“Tearing Down the Temple”

Prophetic Time and Richard Wright’s Eschatology of Resistance

Hound dogs on my trail
School children sitting in jail
Black cat cross my path
I think every day’s gonna be my last
Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don’t belong here
I don’t belong there
I’ve even stopped believing in prayer

Picket lines
School boycotts
They try to say it’s a communist plot
All I want is equality
for my sister my brother my people and me
Yes you lied to me all these years
You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady
And you’d stop calling me Sister Sadie
Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You’re all gonna die and die like flies
I don’t trust you any more
You keep on saying “Go slow!”
“Go slow!”

—Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam!”

THROUGHOUT his life and his works, writes his biographer Michel Fabre, Richard Wright “attempted to reject what the South stood for in his mind but he also kept reaffirming, repeatedly and compulsively, what it had meant for him and how he had been molded by it” (78). If the word
“religion” were replaced with “the South” in this sentence, the accuracy of Fabre’s original statement would not be diminished; indeed, Fabre’s argument would hardly be altered. As I hope I demonstrated in the previous chapter, any inquiry into the history and culture of the U.S. South necessarily includes an examination of its religious cultures. In Wright’s work, region and religion are often inextricable. The southern childhood recalled in his 1945 autobiographical narrative *Black Boy* is haunted, not just by the specter of southern racism, but also by the stifling Seventh-day Adventism of his grandmother. Though the black church was the central institution of the community into which he was born, religion proved to be the cause of great strife within Wright’s family. He viewed his grandmother’s faith as yet another agent of oppression in a horribly oppressive environment—a suffocating force that stifled his intellectual achievement and yet another set of arbitrary social codes that he was expected to perform and ideologies he was expected to passively accept.

Given the directness with which it addresses this topic and its overall centrality in his oeuvre, it is not surprising that examinations of Wright’s engagement with religion often begin and end with *Black Boy*. Written at the height of his fame, the book evinces the same internationalism, historical materialism, and social realist aesthetic that characterize his other masterwork, the 1940 novel *Native Son*, and that would later develop into the anticolonialism and existentialism of his later work, including reportage, travel writing, and novels like *Savage Holiday* (1953) and *The Outsider* (1954). Indeed, the notion that Wright’s work rejects religion is so commonplace that it continues to play a determinative role in the critical reception of his work. For some critics, Wright’s atheism amounts to an unfortunate rejection of his own blackness, while for others, it is a powerful act of resistance against an institution that has been complicit with black oppression.¹ The terms of this debate are reductive: while Wright’s atheism is not in dispute, the sum of his work offers neither a dismissal of the black church nor a full-scale assault on religion. Instead, Wright is like countless other African American writers who, in Qiana Whitted’s estimate, “attempt to negotiate abstract religious grievances with empowering

dimensions of its practice in oppressed communities” (26). Like so many other black writers, Richard Wright’s engagement with religion is complicated, discontinuous, and fraught with a “deep ambivalence.”

That negotiation constitutes important political work, particularly in his earliest works. For at least a moment in his writerly life, Wright found some utility, a rhetorical lineage, and even the possibility of radical change in the language and the narratives of African American religious traditions. In the essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and the short story cycle Uncle Tom’s Children, the African American church clearly retains a vital role in Wright’s vision of a meaningful and revolutionary mass black workers’ movement. The presentation of religion in the collection is not limited to the depiction of the church or the evaluation of it as a potential vehicle for resistance, however: in African American religion, Wright finds the material necessary to articulate a nascent, revolutionary black theory of history. In “Blueprint,” he writes that

in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed and complex consciousness is necessary, a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds [sic] this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today. (43)

Such a theory is dire necessity, he continues: “. . . any one destitute of a theory about the structure, direction, and meaning of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control” (45).

The question of the direction of history is preeminent in Uncle Tom’s Children, and it is at least in part what prevents the atheist Wright from the unequivocal rejection of religion that critics often ascribe to him. These stories each invoke the prophetic time of African American religious culture. Unlike the notions of historical progress that justified European colonial projects and the millenarian nationalism of U.S. political culture, the particular apocalyptic imaginary of black religion offers the possibility of rupture, of a radical break and a totalizing apocalyptic reordering of an oppressive social order. Wright’s fascination with eschatological visions is evident in the apocalyptic aesthetic that characterizes much of his writing. In Black Boy, Wright describes the frightening cosmology of his grandmother’s Seventh-day Adventist faith as

a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, or seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon
turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth . . . ; a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet . . . a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with the clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with the Armageddon, dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead. . . . (102)

This terrifying invocation of the apocalyptic imaginary is by no means unique to *Black Boy*. Indeed, apocalyptic imagery figures prominently in the landscapes of the rural South and the urban North explored in Wright’s fictional universe. Like that of his fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, Wright’s apocalyptic vision reveals the cataclysmic consequences of race for the region and the nation. Unlike Faulkner, however, Wright has little concern with the souls of white folk or with revealing the long histories they have repressed. Instead, his work explores the suffering of African Americans and looks forward to the possibility of resistance.

Though the southern apocalyptic imaginary clearly informs Wright’s artistic vision, his representations of societies on the brink of collapse are rooted in beliefs he frequently and vociferously claimed to disdain. For Wright, any rupture in history would not be brought about by divine intervention, and its form would not be that prophesized by St. John and imagined in spirituals and hymns. Instead, the eschatological vision of both “Blueprint” and *Uncle Tom’s Children* is a Marxist one. In our current political discourse, fundamentalist Christianity and communism are positioned at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. An immediate and obvious connection, however, might be found in the eschatological emphasis of both systems: both communism and fundamentalist Christianity envision an inevitable, potentially violent conflict that will bring an end to the current, deeply flawed social structure in favor of something more just. However, in Wright’s view, the apocalyptic hopes of black religion have failed its adherents, and its promise of inevitable divine action has become complicit with the static, ahistorical condition imposed by the institutions of southern oppression.

Only through a Marxism that attended to the particular experiences of rural African American life, Wright believed, could the African American subject be restored to history. *Uncle Tom’s Children* was written and published at a crucial period in Wright’s career: before the fame garnered by *Native Son*; before his break with the Communist Party USA; before
his move to Paris and his engagement with Sartre and existentialism; in a moment of youth that was energized by the ideas exchanged and ideologies explored in CPUSA-sponsored publications like New Masses and the Daily Worker, to which he contributed, and in the Marxist intellectual circles of the John Reed Club, the Chicago chapter of which he would become head (Fabre 36–37). In this moment, in which his worldview was decidedly materialist, his attention was nonetheless turned toward African American religion. And in Uncle Tom’s Children, Wright seeks to realize the strategy announced in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and deploy a mode of black Marxist writing that would awaken the latent revolutionary potential within African American culture. Individually, each of the five stories in the cycle—“Big Boy Leaves Home,” “Down by the Riverside,” “Long Black Song,” “Fire and Cloud,” and “Bright and Morning Star”—surge with the emancipatory energies of the apocalyptic imaginary. But when the work is taken together as a singular work, these two eschatologies, heretofore parallel and disparate, finally converge.

This chapter will explore the apocalyptic imaginary as the discursive space suited to the aims of Wright’s early writing—that is, to the development of a Marxist message that, by attending to the particular experience of African Americans in the rural South, would revitalize an exhausted revolutionary energy within black culture. In locating this in my broader study of the southern literary and religious culture, I do not intend to minimize either the obvious or the subtle distinctions between the forms of evangelical Protestantism practiced by black and white believers; regardless of race, visions of Apocalypse are critical to the religious culture of the South, and differences between forms of engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary reflect the particular cultures and historical experiences of the communities of believers.

In an effort to interrogate these differences, this chapter will first examine Wright’s depictions of what I will call the ahistorical condition of African Americans under Jim Crow, before interrogating the ways in which Uncle Tom’s Children works to restore the colonized, brutalized black subject into a meaningful teleology. The cycle deploys two specific strategies to do this, both of which engage the prophetic, millennial vision of African American religion in some way: first, its structure casts the black experience in a typology drawn from Scripture; second, this typological structure demands that the collection’s characters experience multiple ruptures in time. These localized apocalypses are most often initiated by an eruption of horrific violence (not unlike the lynching of Joe Christmas in
But rather than restraining and demoralizing the victim (as each of the white promulgators intends), these beatings, lynchings, and murders offer the possibility of revelation and rebirth.

“We git erlong widout time”: The Ahistorical Condition of Jim Crow

Equivocation is not a mode often attached ascribed to Richard Wright. Ideology is often front and center in nearly eight decades of critical response to Wright’s work, and in the realm of propaganda and agitprop, little room exists for uncertainty and ambivalence. However, as critics like Timothy Caron, John Lowe, and Qiana Whitted have noted, Wright’s corpus is more complex than this. This even holds true for Uncle Tom’s Children, even though, if this work is considered solely in the context of Wright’s biography, it would seem a likely candidate for his most polemical work. At the time of its writing, he was still a committed member of the Communist Party USA and worked as Chicago head of the John Reed Club. With regard to the debates of their historical moment, the stories entertain no uncertainty: African Americans must take decisive action to overcome the rule of Jim Crow and lynch law, and if any justice is to be achieved, they ultimately must join with other poor and oppressed peoples. However, the stories’ depictions of black religion and its relationship to resistance are not nearly as unequivocal.

Within Wright scholarship, the middle story, “Long Black Song,” often gets short shrift, perhaps because of the author’s notorious reputation for problematic representations of women in his writing (and reputation for even more problematic relationships with them in his own life).² The protagonist of the story is Sarah, a young black woman stagnating on an isolated farm and in any unhappy marriage; during one of her husband Silas’s frequent absences, she is either seduced or raped by a white salesman, who is traveling across the rural landscape to hawk record players. Silas ultimately discovers what seems to be an act of betrayal and believes that it undoes his years of work to be “as good as any white man” (147); abandoning all hope of attaining any autonomy, he forces Sarah and their

². Most recently, Linda Chavers has offered a fascinating examination of Wright’s “implied complicity in women’s oppression” in Black Boy, in which “he presents a pattern of pseudo-rebellion against restrictive female figures in the lives of his male protagonist”; Fabre thoroughly covers Wright’s relationships with various women in The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright.
infant daughter from their home and embarks down a “long river of blood” (153), first whipping the salesman (who returns to finalize the transaction) and, later, shooting other white men who come to arrest and likely lynch him.

The initial impact of the story emerges from its depiction of violence, and the related (and problematic) exploration of the pathologies of black masculine anger and black female victimhood: Silas’s efforts to assert a fairly conservative notion of masculine autonomy—that is to say, to be a successful provider and earner, to marry and raise a family—are thwarted by the intrusion of the white salesman upon his real and conjugal property. Like the Eve of Genesis, Sarah’s capitulation to temptation (and to the evil embodied in a seemingly pleasant white man) initiates a tragic course of events, which she can only observe. The takeaway: the mythic models of American success, whether the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer or subsequent (Horatio) Algerian American dreams of commercial success, are traps for black folk; any apparent triumph is merely a fata morgana, concealing an inevitable assertion of white superiority that will tragically destroy black men and black women. Here, Wright leaves little room for uncertainty.

Ambivalence, however, characterizes many other elements of the story. In particular, the exchanges between Sarah and the salesman evince the complexity and confusion of the black subject’s relationship to time and history. The conversation begins when the salesman notices Sarah’s infant daughter, Ruth (to whom the narrator curiously applies the pronoun “it”) banging a broken “old eight day clock,” which Sarah had previously given her as a plaything (126). The salesman is shocked to learn that this is the only clock in the house. “But how do you keep time?” he asks.

“We git erlong widout time.”
“But how do you know what time it is when you get up in the morning?”
“We jus git up, thas all.”
“But how do you know what time it is when you get up?”
“We git up wid the sun.”
“And at night, how do you tell when its night?”
“It gits dark when the sun goes down.” (131)

To this point, the exchange has the comic feel of a typical country-mouse, city-mouse story. Both laugh, and Sarah cannot help but think that the salesman in his naïveté and ignorance of the particular rhythms of rural
life, is a “Jus lika lil boy.” However, greater significance and ambiguity are imparted to the conversation by the final punchline that precedes their laughter, as well as the troubling sexual encounter that follows it. Before the fun ends, Wright carefully shifts the terminology from keeping precise time to living in the absence of time. “I don’t see how in the world anybody can live without time,” says the salesman. “We just don’t need no time, Mistah,” Sarah responds.

Prior to this additional dialogue, the salesman appears foolish—so dependent on modern mechanisms and structures of thought that he can no longer understand what is obvious: the rhythms of time do not originate from any artificial device but are in fact manifest in the natural world. After this final exchange, however, the situation is murkier, and the reader must question the implications of living outside of time. Is this a parable about the fundamental cultural misunderstandings that characterize interactions between white and rural black people—a problem Wright confronted in his role as the designated black voice in a Communist Party infrastructure dominated by white people from the urban North? Or is this episode another manifestation of a theme that recurs throughout Wright’s work—namely, the idea that black people “have never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization” (Black Boy 37)? Does this moment suggest that the ideology of white supremacy and the institutions of segregation have so severely restricted any assertion of black agency that the very possibility of rational progress has been foreclosed?3

Indeed, prior to this conversation, Sarah’s existence is depicted as profoundly ahistorical. The dislocation and stagnation of her current moment are contrasted to the joyous sense of possibility that characterized her romance with Tom, her lover who was deployed to the front in Europe, as well as the earliest days of her marriage to Silas:

Yes; there had been all her life the long hope of white bright days and the deep desire of dark black nights and then Silas had gone. Bang! Bang! Bang! There had been laughter and eating and singing and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer. There had been cooking

3. This interpretation is given credence by Sarah’s ignorance of the meaning of word “science,” which the salesman tells her he studies (134). While later African American writers might strongly critique or even reject Enlightenment notions of rationality and progress, the young Wright—still embracing Communism, not yet engrossed in the existentialism that characterizes his later work—would be unlikely to fully dismiss the methods of science, empiricism, or Western thought as too complicit in the ideological domination of non-Western peoples to play a role in the fight against oppression.
and sewing and sweeping and the deep dream of sleeping grey skies in winter. Always it had been like that and she had been happy. But no more. The happiness of those days and nights, of those green cornfields and grey skies had started to go from her when Tom had gone to war. His leaving 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)

Without hope in the possibility of a new day, the joyous, pastoral rhythms of agrarian life dissolve into a numbing repetition of meaningless events. From this perspective, little alternative is possible. Any movement through time and across physical space are so foreign that they threaten to negate the self; musing on Tom’s deployment to Europe, Sarah feels “that merely to go so far away from home was a kind of death in itself” (127).4

Sarah’s hopeless, existential yearning for something more complicates a common criticism of Wright’s work—that his work denies the affirmative, sustaining elements of African American culture and instead only depicts the “cultural barrenness of black life” he laments in *Black Boy* (37). The life Sarah remembers is hardly barren, but her current circumstance might be characterized that way. Here and elsewhere in Wright’s fictional universe, the difference between the two states—between the fecundity and pleasure of rural black life and the emptiness Sarah now feels—emerges from shifts in the individual’s and the community’s relationships to time. If the black culture represented in Wright’s corpus is indeed barren, it is only because it is profoundly ahistorical. Throughout his work (and particularly, in *Uncle Tom’s Children*), Wright articulates the freedom that he and his characters desire in both spatial and temporal terms. While he recognizes African American religion as a source of spiritual nourishment necessary for survival under the conditions of slavery and Jim Crow, it offers little opportunity for movement or progress in his fiction. In the autobiographical essay “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” he reports being warned by his family to “never again attempt to exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to ‘stay in your place’” (7). He continues this argument in *Black Boy*: “I knew that I lived in a country in

4. This sentiment fascinatingly juxtaposes the relatively carefree attitude of the wandering mother Lena Grove in *Light in August*. Lena willingly transgresses upon any social restriction on her mobility, but rather than opening the possibility of deliverance, her travels seem as pointlessly repetitive as Sarah’s life on the farm. For Faulkner, movement is made possible when Byron Bunch joins her and helps form a de facto family unit; Sarah, on the other hand, is driven to despair by the emptiness of her domestic stability.
which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive” (169). The young Wright desires to leave his southern home in favor of a place where personal progress—movement toward a telos—is possible. While the adolescent Wright who emerges in these writings chafes at these restraints, other African Americans often seem complicit in them and, in the case of his grandmother, even reinforce them. His classmates, for instance, are “not conscious of living a special, separate, stunted way of life. . . . Although they lived in an America where in theory there existed equality of opportunity, they knew unerringly what to aspire to and what not to aspire to” (197). The choice of the word “aspire” is critical in the context of this conversation: unlike the more passive hope, which implies waiting on something beyond oneself, to aspire requires a vision of progress and work over time toward a definite goal. Aspiration is, then, teleological, but in Wright’s estimation, progress toward any goal is inevitably “stunted” by the regime of southern apartheid.

This spatial and temporal formulation of freedom is encompassed in Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s term “United States Black Modernism.” Under the regimes of white authority, there exists no “black public-sphere mobility,” writes Baker (83; the italics are his). African Americans have been denied the “fullness of United States black citizenship rights of locomotion, suffrage, occupational choice and compensation that yield what can only be designated a black-majority, politically participatory, bodily secure GOOD LIFE.” “Modernism” clearly implies a chronological break with the past, but Baker also defines it in terms of “mobility” and “movement” in space: United States Black Modernism is thus a transformative condition in which black people would be able to move in space and through time toward a goal.

The freedom Baker claims here is the same freedom to aspire and achieve that the young Wright finds absent in his community. His posthumously published first novel Lawd, Today! layers the collapsing personal life of Jake, a black Chicago postal worker, within both the collapse of the black community to which he belongs as well as the apocalyptic collapse wrought by the Depression in the U.S. and the rise of the Third Reich in Europe. A failed schemer, Jake is incapable of imagining success beyond the terms of immediate physical and material gratification. Likewise, the protagonist of The Long Dream, Fishbelly, learns from his father to check any aspirations that he might have of a life beyond the limits of Jim Crow: “Dream only what can happen. . . . If you ever find yourself dreaming something that can’t happen, then choke it back, ’cause there’s too many dreams of a black man that can’t come true” (80).
Prior to the events of “Long Black Song,” Silas has not yet learned this lesson; he is driven by the dream of mobility and autonomy—and of achieving them in the manner in which the white farmers around him do. “Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do just like they [white people] do,” he tells Sarah (140). But, as Baker notes, the institutions and practices of Jim Crow foreclose the possibility of any real mobility. After years in which Silas dutifully “work[ed] hard and saved his money” in order to buy a farm and “grow his own crops like white men” (147), the act of infidelity reveals the inevitability of white authority and exposes the naïveté of his aspiration for autonomous dominion over his own land.

As a black woman, Sarah’s position is even more restricted, and her ahistorical condition leads to her undoing. Wright’s representation of women is often problematic, and Sarah’s sexual encounter with the salesman is no exception. The degree of her complicity in the encounter is troublingly uncertain; one struggles to determine if this is a depiction of the powerlessness of black women (that is, she relents to his advances because she is powerless to do otherwise) or an example of the emasculation of black men (that is, despite his best efforts, Silas can never truly possess the authority of a man, and so betrayal by a woman is all but inevitable). While not discounting either interpretation, I would assert a third possibility: rather than simply offering another parable of the nearly unlimited possibilities for white abuses and black suffering under Jim Crow, this episode reveals the deep connections between desire and history. Operating from this perspective, one views Sarah as neither overwhelmed by the authority of the salesman’s whiteness nor repulsed by Silas’s powerlessness, but instead, moved by powerful yearning for a restored relationship to history and time.

After all, the white man hardly strikes us as a figuration of authority and power; throughout their encounter, he seems “Jus lika chile” to Sarah (132). Their interaction becomes erotically charged only once the salesman demonstrates the record player with the spiritual “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder”:

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 save 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... (132–33)

Nothing after the song suggests that Sarah sees him differently. It is the song that profoundly affects her, filling her throat with a lump, causing her to tremble. Most critically, though, Wright portrays this arousal in temporal terms: she “feel[s] the rise and falls of days and nights, of summer and winter,” for instance. Likewise, when seduction gives way to actual sex, the rhythms of coitus echo the rhythms of time and season:

A liquid metal covered her and she rode on the curve of white bright days and dark black nights and the surge of the long gladness of summer and the ebb of the deep dream of sleep in winter till a high red wave of hotness drowned her in a deluge of silver and blue that boiled her blood and blistered her flash bangbangbang... (137)

Beginning with the song, this encounter with the salesman fleetingly fulfills Sarah’s deep existential yearning to exist in time. Crucially, this is not time figured in the way the salesman imagines it—a concept of history that is dependent on clock and in which the value of time is measured by the scientific or industrial progress that has passed. Instead, it is prophetic, apocalyptic time—a sense of history grounded in the particular textures of African American experience, in which the suffering of the current moment ultimately will be redeemed and its meaning will be revealed.

Wright’s salesman likely has little conception of the significance of the song he plays; perhaps it is the only “race record” in his collection, and he plays it to appeal to his audience. For Wright, however, the reference is a strategic one: spirituals were among “the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed” (“Blueprint” 40). Like countless other spirituals (and like the Carter Family’s “No Depression [in Heaven]”) “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” provides a spiritual balm, prophesying the ultimate
day of deliverance that will redeem the suffering of the current moment. Even under the conditions of bondage, these spirituals allowed African Americans to assume “the role of the chosen people,” elected for a special historical role by their earthly suffering and permitted them to “prophesy an apocalyptic end to the world that slaveholders made,” according to Baker (Long Black Song 53). The revolutionary eschatology of slave religion culminates in the Jubilee, a moment that begins with Christ’s joyous return and offers the long-awaited deliverance from the physical bondage of chattel slavery and the spiritual bondage of human sin. As the moment of divine judgment, the Jubilee promises retribution against oppressive regimes of white power—that is, otherworldly justice that transcends the corrupt institutions of human authority. More broadly, as Paul Gilroy persuasively argues, this cosmology amounts to a “critique of modernity” and of its inadequacy to generate totalizing meaning (56). Rationalism and empiricism too easily yield to the prevailing historical order and fail to accommodate the experiences of an oppressed minority; in short, these systems cannot adequately represent the existential pain endured by a group that has been discursively reduced to the status of property. The cosmology of African American religious traditions, however, offers scriptural precedence for bondage and deliverance. This at least offers an alternative historical narrative in which deliverance and justice are not only possible, but imminent.

This notion of sacred, prophetic time is hardly limited to songs. Indeed, the apocalyptic imaginary has proven to be a wellspring for African American writers since the early nineteenth century. In his 1829 Appeal, David Walker writes that slaveholding nations

forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors; for although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring other destructions upon them. (3)

The echoes of Walker’s prophetic rhetoric are audible in Frederick Douglass’s sermon “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” delivered twenty-three years later. “We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake,” he exhorts. “The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled;
the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced” (344). In *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, David Howard-Pitney introduces this rhetorical model through a reading of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, contextualizing King within this tradition of prophetic millenarianism (3–4). The power of this rhetorical mode to incite strong emotion and debate persists even now, as evinced by the political and media outrage that came once excerpts of sermons by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, once the pastor to the Obama family, were posted to YouTube and broadcast on television during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. However, the firestorm Jeremiah Wright’s rhetoric caused—and the message of millenarian hope articulated in then-Senator Obama’s response—suggests that the complexities and historical underpinnings of this mode remain misunderstood by many of those outside the black community.\(^5\)

For Sarah, however, “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” has no explicit political content. For a fleeting instant, the song removes her from the existential malaise that has characterized her life on the farm and reawakens her sexuality; she yearns, wants, and aspires in ways that resist the numbing, suffocating, and dehumanizing effects of Jim Crow. In some ways, this episode in “Long Black Song” functions as the fulcrum upon which *Uncle Tom’s Children* pivots. Like the first two stories, it ends tragically and hopelessly: learning of Sarah’s liaison with the salesman, Silas embraces the existential meaninglessness of his position and embarks on a murderous rampage, “follow[ing] that old river blood, knowing that it meant nothing” (154); as she watches their house consumed by flames, Sarah is left, “Naw, Gawd!” and knowing that deliverance is not coming (156).

This episode also provides a center around which the cycle coheres—a moment that reveals a key to the larger work’s themes. Here, Wright

\(^5\) David A. Frank offers a thoughtful interpretation of both Obama’s and Wright’s use of the prophetic voice and African American religious rhetoric in his essay, “The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama’s ‘A More Perfect Union’ Address, March 18, 2008.” Frank judges Obama’s use of the mode “a masterpiece with small flaws and sequels that do not fully match its excellence,” which articulates a nuanced understanding of these misunderstandings and carefully explicates “the hush harbor talk of both blacks and whites” (25). Jeremiah Wright’s rhetoric, subordinated to Obama’s, is judged problematic in the “melancholic and fatalistic dimension to his thinking about America, which is inconsistent with his theology of hope” (25). However, Frank fails to distinguish between the millenarian modes of prophetic rhetoric and the apocalyptic power of the jeremiad; he discusses the prophetic tradition at length, but does not look toward examples like the “Appeal” or “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”.
exposes the black subject’s alienation from history; the power of the prophetic sense of apocalyptic time to resist that alienation; and its ultimate failure to affect real historical change on its own. For Sarah, the prophetic time of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” may provide an alluring, even nourishing alternative to the existential emptiness of living outside of time, but it does not save her. Looking back from this point, the hopelessness and violence in the prior stories have new coherence; looking forward, the calls to action have greater urgency. The counterhistory offered by black religion, once sufficient to psychologically and culturally resist the brutalizing circumstances of bondage, has failed by Wright’s estimation: the “archaic morphology of Christian salvation” only “ameliorate[s] and assuage[s] suffering and denial” (“Blueprint” 39), thereby inhibiting any real threat to the oppressive regime of white authority. The God at whom Sarah screams does not answer and instead allows her to watch as her husband is consumed by his anger.

The cry “Naw, Gawd!” reverberates throughout Uncle Tom’s Children, as well as much of his other work. In Black Boy, in particular, Wright’s confrontations with religion range from cynical to frustrating to terrifying. The sum total of this experience, filtered through a Marxist lens, leads him to conclude, “Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn” (136). Many Wright scholars have contended that his work fails to recognize the possibilities of black religion. Most recently, James W. Coleman has argued that Wright “limit[s] the black cosmos with his own bleak view” (17). Despite occasional reference to scripture, Wright’s writings “ignore the Bible’s richness and complexity,” and offer evidence of “his strong desire to simplify and trivialize, and to distance himself from black people and black culture,” according to Coleman (22–23). Coleman’s thesis applies a familiar criticism of Wright to this specific topic: by focusing on the dehumanizing consequences of Jim Crow, Coleman argues, his work denies even the possibility of a nourishing African American identity or culture.

This line of criticism reduces Wright’s complicated engagement with religion to fit a few, strident statements on the topic. While he may polemically describe the South as a landscape bereft of opportunities for the actualization of the black self and may attack the “cultural barrenness of black life” in his memoir (37), Black Boy elsewhere delights in the richness of a childhood spent in that rural space and within that community. 6 Likewise,
even his rejections of religion are fraught with contradictions, as Whitted has convincingly shown. For instance, Wright writes that his family “was determined to take me by the throat and lift me to a higher plane of living” (*Black Boy* 7), and he explicitly contrasts his grandmother’s faith with the “throbbing life of the people in the streets” (102); in doing so, Whitted contends, he establishes that “ecclesiastical space and time seem to exist as a separate planar entity” from the “South’s social realities” (65). Even if meant as a dismissal, she continues, this recognition opens up the possibility that religion might respond to African Americans’ need for an alternative cultural space “during an era in which public space was defined racially and every seat and sidewalk was marked by the profanity of segregation.”

And so, while he might rail against the religion of his grandmother, it is inaccurate to describe his engagement with religion as a rejection or a dismissal. Indeed, in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” he explicitly recognizes that, for slaves, religion constituted “a struggle for human rights,” and he includes spirituals as a source of “racial wisdom” (39–40). That essay prompts the Left to look at African American folkways—including religion—not as obstacles inhibiting the mass movement of agricultural workers in the South, but rather, as the means through which such a movement might be realized. *Uncle Tom’s Children* follows that blueprint closely, and in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “Fire and Cloud,” it depicts the institution of the black church as a potential vehicle for resistance.

Wright’s interest in black religion extends beyond structure to ideology; Sarah’s cry of “Naw, Gawd,” is answered near the end of “Fire and Cloud,” when the protagonist Reverend Dan Taylor triumphantly declares, “Gawd ain no lie! He ain no lie!” (220). This moment in the story proves difficult to square with Wright’s atheism or assertions that his work explicitly rejects religion. This apparent contradiction, however, is reflective of the ambiguity with which *Uncle Tom’s Children* treats and uses religion. The book, along with the “Blueprint,” grapples with the apparent failure of African American messianism and millennialism to give rise to a mass revolutionary movement. Wright recognizes that these traditions generated revolutionary energies for slaves but characterizes them as inadequate in the face of modernity. While Negro folklore and religion “embod[y] the memories and hopes of [a] struggle for freedom. . . . How many John Henrys have lived and died on the lips of these black people?”

of . . . black life: the Thomas Wolfe–like lists of beautiful sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of Southern black rural life; the lyrical catalogues of black folk beliefs that he recognized as vital to African-American survival in the South; the indomitable will Wright inherited from his mother . . . ” (114).
he asks (41). “How many mythical heroes in embryo have been allowed to perish for lack of husbanding by alert intelligence?” In the works from the period in which “Blueprint” and *Uncle Tom’s Children* were written, Wright contends that the black Marxist intellectual could provide that “alert intelligence” and, through properly deployed Marxist analysis, direct these revolutionary energies toward meaningful resistance. *Uncle Tom’s Children* seeks to do just this through fiction: to renew black faith for the context of modernity, to reawaken its “racial wisdom” of African Americans to the possibility of resistance, and to locate in the brutalized black bodies the possibility of a regenerated black subject. In that effort, Wright constructs his story cycle around a typology appropriated from Scripture.

**Typology and the Apocalyptic Structure of *Uncle Tom’s Children***

As John Lowe has pointed out, the typological structure of *Uncle Tom’s Children* is fairly systematic (63). The reader is introduced to the timeless, pre-lapsarian paradise of the first section of “Big Boy Leaves Home”: the innocence of Big Boy and his friends is violently torn away after they are seen naked by a white woman. The final version of the book concludes violently with “Bright and Morning Star,” in which the activist son Johnny-Boy and his mother Sue (the protagonist) are martyred by a white lynch mob. The narrative structures of the stories, as well as the cycle itself, systematically move through a series of scriptural types: “Big Boy” is followed by the flood story in “Down by the Riverside”; “Fire and Cloud” offers the possibilities of spiritual rebirth and messianic deliverance through Rev. Dan Taylor, who is simultaneously a Moses figure (leading God’s Chosen People to salvation), the pillar of fire that lit the way for Moses and the Jews, and a figuration of Christ. Twice, characters refer to the betrayal of Judas, whose betrayal of Christ is echoed by the actions of Deacon Smith in “Fire and Cloud” and Booker in “Bright and Morning Star.” Several conversions, akin to St. Paul’s on the road to Damascus, occur throughout the text, often after characters have suffered or been victimized: the protagonists of each story are all reborn through violence and are, at least to some degree, awakened to the necessity of resistance. In the final story, Sue’s martyrdom,

7. Perhaps not coincidentally, the *Morning Star* was the name of a steamship that Adventist missionaries used as a mobile base on the Mississippi during their campaigns to reach out to southern blacks during the 1890s and early 1900s (Bull and Lockhart 279).
a crucial element of any crusade, is inspired by her visions, which recall both Paul’s conversion and the Revelation of St. John (a crucial point to which I will return). Though she approaches the lynch mob on the pretense of tending to her murdered son, Sue transcends the role of Virgin Mother to become both a messenger and an agent of justice.

The initial story (and most frequently anthologized) in the cycle, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” functions as a sort of microcosm of the typological structure; it begins in paradise and comes to an end with Big Boy’s flight to the Promised Land of the North. His escape is necessitated by the transgression of a racial taboo, when he and his four young friends, all naked from their swim, are spotted by a white woman. Prior to her appearance, the four engage in the play of young boys: they wrestle; they giggle when one offers a silly pun or passes gas; and they make crude jokes at the expense of each other’s mothers. In their Edenic surroundings, even the ground seems warm and comfortable: one of the boys remarks that its “Jus lika bed” where he “could stay here forever” (18). Nonetheless, they are aware both of the danger inherent in this place and of the possibilities offered by the world beyond it. Seeing a train barreling northward and out of the reaches of Jim Crow, they begin singing “Dis Train Boun for Glory” (19), a song that conflates the deliverance promised by God in Scripture with that promised by an escape to the North.

In this nearly prelapsarian state, nakedness poses no problem for the boys, and when they reach the swimming hole, they unselfconsciously strip. Once they see the white woman Bertha, however, they “instinctively” cover “their groins” (29), reenacting Adam and Eve’s sudden development of modesty. In an instant, their innocence is snuffed out by the reality of the terrifying sexual mores and paranoia wrought by Jim Crow. Their unintentional violation of racial codes leads to a confrontation with the woman’s fiancé—a soldier recently returned from the Great War. Big Boy kills him in self-defense, but only after his friends Buck and Lester have been felled by the soldier. The soldier’s death precipitates an eruption of white violence against the black community, which culminates in Big Boy’s flight to the North and the lynching of his friend Bobo.

Just as the scene at the swimming hole recalls the expulsion from Eden in Genesis, the rendering of Big Boy’s escape and the lynching contains horrifying, apocalyptic imagery and, in certain moments, very specifically draws upon the Book of Revelation. For example, Big Boy hides from the mob in an old kiln where he must fight and kill a snake and a dog. The image of a snake evokes the serpent of Genesis most immediately, but the location—a kiln—perhaps invokes the image of the pit or furnace in the
ninth chapter of the Book of Revelation. Once the fifth seal is broken, John watches an angel open “the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace” (Revelation 9:2). A variety of beasts emerge from the pit, including a creature alternately described as a serpent and a dragon.

Once Big Boy defeats the snake, he faces the dog: “Green eyes glowed and drew nearer as the barking, muffled by the closeness of the hole, beat upon his eardrums” (58). The monstrous dog perhaps does not have a direct analog in Revelation, but it does recall familiar figures from antiquity—the mythic Cerberus—and from African American culture—the demonic dogs sent by overseers, slavecatchers, and posses to track fleeing black men (and most famously invoked in the Robert Johnson song “Hellhound on my Trail”). The connection between this episode and the Book of Revelation becomes only more interesting as it is explored further. The beast from the bottomless pit wreaks havoc, killing two powerful prophets. Afterwards,

For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these people had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth. (Revelation 11:7–10)

John’s vision of people gloating and celebrating over the corpses certainly would have rung true for anyone who grew up, as Wright did, under the omnipresent specter of lynching. “Big Boy” seems to allude to this passage: the mob sings, “We’ll hang ever nigger t our apple tree . . . ” (55). “LES GIT SOURVINEERS,” one member yells, clearly invoking the act of mutilation that was part of the lynching ritual, but also echoing the Scriptural exchange of gifts (56); they playfully argue over who gets to place the noose around his neck and about the proper amount of gasoline needed to douse him.

Big Boy’s observation of Bobo’s lynching is dramatically and terribly incomplete. He never sees Bobo’s body, and through the smoke, he can only partially see the mob. He—and thus, the reader—is removed somewhat but is still witness to the scene:

He smelt the scent of tar, faint at first, then stronger. The wind brought it full into his face, then blew it away. His eyes burned and he rubbed them with his knuckles. He sneezed. . . . Big Boy slid back into the hole,
his face buried in clay. He had no feelings now, no fears. He was numb, empty, as though all blood had been drawn from him. (57)

In the wake of this terrible moment, Big Boy no longer fears for his own safety. Instead, he is left dulled by an almost nihilistic inability to react or to make sense of what has transpired. And, indeed, this is the true terroristic function of lynching: not to punish a particular offender, but to terrorize all black people until they accept the subhuman condition required by the white regime of authority.

Big Boy retreats from the scene in order to protect himself from the psychic pain such identification would necessitate. In repressing this pain, however, the threat posed by the lynching to the community—not to the victim—is realized. What Big Boy experiences as numbness amounts to the destruction of any ability to articulate the meaning of the experience and, by extension, the destruction of his ability to articulate his own sense of self. It is as if something intrinsically human—fear, horror, or just anger—has been expunged from his psyche. The lynching ritual renders the African American subject abstract and unparticular; for the mob, the victim becomes a figuration of evil, transforming him into “something that represented the complete negation of humanity, . . . an alien presence, sentient, but as completely unlike white people as a fiend, . . . a ‘counterhuman’ who could be addressed by name and yet destroyed as one would destroy all the evil that white men had ever encountered,” writes Abdul JanMohammed (166). Thus, by numbing the very human response of horror, the lynching reforms Big Boy as a subject of white power, whose existence is constrained by the possibility, if not the inevitability, that his or her life will end similarly—violently and at the hand of a white person. At that moment “death has percolated into the innermost reaches of subjectivity,” according to JanMohammed (2). This is a profound teleological disruption: this cataclysm offers neither deliverance nor justice. It is simply an End.

In the previous chapter, I examined how lynchings inform and are informed by the cosmology of white southern evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism; this relationship was a paramount concern for anti-lynching activists and writers, who sought to point out the horrific hypocrisy of ostensibly Christian people committing such brutal rituals. In Rope and Faggot, Walter White writes that “[n]o person who is familiar with the Bible-beating, acrobatic, fanatical preachers of hell-fire in the South, and who has seen the orgies of emotion created by them, can doubt for a moment that dangerous passions are released which contribute to
the emotional instability and play a part in lynching” (43). White’s thesis seems to be manifest in Faulkner’s horrific figuration of southern racial violence, Doc Hines. However, the critique of racial violence offered by *Light in August* is limited in an important way, as the consequences of racial violence are almost entirely restricted to the white community of Jefferson. The novel’s ultimate concern is *their* damnation, the indelible moral stain that is the consequence of their complicity in Christmas’s crimes and his death.

The representations of white violence against African Americans in *Uncle Tom’s Children* do far more than damn their perpetrators: they offer the possibility of making sense of black suffering, at least provisionally, by locating these horrific experiences into a coherent historical narrative. B. Eugene McCarthy contends that *Uncle Tom’s Children* is a historical document, but not in the sense of reportage or even fictionalization of historical events. Instead, Wright creates “models of past structures” that have gone unexamined and unmentioned in the historical accounts of the dominant culture (732). Conventional histories would be insufficient to accommodate the first-hand observation of friend’s mutilation and death at the hands of a lynch mob; Mann’s experience in “Down by the Riverside,” in which he survives a catastrophic flood, only to be conscripted and ultimately gunned down by the state National Guard; or Sarah’s story, in which she bears witness to her husband’s death in a murderous rampage. However, these were the realities of life under Jim Crow. As awful as these scenes might be, they are given meaning in the context of the cycle. Again, “Big Boy Leaves Home” proves to be a microcosm for this structure. Indeed, the very title suggests the possibility of gaining the mobility denied by Jim Crow. Though no one could call this a happy ending, Big Boy does in fact escape northward and, thus, realizes the hope that African Americans had long embedded in the song “This Train (Is Bound for Glory),” sung innocently by Big Boy and his friends in the story’s opening.

It is thus through a typological structure, moving from the expulsion from Paradise to the flight to deliverance, that “Big Boy Leaves Home” rescues the black subject from the existential dead-end that lynching would otherwise impose. This rhetorical move is hardly unique to *Uncle Tom’s Children*. It is accurate, very generally, to posit African American religion as inherently typological—that is to say, that its cosmology looks toward antecedents in scripture to coherently narrativize the recent past and present. According to James H. Cone, when slaves told the story of Moses and the deliverance of Israel, they “sang of a God who was involved in history—*their* history—making right what whites had made wrong. Just
as God delivered the Children of Israel from Egyptian slavery, drowning Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, he will also deliver black people from American slavery” (24). In other words, invocations of the flight of the Hebrews and prophesies of the Jubilee inserted the slave experience into a teleology otherwise denied it and reconfigured slaves’ suffering and oppression as necessary steps in a progression toward ultimate deliverance. Cone continues: “Through the blood of slavery, [slaves] transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus’ time became their time, and they encountered a new historical existence” (54). Cone limits his analysis to the traditions of slave spirituals, but this theology clearly informs the religious traditions of African Americans well after Emancipation—and to black understanding of events that fit more conventional notions of “historical.” As Albert J. Raboteau notes, “Freedmen . . . referred to Lincoln, Grant, and other Union figures as deliverers and saviors like Moses and Jesus” (102).

While evident in African American religious culture, typological thinking is hardly exclusive to it. In The Great Code, Northrop Frye contends that the “general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as ‘In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed’” (79); thus, the Old Testament provides a type, or initial model, and the New Testament provides an antitype, or “realized form,” that fulfills the initial model. He continues, in a passage worth quoting at some length:

Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time: the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future. What typology really is as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: an assumption that there is some meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which will indicate what that meaning or point is, and so become an antitype of what has happened previously. Our modern confidence in historical process, our belief that despite apparent confusion, even chaos, in human events, nevertheless those events are going somewhere and indicating something, is probably a legacy of Biblical typology: at least I can think of no other source for its tradition.

8. While, in Raboteau’s estimation, the conflation of Lincoln and Moses “seems to have been an analogy and not a literal or symbolic identification” (102), the conflation of Moses and Lincoln is also a central precept of the prophetic vision articulated by Calvin Burden in Light in August.
Certainly, the sheer scope of Frye’s attempt to systematize myth and the Bible’s foundational role in Western literature leaves his work open to criticism. However, his analysis—particularly the notion that typology is a “theory of history”—illuminates the sort of apocalyptic thought with which this project is ultimately concerned. In particular, Frye contrasts typology with causality. Typological thinking, he asserts, looks for prior models to be enacted and perfected in the future, while causal thinking seeks to explain “a mass of phenomena” by systematically reaching back into the past for “prior causes” that reveal “the real meaning of the existence of the effects” (81).

Throughout *Uncle Tom’s Children*, characters vacillate between typological and causal thinking. Hiding in the kiln prior to Bobo’s death, Big Boy attempts to work out what has led him into this circumstance, entertaining through a number of potential cause-and-effect scenarios. He wonders whether God is punishing him for speaking ill of his friend Buck’s mother; he regrets skipping class rather than doing “like Ma told im t do,” but then absolves himself of responsibility and blames the school itself (49): “He woulnt be in all this trouble now ef it wuznt for the Gawddam school!,” he tells himself (49–50). He next assigns blame to the inscrutably evil white population of his town: “Gawddam them white folks! Thas all they wuz good fer, t run a nigger lika rabbit!” (51).

The appearance of the lynch mob ends any effort to make sense of this experience. No model of causality is sufficient to account for this episode, it seems. However, the cycle provides an alternative interpretive mode in its typological structure. In Frye’s formulation and in Wright’s application, typological thinking can provide coherence and even meaning to events when the empirical logic of causality cannot. In this theory of history, one needs no evidence to believe that, even in the face of such evil, history is moving in an ordered manner in which the meaning of types are revealed by the manifestation of their antitypes (Frye 81).

In its forward gaze, then, apocalyptic thought can be generally described as typological. Apocalypse serves as the antitype of creation, answering the ontological differentiation (figuring as the fracturing of existence’s perfection via the Fall of Man) with a restoration of divine unity. Typology is thus a form of teleology, in which history is propelled forward through type and antitype. Within the literalist hermeneutic of southern evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism, this cosmology envisions an anthropomorphic, often angry God as the force directing history in a systematic, ordered progression toward an ultimate telos. When Faulkner’s Doc Hines calls the dietician at the orphanage “the Whore of Babylon” and when
McEachern refers to the prostitute Bobbie as “Jezebel,” they are not simply levying insults, but rather, deploying scriptural typology as their primary interpretive system, looking backward to previous types to explain the uncertain presences.

In these instances, typologies prove not just to be effective interpretive mechanisms, but powerful rhetorical tools. Wright cannot be placed among the faithful, but certainly he found utility in deploying these typological structures in an effort to introduce a Marxist teleology. Even in this, though, he might not have been an originator. During their initial encounters with communist ideology during the Depression—and before Wright published *Uncle Tom’s Children*—many rural black southerners relied upon a “collective memory,” according to Robin D. G. Kelley, evaluating its historical vision through the lens offered by black folkways and experience. Already, African Americans had adapted their narratives of deliverance to the realities of the post-Reconstruction South. “Hidden away in Southern black communities was a folk belief that the Yankees would return to wage another civil war in the South and complete the Reconstruction,” writes Kelley (99). The Marxist narrative of class resistance and revolution was just as easily incorporated into these stories, and rural African Americans repositioned northern Communists and even the U.S.S.R. in the place of the Union Army. Significantly, the aging organizers Kelley interviewed and the archival texts he reviewed all articulate this vision in typological terms. “For many black radicals,” Kelley writes, “the Russians were the ‘new Yankees,’ Stalin was the ‘new Lincoln,’ and the Soviet Union was a ‘new Ethiopia’ stretching forth her arms in defense of black folk” (100). Thus, the teleology of African American deliverance was shifted from the scale of conflict within national borders and from the traditional discourse of U.S. Constitutional rights and into an internationalist, Marxist paradigm.

While translation between communism’s revolutionary promise and the long-held expectation of inevitable deliverance within black culture may have been organic in some instances, *Uncle Tom’s Children* further develops this connection: first, by inserting the most terrifying experience of black life into familiar biblical types and then by revising the teleology toward which those types, by tradition, should build. Given the horrors of black life in the South, one can easily imagine a narrative of black life that ends in existential emptiness if not outright nihilism; the violent conclusions of “Down by the Riverside” and “Long Black Song” provide little reason for hope. Imagination is not necessary to access an alternative narrative of black life in which suffering is redeemed by faith alone; that is the
fate of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom in the novel to which Wright’s cycle responds. Neither option is particularly useful in the struggle to end that suffering. Just as Big Boy’s traumatic experience is imbued with some hope by the possibility of deliverance northward, so too are “Down by the Riverside” and “Long Black Song” in the larger context of the cycle. Considered from this perspective, their conclusions are not ultimate and irrevocable ends, but terrifying experiences that might awaken African Americans to the necessity of active resistance. They offer the possibility of ruptures in time and of insights that should provoke action, and when read as types of experience that build toward the ends promised in the final two stories, they contain the possibility of redemption.

Revising the Teleology:
The Possibility of Rupture, Revelation, and Rebirth

Like “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “Long Black Song,” “Down by the Riverside” offers few obvious reasons for hope on its own. The protagonist Mann shares Silas’s Jeffersonian dream of agrarian independence, as well as his fate: the dreams of wealth and patrimonial lineage are ended by the dissolutions of their families and, ultimately, their deaths at the hands of white men. Rather than fleeing the rising waters of the Mississippi, Mann chooses to remain at his home with his pregnant wife, son, and mother-in-law, hoping to gain an advantage on other farmers who might have left. This fateful decision—individually focused, capitalist in nature, evincing a faith in the yeoman fantasy—proves calamitous. Though he manages to row his family to safety in a stolen boat, his wife Lulu dies in childbirth, as does the infant. Along the way, he encounters Heartsfield, the white owner of the stolen boat; the two men exchange gunfire, and Heartsfield is killed. Mann is subsequently conscripted into the flood fight by the National Guard (echoing the real events of Greenville, Mississippi during the 1927 flood), and in a tragic twist of fate, he is sent to rescue Heartsfield’s family, who ultimately turn him in to the Guardsmen following their successful rescue. Mann attempts to escape, and when cornered, begs for help from other black people around him. No assistance comes, and he is ultimately shot dead.

The story is a tragic inverse of the Noah narrative in Genesis: Mann shepherds others to safety during the deluge, but his own life and his line of progeny is effectively ended. In this awful series of trials, Mann’s story comes also to resemble that of Job. Indeed, much like the Book of Job, each
of the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* requires the reader to wrestle with the incommensurability of suffering. In Robert Alter’s estimation, Job offers “a revelation of the contrast between the half-jaded truths of cliché and the startling, difficult truths exposed when the stylistic and conceptual shell of cliché is broken up” (66). While these truths are indeed bleak, hope emerges from the possibility of and revelation and insight. In this mode, Apocalypse still functions to negotiate uncertainty, but not the uncertain moral status of another person. Instead, it works to explain the inexplicable—that is to say, the suffering of the innocent, the faithful, and the powerless.

Several moments of “Down by the Riverside” hint at the possibility of rupture—that is, at cataclysmic breaks in history that make possible the revelation of such difficult truths. Elsewhere, I have written about the capacity of natural disasters, including the flood in “Down by the Riverside,” to expose repressed realities about both social and built structures. The possibility is made evident early in the story, at the very base of the physical manifestation of Mann’s agrarian dream. As he walks across the front room, Wright writes, “the half-rotten planks sagged under his feet. He had never realized they were that shaky” (62). Mann, like Silas, has avoided questioning the ideological foundations of his agrarian project. At multiple points in the story, Mann experiences more intensely uncanny ruptures in time: after fleeing the Heartsfield house and well out of earshot, he continues to hear “echoes” of the mother’s and son’s cries (81); when he is informed of the deaths of his wife and unborn child, a doctor tells him, “Well, boy, it’s all over” (88). Later, working his way through the flooded landscape, he watches a house floating through the street. “[I]t seemed like a living thing, spinning slowly with a long, indrawn sucking noise,” Wright writes, “its doors, its windows, its porch turning to the light and then going into the darkness” (106). Watching, Mann feels “himself suspending over a black void,” outside of space and time (108). Finally, when he returns to the Heartsfields’ home, Mann is overwhelmed by “a feeling of unreality” (114).

Perhaps the most important allusion to time in “Down by the Riverside” is also the most innocuous. In the hospital, after learning of Lulu’s death, Mann becomes aware of a ticking clock. Time is passing, but it is empty time. “It seemed that he wanted ever so much to say something, to

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do something,” writes Wright, “but he did not know what” (89). In this regard, Mann is representative of Wright’s African American subject, not simply because of the inevitably awful circumstances in which he is placed, but because he is “destitute of a theory about the structure, direction, and meaning of modern society,” and thus rendered “a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control” (“Blueprint” 45). Indeed, Mann views time spent considering his circumstance as time wasted; as he leaves the house on the stolen boat, rowing against the current, he “lower[s] his chin and determine[s] not to think,” trusting in God and his own physical strength (83). For Wright, that failure to think, to move beyond the hope of divine intervention, inevitably proves fatal.

Fascinatingly, the clock Mann hears is just the first of six similar images that appear in Uncle Tom’s Children. In each story save “Big Boy Leaves Home,” clocks appear in moments in which characters face potentially transformative decisions or are offered significant insights. In “Long Black Song,” for instance, the broken eight-day clock initiates the critical conversation about time. While Mann may refuse to recognize the meaning of time or find the possibility of revelation or change in its ruptures, other characters in Uncle Tom’s Children are moved to take action in these moments.

In the penultimate story of the cycle, “Fire and Cloud,” the chimes of clocks twice signal the gravity of decisions faced by the protagonist, Reverend Dan Taylor. Before he ultimately heeds these chimes, Taylor relies upon a fairly conventional, even conservative sense of time and history. He shares the Jeffersonian agrarian dreams held by Mann and Silas, and even romanticizes that hopefulness, as Sarah does. The “hopes of those early years” were once felt in “the plow handles trembling in his calloused hands,” and a “surge of will, clean, full, joyful” followed in the sounds of “the earth cracking and breaking open, black, rich and damp” (160). This hopefulness, however, “crumbl[es] in his hands, right before his eyes” as the county is overtaken by drought and the plantocracy refuses to end price-fixing strategies that leaves both poor whites and blacks hungry. In Taylor’s worldview, any solutions will not come from black people, who are “los in one big white fog” (157); instead, action can only be taken by “the white folks,” who “done conquered everything.” Black people might be able to convince, cajole, or even frighten white people into action, but only if God intervenes and provides some sign that will provide direction out of the fog. Absent both, Taylor is convinced of his own helplessness: “Here Ah is a man called by Gawd t preach n whut kin Ah do?” he asks (158). “Hongry folks lookin t me fer help n whut kin Ah do?”
Indeed, beseeching God to intervene is, at least initially, the only public response to the drought that Taylor seems willing to make. He offers a lengthy, apocalyptic prayer with his congregation:

“Lawd, Yuhs a rock in tha tima trouble n Yuhs a shelter in the tima storm!”

he is he is

“Lawd, Yuh said Yuhd strike down the wicked men who plagued Yo chillun!”

glory t gawd

“Yuh said Yuhd destroy this old worl n create a new Heaven n a new Earth!”

wes waitin on yuh jesus. (167)

The prayer is grounded in black religion and its millennial expectation of deliverance and salvation. Taylor does not ask for the power to act or change circumstances, but begs God to “ack in us n well obey! . . . Wes helpless at Yo feet, a-waiting fer Yo sign!” Taylor has no expectation that he or any of his congregants should act to alleviate this suffering. Instead, he falls back on a belief that God’s intervention is imminent. Thus, when one of the congregants implores him, “Please, Reveren, cant yuh do somethin?” he quietly leaves the room (169).

For Wright (as perhaps for any committed Marxist), Taylor’s choice to passively wait on God is a manifestation of the perniciously problematic consequence of religious belief; again, in his analysis, once black religion “began to ameliorate and assuage suffering and denial,” it became implicated in the oppression of its believers (“Blueprint” 39). Through the choice faced by Taylor, “Fire and Cloud” dramatizes the juxtaposition of faithful waiting and committed action. Once at his home, he must confront a divided congregation, some of whom implore him to lead, while others, including the “black Judas” Deacon Smith (161), who hopes to curry favor with the white elites; a delegation from the town’s white leadership, demanding that he take action to prevent a rumored march; and “the Reds,” a group of Communist organizers who seek his help in organizing an integrated rally. In each private meeting, he maintains the position expressed in his public prayer, equivocating as he awaits God’s guidance. Neither the town’s white leadership nor the Communists accept this: the mayor and his cronies ultimately threaten his life, and the Communists make it clear that the minister nonetheless has both the ability and respon-
sibility to act. The white organizer Hadley tells him, “Then the demonstrations going to be smashed. . . . You can stop it! You have the responsibility and the blame!” (175). Taylor, however, refuses that responsibility; he rejects any action that resembles “war” or “makes blood,” and he tells them, “Gawd knows Ah ain t blame” (176).

Crucially, this is the first moment in Uncle Tom’s Children in which a black character is not simply reacting to the awful, inevitably tragic suffering wrought by Jim Crow. Instead, Taylor is here endowed with real agency, which he initially rejects. This equivocation, couched in the terms of Christian peace and his responsibility to protect his congregation, is sharply contrasted with the impatience of his son Jimmy, who tells his father, “We jus as waal git killed fightin as t git killed doin nothin” (163). The gravity of Taylor’s circumstance is once again signaled by the appearance of a clock. As Taylor moves through the home and between the various groups, who are not necessarily aware of the presence of their rivals in the house, Taylor notes his own eight-day clock, which “boomed six times; he looked and his eyes strayed up and rested on a gleaming, brass cross” (171). This is not the empty time that Sarah experiences, but rather, an instance fraught with the sort of apocalyptic, world-changing possibility implied by the symbol of Christ’s sacrifice.

The transformative consequences of Christ’s death and resurrection are invoked in Taylor’s subsequent violent confrontation with representatives of the white power structure, who kidnap and brutally beat him. Though horrifying, this assault is not a hopeless episode of black suffering. Rather, it is the moment in the cycle in which the historical agency of the black subject is finally renewed. With each blow, something of Taylor seems to be burned away, and Wright refuses to spare the reader Taylor’s pain:

Each flick came straight on his back and left a streak of fire, a streak that merged with the last streak, making his whole back a sheet of living flame. . . .

There was a pause. Then the blows came again; the pain burned its way into his body, wave upon wave. . . . Each blow weakened him; each blow told him that soon he would give out. Warm blood seeped into his trousers, ran down his thighs. He felt he could not stand it any longer; he held his breath, his lungs swelling. Then he sagged, his back a leaping agony of fire; leaping as of itself, as though it were his but he could not control it any longer. The weight of his body rested on his arms; his head dropped to one side. (199)
As Taylor nears a total collapse, the sheriff mocks the preacher by demanding that he recite the Lord’s Prayer between blows. Taylor stumbles on the phrase “Thy will be done,” however; simply waiting on Christ’s return and the restoration of God’s kingdom on earth may be pointless in the face of this sort of terrorism.

That is not to say that Taylor’s suffering is meaningless, however. In Wright’s worldview, the full confrontation with pain and suffering is a necessary step toward resistance. From it emerge the possibilities of rupture and of revelation. And indeed, Taylor is transformed by this brutal assault—not terrified as the sheriff intends, but awakened to the necessity of direct resistance. In constructing his model of the death-bound subject, JanMohammed suggests that an antidote to the social-death of slavery and subjection, as formulated by Orlando Patterson, and the actual death to which resistance might lead is a symbolic death, a painful process that begins when the subject faces “his powerless position, the genealogical isolation, his lack of control over any aspect of his present and future life” as well as his or her own complicity in that isolation (21). Then, JanMohammed writes, “the individual must destroy or effectively overcome his own formation. In short, he will have to annihilate his old self and (re)form another one” (22). Having already survived the physical trauma of his own beating, Taylor can only survive the psychic trauma by destroying the self that was complicit in the infliction of pain—the self that, despite praying the Lord’s Prayer and dutifully waiting for God’s will to be done here on earth, has never been delivered from evil. Once he confronts the very real possibility of his death, he gains the authority to determine the direction of his life, which had been previously circumscribed by the counterclaim posed by the threat of lynching, so evident in “Big Boy Leaves Home.” Time has been ruptured, but its consequence is neither stasis nor dislocation. Instead, Taylor gains a new sense of history in which he has the agency necessary to alter its direction.

Again, the chimes of a clock mark a rupture in time. Wandering the streets and still groggy from the beating, Taylor hears “a clock striking so faintly that it seemed to be tolling in his own mind” (202); once he counts the number of strikes and determines the hour, he begins to gain his bearings and to make sense of his circumstance. Though this process begins in the conventional terms of human time and space—he ascertains the late hour, his location, and the danger posed in these combined circumstances—his effort soon moves to the plane of morality and metaphysics and into a prophetic sense of time. “Like a pillar of fire he went through the
white neighborhood,” writes Wright (204). “Some day theys gonna burn! Some day theys gonna burn in Gawd Awmightys fire!”

The image of the pillar here both recalls the fiery pain he endured during his beating and invokes the pillars of cloud and flame from the Book of Exodus. These manifestations of God’s presence led the Hebrews through the wilderness during their flight from bondage in Egypt. However, Taylor is not a figuration of Moses in this instance, being led toward deliverance, but the pillar itself, preparing to lead others. Likewise, the flames are not as benign as those in Exodus, but the all-consuming, destructive flames of apocalyptic judgment. Taylor thus beseeches God, not for a sign, but for the strength to act: “Gawd, ef yuh gimme the strength Ahll tear this ol buildin down! . . . Tear it down like Samson tore the temple down!” The notion of a minister tearing down a temple is striking, as is the revelation to Taylor that follows. Learning from Jimmy that his unexplained absence after his beating has provided Deacon Smith, with the opportunity to usurp his position at the church, the fire that “seethe[s]” from him “inside and out” becomes a “fire of shame” for his failure to act earlier (206). “Seems like Gawds done left me!” he tells his Jimmy (208).

This final sense of abandonment by his God and his congregation initiates the final steps of Taylor’s transition toward a collectivist cosmology that looks toward “the people” as the source of transcendence and deliverance, rather than an individual relationship with God, as evangelical Protestantism demands. “Its the people!” he tells his son Jimmy, “Theys the ones whut mus be real! Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us!” (210). Emboldened by this new faith, Taylor fully becomes the scriptural pillar of fire—not an agent of judgment, but a sign for others to follow. He returns to the church and shares his story with the congregants: “Ah done seen the sign. . . . Ah done felt it! Its fire! Its like the fire that burned me last night! Its sufferin! Its hell,” he tells them (218). “Gawds done sent His sign. Now its fer us to ack. . . .” The congregation erupts into song, describing the Israelites’ journey out of bondage. They have not abandoned their faith; rather, they have reconfigured its messianic eschatology to announce a demand for justice in this world. Their (re)visionary invocation of the apocalyptic imaginary, like those of the activists chronicled by Robin D. G. Kelley, fits the particular textures of African American spiritual traditions, as does Dan Taylor’s assumption of a prophetic role within a prophetic sense of time.10 By refusing to wait,

10. As Houston Baker notes, “the preacher generally identifies himself as the person
by choosing to act, they restore themselves to a meaningful relationship to history. Critically, this embrace of a collectivist eschatology does not require them to abandon their faith. Taylor seems to caution Jimmy from wholly accepting the gospel offered by “the Reds” (210), and as he takes the first steps of his march, he thinks to himself, “Gawd ain no lie!” (220). What has emerged from Dan Taylor’s experience is an entirely new cosmology, one that draws upon the revolution possibilities of both Marxism and the prophetic historical vision of African American religion.

If the original ending piece, “Fire and Cloud,” offers the possibility of resistance, then Wright’s addition of “Bright and Morning Star” adds a call for and recognition of the importance of sacrifice and even martyrdom—themes that are, of course, crucial to Christian theology. In the story, Wright makes the connections he seeks to draw between the eschatologies of Christian and Marxist thought explicit, if not more complicated, through Sue’s changing worldview or, as she refers to them, her three visions. Sue’s original vision is the faith in Christ she developed within the institution of her church; her two sons, both Communists, have at least attempted to awaken her class consciousness. The original vision, in Wright’s formulation, has clearly failed Sue and her community, helping them to cope with the trauma of their lives but nearly paralyzing them: “Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like him and suffer without a mumbling word” (224). Though her suffering is unspoken, it is still experienced, and the structures of oppression—“the white folks and their laws”—are manifest within the vision as “a cold white mountain,” a figuration of authority that perhaps recalls Moses’s reception of the Commandments on Mount Sinai (224). Sue understands her desire to actively challenge the mountain as “temptation, something to lure her from the Lord, a part of the world God had made in order that she might endure it and come through all the stronger,” and so she attempts to put it out of her mind.

The continued psychic disruption caused by the image of the mountain, however, leaves her ripe to accept an alternative. Indeed “the new and terrible” vision of class resistance offered by her sons Sug and Johnny-Boy seems a ready-made replacement for its predecessor: “The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the

chosen by God to herald a fiery end of time that will come unless his listeners repent” (51).

11. Lowe contends that the activists have encouraged her to trade in the “Bright and Morning Star” of her hymnal—that is, Christ—for another star, that of the Soviet flag (59).
meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went” (225). However, the psychic residue of the former vision lingers, and Sue guiltily finds herself singing “The Lily of the Valley” as she works: “But sometimes like tonight, while lost in the forgetfulness of work, the past and the present would become mixed for her; while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lip with their beguiling sweetness” (226).

Wright’s choice of the word “vision” to designate Sue’s view of the world has a scriptural antecedent. St. Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is couched in terms of vision, sight, and blindness, and the awakening of class consciousness clearly parallels the Christian notion of conversion. The term ‘vision’ is equally appropriate within the context of Apocalypse, as the Book of Revelation is St. John’s record of a dream vision. The writer of apocalyptic narrative casts him or herself into the role of interpreter, taking on the job of organizing the vision of signs, messages, and images into a coherent narrative (Zamora, Writing the Apocalypse 15). Interpretation is a crucial element of Wright’s vision: as he argues in Black Boy, the dogmatic teachings of the CPUSA failed to attend to the realities of black experience in the United States. Much as Kelley’s black Alabama communists took it upon themselves to create a Marxism that spoke to their lives and their culture, Sue finds agency once she actively engages the possibility of resistance and charts her own historical vision. Operating under the principles offered by party dogma, Sue attempts to challenge the authority of the sheriff, who has come to her house, seeking Johnny-Boy:

Hotly, something ached in her to make them feel the intensity of her pride and freedom; her heart groped to turn the bitter hours of her life into words of a kind that would make them feel that she had taken all they had done to her in her stride and could still take more. Her faith surged so strongly in her she was all but blinded. (240)

She “gropes” to turn her feelings into “words,” but she cannot; she believes she sees the world as it truly is, but she is blinded. This vision offered by party organizers has failed her by further obscuring the truth.

Once she has been betrayed by the Judas figure, Booker, Sue recognizes a final vision, in which she finds “focus” (253) and “the strength to live and act” (252). This third vision is initiated as Sue returns to the hymn “The Lily of the Valley”: 
Mired she was between two abandoned worlds, living but dying without the strength of the grace that either gave. The clearer she felt it, the fuller did something well up from the depths of her for release; the more urgent did she feel the need to fling into her black sky another star, another hope, one more terrible vision to give her the strength to act and live. (252)

Though Sue is emboldened by her second vision—that offered by the Communist Party—it is a limited epistemology, inadequate to represent the particularities of African American experience. Johnny-Boy “believes so hard he’s blind,” Sue thinks, and he himself claims not to see race but only class (234). Sue’s agency comes at the moment in which she recognizes that her resistance does not necessitate the complete abandonment of her culture and her community. The attempt to do so is impossible, in fact, and leaves one “mired” between the two. Instead, Sue gains agency once she begins to interpret these visions and to use them both toward a single end.

Although Wright remains our ultimate apocalyptist, Sue is the collection’s final interpreter of the signs of the times. Just as she finds a space to integrate the ideological material of both visions, Wright continues to adapt the Christian myth: Sue is at once a figuration of God, the Blessed Virgin, and Christ. In the context of the story, however, her sacrifice—after she shoots Booker—allows her to define the meaning and consequences of her own suffering and death. According to Lowe, Wright subverts the threat of the ritual violence against African Americans by locating the wounded and maimed bodies as the “generative ground for the new ‘word’ [i.e., Gospel] of Communism” (59). It is not a by-the-book communism that shapes the form of Wright’s cycle, however. Through the intertextual exchange between the secular historical vision of the Left and the sacred historical vision of the apocalyptic imaginary, Wright’s narrative renews the black subject by restoring it to a meaningful teleology. This self is made whole, at least provisionally, by redirecting it toward a telos that exists outside the reaches of the regimes of white authority.

The story, and the cycle, ends with Sue staring up at the stars above “[the doomed living and the dead that never dies” (263). The doom the living face might be a lynching yet to come, but it is just as easily and logically the course that the institutions of race and class—not fate or God—have determined for them. “Blueprint for Negro Writing” provides useful context for this final line and, specifically, for Wright’s notion of doom: “at the moment when a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering,
the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed” (“Blueprint” 41). Doom, it seems, need not have the horrific connotation which we normally ascribe to it—and which it seems to have in *Light in August*. Indeed, from the doom of Apocalypse emerges a renewed world. When Sue joins the resurrected victim of “Between the World and Me” and countless other brutalized and murdered African Americans as part of “the dead that never dies,” their deaths are to be relived by others. Their spirits, however, need not haunt the survivors. Instead, they might spur them to action and to find a meaning in their doom.

**Conclusion: Writing New Endings**

In addition to rarely considering *Uncle Tom’s Children*, the long scholarly project of reconciling Wright’s often contradictory statements, presentations, and uses of black religion often fails to account for a crucial biographical fact: for much of his childhood, Wright did not attend a conventional black congregation, but rather, his grandmother’s Seventh-day Adventist church. This transracial denomination had very few black members in Mississippi during his childhood. While his grandmother’s congregation was most certainly an African American one, affiliation with the Adventists would have isolated the young Wright from the majority of his peers and perhaps removed him from some of the spiritual sustenance of more conventional black congregations. Historian Holly Fisher specifically contrasts the social conservatism of Adventist belief with the liberation theology of African American religion (113). Though the Adventists preached racial equality, the church envisioned it as an equality before God rather than men. Thus, while the Adventist Church reached out to African Americans in the South, their Michigan-based leadership did little to encourage the integration of congregations or church leadership in the region. And, like those of many other white fundamentalist Protestant groups, the Adventist eschatology did not encourage worldly involvement or political activism, as Calvin Rock, a current African American leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church notes: “Certainty that the world would end any day or hour made serious plans for change unrealistic” (57).

12. According to Calvin Rock, the Seventh Adventist Church counted just 3,500 black members in all of North America in 1918, when Wright was ten years old (21). This membership was concentrated in urban areas of the Northeast (Bull and Lockhart 278).
Despite his frustration with its precepts, Wright’s worldview shares something important in common with the Adventist faith. According to Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, Seventh-day Adventism positions its members as separate and apart from any nation, including the United States. Furthermore, its prophetic vision imagines “America [as] the ultimate eschatological adversary.” For the early Adventists, “Not only was the world about to end, but America . . . was actually a diabolical monster bent on the destruction of the saints” (246). Their prophetic belief holds that American will be “toppled” through divine intervention (248). As Delbert W. Baker notes, early Adventist leader James White (the husband of Adventist founder and prophetess Ellen G. White) even argued in 1862 that the institution of slavery was yet another sign that the United States was doomed (130).

Despite such statements, the Adventist belief in the imminent return of Christ and its inclination against political involvement did little to facilitate the realization of this revolutionary vision—a point at which the materialist historical vision of Uncle Tom’s Children departs. Nonetheless, one cannot help but speculate how intimate experience with this specific eschatology informed Wright’s broader interpretations of other prophetic visions, including that of black religious culture. Indeed, while they might condemn the actions of the United States, black writers like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., still offered variations of the American jeremiad and called for a national, democratic renewal. If Wright’s cosmology rejects anything, then, it is not religion, as Coleman suggests, but the possibility that black people could be delivered by the political institutions of the United States of America.

Furthermore, Wright’s experience with the Adventist Church would have almost certainly have required him to take a comparative approach to the very notion of Apocalypse and even the narrative function of endings. In his youth, he likely would have had direct engagement with the unique eschatology of Seventh-day Adventism, the millennial hope of African American religion, the civil religion of the Lost Cause espoused by so many white Mississippians, the millenarian nationalism of the U.S., and the revolutionary eschatology offered by communism. Ultimately, Wright would adhere to none of these; his body of work reveals an evolution in

13. Baker cites Ellen G. White’s 1908 pronouncement that “We are not to be in haste to define the exact course to be pursued in the future regarding the relation to be maintained between white and Colored people. . . . Men may advance theories, but I assure you that it will not do for us to follow human theories” (130).
eschatological and apocalyptic thinking, moving away from the prophetic visions offered African American faiths and by communism in favor of a narrative drive toward the chaotic collapse of a modernist and existentialist end of meaning. The engagement with the southern apocalyptic imaginary in *Uncle Tom’s Children* still exists in the aesthetic of later works—in the blighted apocalyptic or even post-apocalyptic urban landscapes of later existentialist works like *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday*, in which words and actions alike seem increasingly meaningless and through which protagonists march toward their inevitable dooms. However, *Uncle Tom’s Children* fascinates, not simply because it is a step in the development of the aesthetic of later works, and not because the cosmological and ideological foundation of this aesthetic is so evident in this nascent stage. Instead, the prophetic vision of this early work is worth study because its use of those elements is so powerful and the attempt to negotiate the contradictions between them in order to create a revolutionary historical vision of black liberation is so effective. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, the Apocalypse is suddenly and violently not what the audience expects—though, like other apocalyptic visions, it remains both a cause for alarm and for rejoicing, for fearful repentance and resolute action.

Indeed, the revision of Apocalypse is perhaps the most subtly subversive move any writer can make. According to Lois Parkinson Zamora, “Apocalyptic narrative moves toward an ending that contains a particular attitude toward the goals of the narration, and toward an end that implies an ideology” (*Writing the Apocalypse* 12). While the telos toward which the apocalyptic narratives of *Uncle Tom’s Children* drive is unquestionably different from that envisioned by African American religious tradition, neither the aim nor the result of his engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary differs greatly from those of the churchgoers he depicts. Writing on the eschatology of African American music, Gilroy observes that “by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present” (36). The revision of ends is not limited to contemporary writers but rather is a crucial element of the African American apocalyptic imaginary. Gilroy describes African American millennialism as representative of a “politics of fulfillment,” which he defines as “the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that the present society has left unaccomplished” (37). This discourse provides “a medium in which demands for goals like non-racialised justice and rational organisation of the productive process can be expressed.” The same can be said for the apocalyptic imaginary.
Certainly, it allows us to revise and rewrite our endings and, thus, to direct events and experiences toward a new telos. Moreover, it is discursive space open to possibilities denied by conventional systems of meaning, as I will show in the next chapters.