “over on the other shore” or “up yonder” is but the hill across which she flees. Thus, there are two contesting realms propelling the hymn’s promise of redemption as well as the short story’s action: there is the figurative setting of the hymn that lies outside of history, “when time shall be no more,” a setting therefore characterized by its absence. Then there is the setting in which Wright’s characters move, a distinctly southern landscape that reaffirms its presence over Sarah’s ahistorical vision by
playing out one of the most brutal historical legacies of the Old South, lynching.

Similarly, the third verse of the hymn, significantly omitted from Wright’s text, delineates the earthly life from which “His chosen ones” shall be redeemed:

Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,
Let us talk of all His wondrous love and care;
Then when all of life is over, and our work on earth is done,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

For this, the earthly presence, the hymn preaches unquestioning submission to higher authority—God, Master, Massa—and counsels meek endurance of present toils. The text of Wright’s story renders this last verse absent, but it is disastrously portentous in that its counsel has been internalized by both Sarah and Silas. That the story omits the last stanza of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” one requesting submission and obedience, only reaffirms that the antiphonal play between the hymn and the black couple is in fact a call and response between presence and absence: the presence of the graphophone calls and gives voice, in music, to Sarah’s dreams and desires, which she otherwise could not articulate. Sarah’s reaction to the absence of articulate expression in her mind is to respond with her body to the seductive music. Though she initially seeks to ward off the advances of the salesman, she gives in eventually and submits, thereby enacting the hymn’s last stanza, which is missing from Wright’s text, but certainly not from the graphophone demonstration earlier. Moreover, the fulfillment made present by the hymn in the first stanza is a presence in sound only, and hence an absence as far as Sarah is concerned, an absence that she fills with her body aroused to presence by the salesman: her lover Tom’s absence “had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled. But not quite. Silas had not quite filled that hole. No; days and nights were not as they were before” (129).

A similar dialectic adheres to the character of Silas. His business trip to Coldwater has been very successful: he has acquired ten more acres of land, which will necessitate hiring a farm hand to tend to his expanding property. To Sarah’s surprised question, he responds, “Sho, hire somebody! Whut yuh think? Ain tha the way the white folks do? Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do just like they do” (140). In insisting on forging a separate existence and economic independence, he lives out a Washingtonian philosophy (McCarthy 735–36). But, just as Booker T.
Washington’s metaphorical bucket ironically becomes in Wright’s story the bucket in the well behind Silas’s house that is the site of the white salesman’s violent sexual advances to Sarah—the Washingtonian bucket brings water to quell the white man’s thirst, and when Sarah hears him drink in the dark, she hears “the faint, soft music of water going down a dry throat, the music of water in a silent night” (135)—so does the black farmer discover that his strivings for a separate existence are futile:

From sunup t sundown Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! Ah cant go into their houses, n yuh know Gawdam well Ah cant! They don have no mercy on no black folks; wes just like dirt under their feet! Fer ten years Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free, givin ever penny Ah kin t em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house. . . . Ef yuh wans t eat at mah table yuhs gonna keep them white trash bastards out, yuh hear? (143)

As Silas is about to discover, it is impossible to keep the white South out of his little world and to render it absent, partly because it has always been present in the ideology he himself embraces. He symbolically rejects the white version of southern history when he throws the graphophone clock out into the yard, destroying it. Instead, he is determined to write his own history, defend his own place in time with his life.Tragically, Silas never fully realizes that the white South has always already been figuratively present because of his unwavering adherence to a southern agrarian work ethic, “labor[ing] for the Master from the dawn till setting sun” (Fabre 159; Gardner 428). As Sarah muses, “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” (147). The white South’s physical absence is negated by its overwhelming ideological presence, rendering the struggle for black (economic) separatism futile:

The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo women! N then they take yo life! . . . Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah’m gonna be hard! When they come fer me Ah’m gonna be here! N when they git me outta here theys gonna know Ahm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em feel it! . . . But, Lawd, Ah don wanna be this way! It don mean nothin! Yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin . . . (152–53)
The “long river of blood” coursing through and in southern time is therefore seemingly inescapable and exacts two more victims, one white, the other black. The fact that the violence cuts both ways, across the deep racial divide, exposes that the dominant, white southern version of time and history that is being enforced is not without fatal consequences for the master, either. Just as Bigger Thomas would later only be able to ‘write’ himself into history by killing Mary Dalton before dying himself, so does the dialectic of presence and absence accelerated by “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” find its bitterly tragic finale in the fate of Silas, who is rendered ‘absent’ by the mob because he insists on making his presence known by erasing the life of one of them.

Even so, the dialectic of presence and absence put into motion by the Methodist hymn suggests that music has the power to occasion a momentary suspension of historical time, allowing for the conjuring up of spaces, and visions thereof, where seeming experiential opposites can find a home. Interestingly, the hymn’s arrangement on the original Edison recording also calls attention to a different world arising out of the suspension of time: at the end of each chorus section, the 2/4 time signature is arrested briefly in a fermata on the word “yonder.” But just as in Sarah’s rapture and subsequent vision, the suspension of time on the recording is a momentary one, too. And so, as Silas discovers with deadly consequences, one cannot remove oneself permanently from history; the return into historical time is all the more painful. As Jean Toomer himself pointed out,

Music is an almost instantaneous evocator of the inner-experiences not being had, not being thought of as possible, until the music begins. Add music, and you can instantly transport yourself, through inner-experience, into a different world. . . . Music, however, though able to transport you into a different world, cannot keep you in that different world—no, not even if you yourself are a musician. Once it is over for the time being, you slide back into this world. (“Music” 276)

The two different worlds in “Long Black Song,” Sarah’s fantasy of a South of racial harmony and the reality of a South whose sociopolitical economy of white dominance is enforced by lynching, look to be anything but syndetic. That Wright appears to give Sarah’s vision the moral privilege is brought out once again by the setting. Sarah witnesses the killing from an elevated position, standing on the slope of a hill behind the house. From her vantage point, the participants of the senseless violence about to enfold look like “dolls” and “toy men” enacting a brutal game “in the
valley below” (149). At the end, Sarah turns away from the carnage, and the story releases her and Ruth “over yonder” across the hill into an uncertain future that, at best, entails temporary refuge at her Aunt Peel’s.

Thus, in “Long Black Song” music is rendered as not only inefficient, but treacherous. The lyrics of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” act as cynical betrayal of the dreams and desires of Sarah and sound the prelude to the lynching of Silas. The Methodist hymn therefore functions in opposition to the long black song of liberty and self-determination and mocks the betrayed ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Significantly, Wright’s short story does not posit black music as a corrective to the false illusions conjured up by the strains of the all-white Edison Mixed Quartet. There is, in other words, no long black song being sung. Music, like narrative, entails the embellishment of time passing by, but in Wright’s southern ritual grounds black music is unable to furnish a counterweight to a passage of time chronologized by whites—just as the lullaby Sarah sings to Ruth at the very beginning fails to have the desired effect, too, for Ruth isn’t mollified until she gets to hit the old clock with a stick. The notable absence of black music in “Long Black Song” and the story’s strategic placement within Uncle Tom’s Children suggests that music does not constitute a sufficiently effective tool of nascent black revolutionary appropriation of and participation in history. Hence, that this particular rendition of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” is ‘white’ music makes the reneging on its own promises all the more cynical, not to mention historically accurate, but the betrayal owes its tragic outcome less to the ethnic makeup of the Edison Mixed Quartet than to the nature of music itself.

“Long Black Song” is the middle selection of the amended collection. As several critics have pointed out, Uncle Tom’s Children traces a rising narrative arc of black revolutionary self-assertion, from Big Boy’s escape from the lynch mob in “Big Boy Leaves Home” to Johnny-Boy’s mother’s taking a stand in “Bright and Morning Star.” “Fire and Cloud,” the selection immediately following “Long Black Song,” in a way narrates the realization of Sarah’s vision. At the end, Reverend Taylor is leading a crowd of black and white protesters in a march on city hall, putting into action what seemed like naïve utopia with Sarah, namely the recognition that in these southern ritual grounds, white and black indeed “were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel” (155). However, music here does not serve to accelerate the plot as it does in “Long Black Song.” During the tense moments right before the black protesters are joined by the town’s poor whites, a “fat black woman started singing: ‘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” (218). The racially mixed crowd picks up the song, and the story ends with Taylor proudly looking onto a “sea of black and white faces. The song swelled louder and vibrated through him. This is the way! he thought” (220). And while the singing, especially its call-and-response structure and its black southern vernacular, clearly classifies this as a sorrow song, neither the song itself nor its performance stirs up any social commitment, let alone revolutionary action. The poor whites of the town have already been sensitized before the march to their economic lot under the corrupt town leadership. The song’s “fire by night” refers to the flogging of Taylor the previous night, “the sign of the cloud” to the racially mixed crowd of protesters marching toward city hall. And so, the singing of the song at the end of “Fire and Cloud” actually mirrors the status of music in “Long Black Song”: in both cases, music, white and black music, is at best merely an echo, a sound mirror of things as they are. In “Long Black Song,” the music echoes the dreams and wishes of the protagonist; in “Fire and Cloud” music echoes the plight of Taylor and his comrades. That one is a sorrow song and the other one isn’t is less significant than the fact that the crowd’s song in the latter story cannot betray them because it doesn’t promise anything, because it merely accompanies the absence becoming presence but doesn’t predict it.

Thus, for Wright, music always reneges eventually on the transcendence it promises. Music betrays Sarah and ultimately Silas not necessarily because it gives voice to a utopian impulse for racial harmony, but because it promises the impending realization of said impulse, conjuring up the presence of an absence. In Uncle Tom’s Children, “Long Black Song” and “Fire and Cloud” represent the twin uses of music as either a device of structural irony or descriptive commentary. The strains of “Dis train boun fo Glory” which the first selection opens leads to Big Boy being released into, at best, an uncertain future in Chicago. The pacifist sentiment of the hymn that gives “Down By the Riverside” its title is undercut by the protagonist’s murder—where else—down by the riverside. And in the last story, the one Wright added for the second edition, published in 1940, “Bright and Morning Star,” music conspires with religion to effect a detrimental passivity on the part of Americans of African descent that serves only to stabilize the sociopolitical status quo. Sue “jus cant seem t fergit them ol songs, no mattah how hard Ah tries” and feels guilty about singing them. True, these sorrow songs do have “their deep meaning,” and they do provide a “spell of peace.” But, again, that peace is illusory, crumbling under the weight of white racism. The sorrow songs’ “deep meaning” appears to have no meaningful effect other than enhancing
Sue’s endurance: “The days crowded with trouble had enhanced her faith and she had grown to love hardship with a bitter pride; she had obeyed the laws of the white folks with a soft smile of secret knowing” (223–24). In keeping with Wright’s dalliance with communism, Sue’s self-sacrifice is made possible only by her repudiation of the passivity and acceptance preached by the sorrow songs (as Wright hears them) that have accompanied her life. And then, of course, there is the biting cynicism of the collection’s epigraph, the first two verses from the Irving Caesar, Sammy Lerner, and Gerald Marks smash hit “Is It True What They Say About Dixie?”

Thus, the only transcendence music by itself offers Wright’s characters is a false one, one that lulls them into dangerous, deadly passivity, objectionable escapism, or treacherous fantasy. Other than that, music remains merely descriptive. To be sure, Wright did recognize in African American music from the South a social function. As he wrote in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” it was

in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complex expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (1382)

However, black music is primarily a channel for intraracial communication and is in and of itself no viable tool for social activism and transcendence of the inhuman conditions that have characterized black life in the South. As the “Blueprint” makes clear, only “a [black] nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness . . . a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies . . . in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society” can effect change and transcendence (1383–84). Music, in Wright’s estimation, cannot reach this necessary “highest possible pitch,” as his use of it in his own fiction makes clear. And the role of music would remain the same throughout Wright’s oeuvre.

Once music, African American music, has traveled upstream from the semirural settings of Uncle Tom’s Children’s Mississippi to the urban jungle of Native Son’s Chicago, it continues to function as a means not
of transcendence, but merely of escapism. The spiritual Bigger’s mother sings, as well as “Steal Away,” emanating from a storefront church, even Mary’s reverence for “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” all figure as but a veiled continuation of subjugation in the novel’s universe (Cataliotti 127–38). The ineffectiveness of the sorrow songs is also shared by secular black musics: the real-life Bigger Thomases, too, on whom Wright modeled his composite protagonist, “projected their hurts and longings into more naive and mundane forms—blues, jazz, swing—and, without intellectual guidance, tried to build up a compensatory nourishment for themselves” (“How” xiii).

Even after Wright abjured communist ideology, in his fiction music stayed merely descriptive at best, downright fatal at worst. Music, for Wright, could not redeem the blood-drenched southern ritual grounds, let alone change them. The chant of “We Shall Overcome” that was growing louder and louder all over the South Wright heard all right in his European exile, but was unable to translate into his fiction. When he returned with The Long Dream to the same grounds and rituals he had visited in Uncle Tom’s Children, music faded still more into the background. The bildungsroman evinces the same dual purposes for music as his previous fiction. Secular music figures as mere sound mirror, “the sensual despair of the beating music” providing the eroticized soundtrack to Jack and Mack’s despicable minstrel show or to Fishbelly’s sexual education on Clintonville’s King Street (153). Again, religious music figures as sarcastic, even bitter, commentary on a plot that inverts the message of the songs—further evidence, as Paul Gilroy points out, that for Clintonville’s chronicler, “the decisive break in western consciousness which modernity identifies was defined by the collapse of a religious understanding of the world” (Black 160). The black sorrow songs (or white hymns) in The Long Dream still merely replicated what he in his “Blueprint” two decades earlier had dismissed as an “archaic morphology of Christian salvation” serving as delusional “denial” and “an antidote for suffering” (1382). The spirituals sung at the funeral of Fishbelly’s murdered father, for example, function as a prelude not to a journey “nearer my home today / Than I have ever been before,” but to Fishbelly’s impending flight from Clintonville and exile in France (322). The music of the South was therefore merely the sound mirror of brutal, unrelenting violence and of fervent hopes; the music of the South was only sounding out what Wright had elsewhere called a “paradoxical cleavage” between what is and what ought to be (Twelve 127). Music, to him, never ceased to be simply part of a superstructure that failed to make pertinent contributions to the struggle for black self-determination. Black sacred music in particular was woefully ineffective
at best in his view; he simply could not conceive of the spirituals as also an expression and a practice of social activism, the way literature could be (Fulton, “Singing”; Reagon 4).

Wright’s take on the sorrow songs coincides with Toomer’s in that they fail to effect change in a meaningful way. Where Wright differs is that as far as he is concerned, there is no reason to listen to them in the first place. Only the Afro-modernist text can give voice to viable historical conscience, one that also warns of the betrayal of music. Song, even black song, may contain some kind of historical consciousness, but it is dim, self-defeating, or treacherous. At best, (black) song is harmlessly mimetic of social reality, but does not transpose into the key of a conscience that can effect meaningful social change. Wright would have been incredulous at Frederick Douglass’s assertion that Niccolò Paganini’s violin was just as effective a weapon in the struggle between civilization and barbarity as the freedom fighter’s pen. Only the literary artist’s words have a chance to achieve victory in that battle: “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (453). This is how Black Boy ends, on May Day of 1936, in Chicago, Illinois. But instead of a spiritual, or instead of the blues that the thousands of black women and men had brought to the Windy City from Wright’s home state, the final epiphany in his autobiography that prompts him to pick up his pen comes as he hears the strains of the Internationale (450–51). Once again, its sounds and lyrics of revolution and solidarity only amplify the betrayal of music, for the Internationale is sung at the very moment Wright breaks with the Communist Party after he comes to see its hypocrisy.

No wonder, either, that no blues were wafting through the open window of his tiny rented room that night, for to Wright’s ears they too were infected with the self-defeating pathology of the sorrow songs. To be sure, Ralph Ellison famously used Native Son and Black Boy as a springboard to define blues as “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 the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (Shadow 129). Wright himself reacted with gratitude to his friend’s essay, but also with surprise: the blues, he informed Ellison, simply had not been on his mind as the primary template for his writing (Rowley 311, 566). And indeed, what Ellison heard, and what he delineated, was
a blues sensibility rather than blues music as a structural device—in fact, Ellison himself would later qualify Wright’s knowledge of black music as rather limited indeed, and, he couldn’t help but snipe, Wright “didn’t even know how to dance” (Going 667). Wright’s prose fiction, as well as his autobiography, is almost completely devoid of explicit references to blues, although he would write lyrics as well as liner notes and essays on the art form, even taking guitar lessons at one point (Dick 393, 399; Fabre 237; Rowley 227, 256–57). His own blues lyrics exhibit a stilted affectation and artificiality that suggest a certain aesthetic distance from the form (Dick 400–5; Oliver 8–13). For example, he agreed to write the introduction to British scholar Paul Oliver’s *Blues Fell this Morning*. In his exile in Paris, Wright showed that he understood the music as a thoroughly Afro-modernist product with a dash of surrealism: “The blues are fantastically paradoxical” because “[m]illions in this our twentieth century have danced with abandonment and sensuous joys to jigs that had their birth in suffering.” Echoing the three key themes that constitute modernism, the blues for Wright are “those starkly brutal, haunting folk songs created by millions of nameless and illiterate American Negroes in their confused wanderings over the American southland and in their intrusion into the northern American industrial cities” (xiii). But Wright’s central definition of the blues is but a liberal (and uninspired) paraphrase of Ellison:

Yet the most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live. All blues are a lusty, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibility. (xv)

Where Wright claimed to hear dialectical redemption in black music, in his own fiction it never figures as more than a prop for structural irony. In blues, Wright heard a decidedly modernist sensibility arising out of their “ability to take seemingly unrelated images and symbols and link them together into a meaningful whole”; blues, to him, were therefore “our ‘spirituals’ of the city pavement” (qtd. in Dick 406; Wright, Twelve 128). But precisely because they were “the spirituals of the city”—elsewhere, Wright commented that “Protestant ministers have put to religious use the sexual power of convulsive songs and have channeled aphrodisiac music into the spirituals”—they were also characterized by “a submerged
theme of guilt” stemming, perhaps, “from the burden of renounced rebellious impulses” leading to “a certain degree of passivity, almost masochistic in quality and seemingly allied to sex in origin” (“Jazz” 242; Foreword xiv). Thus, concludes Craig Werner, “[d]espite his sensitivity to the ironies and ambiguities of modernist writing, Wright seems almost entirely deaf to the double-meanings of Afro-American song” (206).

The blues’ alleged passive masochism of sexual origin explains Sarah’s submission to the white salesman after “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” has conjured up the guilty pleasure of her liaison with Tom and thus quashed her impulses to resist the advances of the white man. That black blues music should have the identical effects as a white religious hymn is but one of many idiosyncrasies in “Long Black Song,” and many readers have pointed out the story’s thematic and structural inconsistencies. Wright himself freely admitted that his effort “did not catch the experience I was looking for,” namely to find an answer to the question “What quality of will must a Negro possess to live and die with dignity in a country that denied his humanity?” (Black 402). For critic Myles Hurd, the problems arise from Wright’s inability to connect the literary techniques of high modernism with African American expressiveness, resulting in “a specific source of bitonality in the work—i.e. Wright’s reliance on ‘white techniques’ to articulate ‘black themes’” (48). However, as Hurd’s own terminology already suggests, the “problematic disharmonies between technique and theme” owe as much to the author’s desire to replicate high modernist techniques as to his inability to hear in music a viable revolutionary protest against white southern violence and its most terrifying ritual, lynching (56).

In a way, therefore, precisely because “Long Black Song” contains no long black song per se, Richard Wright’s modernism remains bifurcated. The short story’s long black song is a song without music, namely, the black experience in the New World. In both secular and religious black music—Afro-America’s historical conscience (and therefore America’s as well)—Wright heard but guilt, repression, passivity, and even dangerous self-deception. In other words, black music expressed a stasis that rendered it impractical as a means of protest, let alone of revolutionary struggle. Ironically, it was the midwesterner Langston Hughes who heard in music, in black southern music, something very different, who heard in it the potential to which Wright seemed deaf:

When I get to be a composer
I’m gonna write me some music
About daybreak in Alabama
And I’m gonna put the purtiest songs in it
Rising out of the ground like swamp mist
And falling out of the heaven like soft dew. (lines 1–6)

The multicultural ideal “Daybreak in Alabama” goes on to forecast a southern ideal in which “white hands / And black hands and brown and yellow hands / And red clay earth hands” are “touching everybody with kind fingers / And touching each other natural as dew” is an ideal borne out of the process of embellishing time passing by, not an ideal vanquished in the collision between cyclical time and mechanical time (15–19). This ideal South, Hughes’s speaker dreams, will resonate “In that dawn of music when I / Get to be a composer / And write about daybreak / In Alabama”—a dawn, in other words, where linear time (the speaker’s composition will be written at some point in the future) cooperates with cyclical time (dawn, daybreak, and the poem’s own circular structure) (20–23). In Hughes’s Alabama, presence and absence, cyclical and linear time, collaborate, they don’t collide. The collision at the center of Wright’s Mississippi, however, creates not hope, just paradox. The disruption brought into the peacefully agrarian idyll by modernity in the shape of the graphophone clock engenders both: the majesty of Sarah’s vision and the tragedy of Silas’s lynching.

“Richard Wright,” sniped Margaret Walker with deliberate ambiguity, “came out of hell” (13). But “Long Black Song” limns the setting as a symbolic ritual ground that contains damnation and redemption, joy and terror, heroes and cowards, life and death. Sarah, perhaps, could not really have received her own vision; she certainly could not articulate it. But Richard Wright, who came from hell and told about it, could. The tensions within “Long Black Song” are thus very much the author’s own: as George Kent has pointed out, Wright’s “personal tension springs from a stubborn self conscious of victimization but obsessed with its right to a full engagement of universal forces and to reaping the fruits due from the engagement. This right may be called the heritage of man” (76). And both sides of this consciousness and conscience arise out of the same ritual ground, the “fantastical paradox” that was the South—and still is. What Wright’s “Long Black Song” and Hughes’s “Daybreak in Alabama” intone in unison, as disparate as they otherwise are, is that the song of Sarah’s majestic vision has not yet been performed. They suggest therefore a shift of focus, from literary text to musical performance, in order to elucidate the full potential of Afro-modernism’s historical conscience.