

## Lunacy and the Left: Learning from Richard Wright's Lost Confessions

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“Why do you spend your time in these crazy witch hunts?” I asked them. “You claim to be fighting oppression, but you spend more of your time fighting each other than in fighting your avowed enemies.” As I spoke to them I recalled the time when my mother slapped me when I had asked her—in the far-off days of Arkansas—why my “uncle” had run away from the white people, why he had not fought back; my mother had given me a ringing slap—fear had made her do it. And I felt that it was the fear of their enemies that made Communists—unconsciously compensating for their fear—fight one another so doggedly and persistently. But I did not tell them that; they would not have understood.

—Richard Wright, *Black Boy/American Hunger*, 368

### **ONE: On the Need for Left Self-Criticism**

The marginalization of the organized anti-capitalist left within the USA has many causes, a long history, and no shortage of diagnosticians. Theories of “American Exceptionalism” seeking to account for why the United States has yet to give rise to a substantial working-class socialist movement go way back, at least to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Stalin first posed the question as such). Some accounts emphasize macro- historical circumstances external to the radical movement itself (the USA’s history of settler colonialism, the particular virulence and persistence of race and racial oppression, the pacifying super-profits of empire, the ready availability of vulnerable immigrant labor, the particular power of American individualism and consumer culture, to co-optive power of the two-party electoral system, the geographical availability of the Western ‘frontier’ as a pressure release valve for class conflict, and so on). Others offer zoomed in accounts of the political line, organizations, and particular leadership of revolutionary left tendencies themselves. Still others emphasize the enduring fact of American state power that has been integral to isolating and destroying those radical groups that posed the clearest threat to the dominant establishment, be it the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist Party on the eve of World War I (via the Espionage Act and the first Red Scare), the Communist Party after WWII, (via ‘McCarthyism’ ) or the Black Panther Party in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and urban insurrections of the late 1960s (via the FBI’s COINTELPRO).

There is of course a danger (sectarian and ahistorical) in overstating the internal causes of revolutionary socialist fragmentation and marginalization, as if the radical left has had the chance ever to make history freely and in conditions of its own choosing. (We most certainly have not.) But there is also a danger—indeed, even a failure of responsibility-- in putting all the blame on “objective conditions” or on “the enemy,” and thereby failing to acknowledge the Left’s own role in reproducing its own marginality to American life. It is thus important to reflect critically

upon rev. left organizations successes and failures alike, in context, as we seek to learn the lessons of the past.

Unfortunately, the long-standing fragmentation of radical left organization, compounded by what Louis Proyect has been aptly termed a “small business mentality” among left groups has often prevented comrades from developing local lessons and critical observations on practice into broader and shared synthesis.<sup>1</sup> The lack of sustained left institutions, and associated institutional memory, as well as the paucity of healthy inter-generational culture on the left—and in American society more generally--similarly makes it less than likely that the lessons learned get passed on and discussed widely. (Pop culture memes like the recent #OkBoomer trend, which encourages a wholesale dismissal of previous generation’s learned wisdom, don’t help matters either.)

This problem is compounded further by the fact that many of the substantial and experience-based records we have of past radical attempts come down to us in the form of memoirs that suffer either from a spirit of narrow self-promotion (personal or organizational), or else from the distortions of bitterness and resentment that often come to the fore when writers take aim at radical organizations from which they have recently split. Within this matrix of bitter tinted red farewell memoirs, we can locate such influential works of African American thought as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectuals*, and, of particular interest for the present essay, Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy/American Hunger*.

## **TWO: On the Importance of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy/American Hunger***

Arguably just the second black authored best-seller in US publication history,<sup>2</sup> Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* has lived on beyond its moment of publication, regularly assigned to students at the middle school, high school, and college level. Few works in US literature dramatize so powerfully the experience of growing up Black and male in the Jim Crow South, detail the traumatic transition of moving to the industrial North during the interwar Great Migration,<sup>3</sup> and at the same time offer us such a memorable account of how one of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Dan DiMaggio’s development and application of this critical concept, in his insightful essay, “Road Maps, Dead Ends, and the Search for Fresh Ground: How Can We Build the Socialist Movement in the 21 Century?” Published in *Cultural Logic*’s special issue on “Culture and Crisis” here: <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/clogic/article/view/191525/188637>

<sup>2</sup> The first was Wright’s previous Book of the Month selection, *Native Son* in 1940.

<sup>3</sup> We should note that the original version of Richard Wright’s autobiography (published in 1945) the “American Hunger” section did not appear at all; *Black Boy* then included \*only\* the Southern Section (included as Part One, “Southern Night” in recent versions). This gave his original readers—and many public school students since—the impression that Wright’s journey *ended* when he left the South, implying (albeit vaguely) that better things awaited him in the North. The notion of Freedom and Opportunity residing in the North of course is a familiar trope that can be traced by to the Slave Narrative of the 19th century—one that continues to this very day, even as the epidemic of police violence and mass incarceration afflicting northern states as well as southern ones contradicts this liberal commonplace. This halving of the full autobiography was requested by the Book of the Month Club as a condition of making *Black Boy*

century's most important literary and critical voices could emerge from the crucible of those conditions.<sup>4</sup>

But as well-known as *Black Boy* may be, there is still much hidden about this crucial text. Notably for instance, it is still largely unknown that Richard Wright's influential autobiography \*Black Boy\* was first conceived, written, and heavily revised under a different title altogether: "Black Confession." Two 600+ paged, typed drafts of his autobiography (plus a handwritten manuscript) bear this title.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the title "Black Confession" itself remains a powerful lens through which to re-read this long-familiar text. As published and in the drafts alike, Wright's autobiography is very much a kind of confession, discussing the shame, codes of silence, and the suppression of important if uncomfortable truths, by individuals and groups alike.<sup>6</sup> Though its title would be changed, Wright's autobiography can still be usefully read as a series of confessions, breaking the silence about often sensitive or taboo subjects—including but not limited to race. (After all the "Black" in "Black Confession" is not quite the same as the "Black" in "*Black Boy*." Whereas both phrases allude to race, the former title also introduces the specter of moral or spiritual "blackness," situating Wright's text in relationship to social prohibitions that are often entangled with race, but not reducible to it.)

But this is about much more than just a changed title. My research into the Richard Wright archival papers, held in the Beinecke Rare Books Library at Yale University, has revealed that the textual differences between the published version of *Black Boy* and the unpublished manuscripts of "Black Confession" are substantial and significant. Significant not only for scholars of Richard Wright and for historians of African American literature, I would argue, but also for critical historians of the twentieth century U.S. Left, and for a broader audience of readers and progressive or radical activists seeking to learn from the past as we shape revolutionary path forward today.

I have assembled to date a list of what I consider to be forty major, substantive—often qualitative—differences between the early manuscript and the published version. The present

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a main selection, an honor that guaranteed Wright's work a mass audience of hundreds of thousands, but nonetheless came at a cost. How great a cost has until now been largely hidden from view.

<sup>4</sup> Nor does the influence of BB stop at the school room door. Scholarly accounts we have of the life (and works) of Richard Wright rest heavily upon the foundation of his famous *Black Boy*. The biographical narrative crafted by Hazel Rowley's 2001 *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, for instance, leans heavily, at times exclusively, on the published text of *Black Boy* as its source of primary evidence for a range of events and claims. While Rowley's endnotes at times do refer to an "early draft of Black Boy," only once in a single passing note does she mention its alternate title. The effect is to emphasize the continuity rather than change between the various manuscripts.

<sup>5</sup> After that Wright worked and reworked the book under the title "American Hunger," before the Book of the Month insisted on yet another title change.

<sup>6</sup> To give just a suggestive taste: The first four lines of dialogue in BB are all versions of "Shhh" or "Shut up!" Censoring and silencing are all over this text, even as Wright continually goes out of his way to foreground embarrassing and even shameful confessions.

essay focuses on just *one* important set of edits that I have discovered in this ongoing research. Specifically I examine alterations found mainly in the second “Part” of *Black Boy*, often now published under the title: “The Horror and the Glory,” sometimes under the title, *American Hunger*.<sup>7</sup> In this “American Hunger” section of his autobiography, Wright relates an account of his experiences in Chicago (as well as a brief treatment of his time in New York) after having escaped the Jim Crow South of Natchez, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee. Like millions of other African Americans taking place in ‘The Great Migration,’ Wright was driven Northward by a combination of desperate poverty and white racist terror, leaving Memphis for Chicago in 1927. As he recounts in *Black Boy*, Wright could see no viable options for resistance to his oppressive conditions in the South, an appraisal rooted not only in the realities of lynch mob rule—this was close to three decades before the public eruption of the 1950s Civil Rights Movement—but also in his deep sense of alienation from the religious and cultural norms that bonded his family and the local black community.<sup>8</sup>

This second section of Wright’s autobiography—now regularly included in the Harper Perennial/Library of America edition of *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, which purports to have “fully restored” Wright’s “original text”—provides us with Wright’s critical account of his living conditions and working conditions as a newly arrived migrant in Chicago, including nuanced reflections on the differences in class, race, and gender relations he witnesses in a Northern industrial city compared with those in the countryside or cities of the Jim Crow South. In this “American Hunger” section Wright offers us a painful personal account of his struggle to become a serious writer, even as his daily life is hemmed in by demeaning, alienating, and exhausting labor (he holds jobs as an insurance agent, as a street sweeper, as a hospital janitor), as well as cramped and segregated city living conditions, not to mention the literally gut-gnawing hunger and the shame brought on by prolonged unemployment during the Great Depression.

Just as importantly, it is in this “American Hunger” section that we find perhaps Wright’s fullest account of his own development from a frustrated and admitted “cynic,” to a race & class-conscious revolutionary intellectual and activist. In this vein, Part Two of the autobiography treats Wright’s relationship with Communism, and with the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), the largest and most influential radical organization in the USA between the 1930s and the 1950s. Wright was an outspoken member of the CPUSA for over a decade—and

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<sup>7</sup> There were no such marked divisions between Part 1 and Part 2 in the early drafts. A version of this Chicago section of the memoir has also been published on its own under the title *American Hunger*, first appearing as such in 1977, 17 years after Wright’s untimely death in 1960, at age 52. Excerpts of Wright’s account on his Chicago years did appear during his lifetime as well, most famously in the essay “I Tried to Be A Communist” which first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1944 and was later anthologized in the influential anti-Communist volume, *The God That Failed*.

<sup>8</sup> This biographical fact, tied up in Wright’s particular family circumstances, has at times led Wright to rather infamous extrapolations about the “essential bleakness of black life in America,” (37) passages that have elicited sharp and heated rebukes from critics from the 40s down to today. See for instance, Kendi’s *Stamped from the Beginning*.

he would later become its harsh and public critic.<sup>9</sup> It is to this subset of edits in Part Two that specifically concern Wright's time in the CPUSA that I would like to draw our attention.

### THREE: Why *American Hunger* (and “Black Confession”) matters

*American Hunger* (*AH*, hereafter) is in fact one of the most substantial, explicit treatments of personal engagement with the CPUSA and the international Communist Movement ever published by a major American author in the USA, not to mention a major African American author. While there are certainly plenty of more detailed and lengthy treatments written and published by long-time U.S. Communists —such as CP leaders William Z. Foster, Harry Haywood, or famous communist political prisoner Angelo Herndon—none of these figures ever achieved popular fame or lasting critical acclaim *as writers* in the way that Wright did. Conversely, while a novel such as Ralph Ellison's magisterial (and complexly anticommunist) *Invisible Man* has achieved critical status that equals or eclipses Wright's, Ellison's book remains a \*novel\* and one that takes considerable liberties with respect to its depiction of the Communist party in particular; most obviously, Ellison refers throughout the later sections of his text not to the Party but to the “Brotherhood.”<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to find a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century text by a similarly well-respected and popular writer that deals with the issue of radicalism, Communist activism, organization, comradeship and culture as extensively and directly as does Wright's *American Hunger*.<sup>11</sup>

And let's be clear: in its published version, *AH* tends to be a pretty scathing treatment.

Famously, *BB/AH* ends with the young Richard Wright being physically accosted and violently tossed head-first out of a Chicago May Day March in 1936, by his “erstwhile comrades.” (White former comrades do the tossing, while black former comrades look on in silence, too ashamed or afraid to defend him.) It's a powerful closing scene that might stand as a synecdoche—a symbolic emblem—for the statement *AH* offers about Wright's relationship with Communism in general: despite his best efforts to join the party and to offer Communism his full talents, he ends up being forcefully rejected and ejected, forced to retreat to a more solitary path as a writer “flinging words into the dark and hoping for an echo,” as he puts it on the memoir's closing page.

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<sup>9</sup> See James Smethurst on Wright scholarship generally over-emphasizing the conflictual nature of Wright's relationship with the CP, to the minimization or exclusion of considering the formative support and influence of the organization and its milieu on Wright's work.

<sup>10</sup> See Barbara Foley's *Wrestling with the Left: the Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Duke UP, 2010) on the numerous liberties and licenses Ellison took with the historical and political record. Also see my extended review essay on Foley's book, “Invisible Tragedies, Invisible Possibilities,” published in *Cultural Logic* here: <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/clogic/article/view/191534/188646>

<sup>11</sup> The leading contemporary contender here may be Chester Himes' *Lonely Crusade* (1947), a fascinating book that deserves an extended discussion and a broader readership, but which sadly is out of print and known mainly to scholars in the field. Contenders emerging from later radical upsurges could include autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur.

Indeed, if as Barbara Foley has shown us, Ellison's *Invisible Man* forms literary "Exhibit A" of how Communism and Marxism are incompatible with humanity in general and with African American experience in particular, *American Hunger* would likely be *Exhibit B or C*. The published text of *AH*, like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, can be read as reluctantly reinforcing a familiar American ideological notion: namely that one can EITHER be an artist/intellectual/free thinker OR a committed communist/revolutionary activist; you can't be both. The early drafts, however, paint a more complicated picture.

As is often the case with historical synecdoche, however, Wright's closing account of May Day 1936 is misleading. Chronologically speaking, for starters, Wright remained deeply involved in supporting CP-led efforts well into the 1940s. To give two examples: Not only would Wright remain a prolific editor, journalist, and commentator in openly CP-identified publication such as *The Daily Worker* well into the 1940s,<sup>12</sup> but Wright also presided as opening speaker at the June 1941 American Writers Congress, the fourth national anti-fascist conference organized by a coalition led by the CP. This was *five full years after* this synecdoche would have him "tossed out" of the red progression by "erstwhile comrades".<sup>13</sup> The shifting timeframe is itself important. As Foley has shown with respect to Ralph Ellison, it appears to have been the patriotic narrowness of the CP's 1940s "Win the War" campaign that increasingly alienated Ellison and Wright from the Party politically, as they felt domestic race and class struggles being de-prioritized in the effort to confront fascism and defend Soviet socialism abroad—a project that, make no mistake, Wright also saw as important. In other words, it was not the "un-American"-ness of the radical Marxist party but rather its turn *towards* a popular "Americanism" that seems to have alienated Wright (as well as Ellison) from its ranks.<sup>14</sup> Locating Wright's falling out with the CP in the mid-1930s thus obscures the actual contradictory conjuncture of these radical black writers' disillusionment.<sup>15</sup>

But the changes and the stakes here go well beyond biographical chronology: they go to the heart of Wright's view of the radical project of the CPUSA. On many points, "Black Confession," I argue, offers a more sophisticated, likely more accurate, and certainly more relevant account of Wright's relationship to the Left than the familiar published version of *BB/AH*.

And this brings me to two general points about how the early drafts of "Black Confession" complicate our view of *Black Boy/American Hunger* as published:

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<sup>12</sup> See the recent volume *Byline: Richard Wright*, on Wright's pro-Communist Harlem journalism.

<sup>13</sup> See recent James Smethurst essay here re: the one-sided emphasis on "conflict" in accounts of Wright and the CP.

<sup>14</sup> Infamously this Popular Front turn was summarized by the Earl Browder era slogan, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism!"

<sup>15</sup> To this we could add in passing that the contemporary rev. anti-capitalist left continues to struggle with the question of how to integrate international issues and the struggle against U.S. imperialism into its domestic organizing.

First, in “Black Confession” (BC), the treatment of Communism is not nearly so scathing in the original version. “BC” is certainly still a critical treatment, but it is also very clearly a sympathetic and even at times exuberantly pro-revolutionary and pro-communist one. In stark contrast with what I would call the cynical radical individualist (and anti-Communist) perspective that for the most part characterizes the published volume, “Black Confession” expresses a *critical communist* outlook, one that continues to encourage readers to participate in the project of the revolutionary transformation, even while registering a wide range of criticisms of how that project has to date been carried out.

Second, the increased vitriol and sharpened polemical aspects that were added to the text by the time *AH* was published pass on to readers a double danger. Not only have we inherited a tendentious and in some ways historically misleading account of Wright’s relation with the 1930s CPUSA. Even more harmfully, by framing Wright’s critical reflections on his radical experiences narrowly as an attack on a caricatured CP — which appears within the text as beyond the pale of sympathetic attraction—the published version enables contemporary readers of *AH* to brush off the critical reflections and cautionary tales that Wright offers, as if they had little to no relevance for us today. But, as I seek to show below, many of these radical lessons (when cut free of their cynical framing) are relevant not just as a proverbial “nail in the coffin” for the “Stalinist” CP of the 1930s. They also are relevant for any radical Left project seeking to gain a foothold in a place like the United States—right up our movement today. By sharpening but also narrowing his criticism of what he termed “America’s first green fruit of materialistic rebellion,” (373) into what is too easily read as a polemical attack on the CPUSA, Wright ironically limited the scope and applicability of his criticisms.<sup>16</sup>

This second point will be our main focus for the present essay.

My broader contention here, is that, insofar as we accept the published version of Wright’s autobiography as the authoritative word on Richard Wright’s relationship to American Communism and the broader project of emancipatory social revolution—and most literary critics and historians of Wright *do precisely this*—we deprive ourselves of some of Wright’s most lucid and enduring insights, lessons for the Left that still can be useful for us today.

Let us turn to an example, one with eerie resonance for our own moment.

#### **FOUR: On Young and Swann**

Near the end of Chapter 18 in *BB/AH*, Wright presents an account of an absurd yet disturbing sequence of events that befell the Chicago John Reed Club during the period of his elected leadership. A Communist Party initiative of the early 1930s, John Reed Clubs were worker-writer groups, hubs of collaboration and debate that often produced “proletarian” literary and art magazines, while organizing artists around bread and butter issues, issues of craft, and

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<sup>16</sup> No doubt this editing came under pressure and encouragement of editors, and was spurred by conflicts with personal and political rivals. Reconstructing the historical process of revision is beyond the scope of the present essay. In future work, I hope to correlate the changing manuscript to Wright’s personal correspondence, journal, and other contemporary unpublished writings as a step towards developing a narrative account of how these changes may have come to be made.

broader social questions.<sup>17</sup> This episode leaves Wright, as he puts it in the published text, “a completely sober and chastened Communist” (328).

The episode involves the appearance in the Chicago John Reed Club of a fellow who introduces himself as “Comrade Young of Detroit.”<sup>18</sup> As Wright puts it, Young “told us that he was a member of the Communist party, a member of the Detroit John Reed Club, that he planned to make his home in Chicago,” adding that, “Shy of forces to execute the demands of the Communist party, we welcomed him.” Described as a “queer artist” with somewhat stammering social skills, Young nonetheless becomes a “conscientious worker” for the club, and soon asks for his name to be put on the agenda of a JRC meeting. At this point, Wright recounts:

...when his time came to speak, [Young] rose and launched into one of the most violent and bitter political attacks upon Swann, one of our best young artists, in the club’s history. We were aghast. Young accused Swann of being a traitor to the workers, an opportunist, a collaborator with the police, and an adherent of Trotsky (324).

To this Wright adds:

Naturally most of the club’s members assumed that Young, a member of the party, was voicing the ideas of the party.<sup>19</sup> Surprised and baffled, I moved that Young’s statement be referred to the executive committee for decision. Swann [the accused] rightfully protested; he declared that he had been attacked in public and would answer in public. He refuted Young’s wild charges, but the majority of the club’s members were bewildered, did not know whether to believe him or not. We all liked Swann, did not believe him guilty of any misconduct; but we did not want to offend the party (325).

Certainly, the particulars of this incident may sound antiquated to 21st century ears. For some, the idea of a Communist party itself may seem passé. Likewise, the particular charges leveled against Swann (“opportunism, collaborationism, adherence to Trotskyism”) are not the kind of charges we’re likely to hear flung about these days (with rare exceptions). Yet I would argue that Wright’s discussion of this Young-Swann incident remains of moment.

Key aspects of the tale remain all-too familiar. As Wright continues,

Three meetings were consumed in bitter debate. Between meetings we urged Young to tell us who had given him the authority to castigate Swann, and Young darkly hinted that he was acting under the orders of either the Central Committee

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<sup>17</sup> The JRCs were named for John Reed, the famous pro-communist journalist who authored an influential, sympathetic account of the Bolshevik Revolution in *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

<sup>18</sup> He is named “Comrade Lewis” in the “Black Confession” version.

<sup>19</sup> While most JRC members considered themselves pro-communist, many were not yet actual Party members.



or the Communist International. And we were naturally impressed. *Who were we to question the decisions of political bodies so highly placed?* I sympathized with Swann, but *was afraid to say a word in his behalf for fear that I, too, would be charged* (325, emphasis added).

Authority placed in “political bodies” that are considered above question; sympathy and skepticism that are silenced by fear of becoming lumped in with the accused; the power of zealotry to disrupt even it does not convince; of personal accusations to paralyze even where they are not backed up with evidence... I’m sorry to say that these are issues that continue to plague organizations of the would-be-radical left today.<sup>20</sup>

The situation at the John Reed Club deteriorates further, sapping the club’s energy, poisoning relations among group members, and leading to threats of resignation. “I was frantic,” Wright states, “I wrote to the Communist party to ask why orders had been issued to punish Swann, and a reply came that no such orders had been issued. Then what was Young up to? Who was prompting him?” (326). When Wright finally forces the matter to the attention of the local CP leadership and is granted a hearing, Young escalates his attacks further, unveiling an even longer list of vicious charges against Swann, which he then proceeds to recite aloud to the party officials. “I stared at Young,” Wright writes, “feeling that he was making a dreadful mistake, but fearing him because he had, by his own account, the sanction of high political authority.”

When an outraged Swann speaks up in the hearing to say that “If this man’s charges against me are taken seriously...I’ll resign and publicly denounce the club,” Young leaps in as if confirmed, “You see!” Young yelled. “He’s with the police!” (326). Though Young’s accusations remain totally unsubstantiated, the sheer length of the list of charges and zealotry of their presentation is enough to get the Party to take them ‘seriously,’ and, furthermore, to cast a shadow of suspicion on Swann, notwithstanding his good record of service to the Club. Indeed, even Swann’s very attempt to defend himself against what he contends are false charges now risks being read as further evidence of his guilt.

Though there is no evidence presented to warrant it, the Party leadership is persuaded by the condemnatory presentation, agreeing to formally investigate the long list of charges carefully. (Meanwhile the accused Swann is asked to abstain from public criticism of his accuser.)

Swann does not need to wait long, for soon after that, Comrade Young... *disappears*. As Wright recounts: “For a week I sought Young in vain. What had become of the man? I asked about him far and wide, but could get no word. Meanwhile the club’s members asked his

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<sup>20</sup> The sudden collapse of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) comes to mind here, a shocking shift brought about most immediately by accusations of sexual violence within the organization, and the alleged “cover up” of this misconduct by senior leadership, but that was also, by some accounts, exacerbated by confusion and disagreement over the proper interpretation of due process for both accused and accuser, all of this compounded by what appears to have been growing distrust of established leadership by newer and often younger cadre.

whereabouts and they would not believe me when I told them that I did not know.” Suspicions continue to swirl even after Young disappears. Wright grows physically ill from the stress.

Finally, someone suggests that members of the club should search some of the luggage that Young has left behind. Searching his bag, they turn up a letter with a Detroit return address. Wright sends an inquiry off immediately, and in a few days receives a reply:

“Dear Sir,

“In reply to your letters of the \_\_\_\_, we beg to inform you that Mr. Young, who was a patient of our institution and who escaped from our custody a few months ago, has been apprehended and returned to this institution for mental treatment” (327).

“I was thunderstruck,” Wright states. “Was this true? Undoubtedly it was. Then *what kind of club did we run that a lunatic could step into it and help run it?* Were we all so mad that we could not detect a madman when we saw one?” (327, emphasis added)

Compounding the matter further is Wright’s shame —shared only behind closed doors with other executive committee members—at having been wildly misled and manipulated by such a “lunatic.” Rather than come clean about the whole mess with the other members of the Club, however, “We swore ourselves to secrecy and decided to suppress the matter. We agreed that we had made a terrible mistake.” This suppressed admission, however, fails to quell further questions, suspicions, and frustration from other club members, including Swann himself, who is denied the chance to ever fully refute the damaging charges that have been made against him.<sup>21</sup>

Wright successfully moves that the charges be quietly dropped. But the damage has been done—one can only speculate as to the damage done to Swann personally—and the shameful secret, that the club and party have been led astray by an imposter escaped from a mental asylum, gets buried. As Wright concludes the chapter, “I offered Swann an apology but, as the leader of the Chicago John Reed Club, I was a completely sober and chastened Communist.”

Once again, the original title “Black Confession” resonates, as Wright shares with readers an embarrassing revelation he was unable to admit to others at the time. Repeatedly, Wright’s autobiography foregrounds how critical truths, even once gleaned by individuals, become blocked from broader circulation, suppressed for reasons psychological, cultural, and political alike. In this way Wright shows us how an understandable desire to minimize shame and embarrassment to self, club, and party, nonetheless has the effect of allowing underlying problems to fester on, damaging not only targeted individuals, but the underlying culture of comradeship and trust. Indeed, Wright’s own mistreatment by comrades at the end of *AH* can be seen as an ironic boomeranging of this Young-Swann episode. When Wright is himself targeted and tossed out of the ranks, we must recall that this culture of scapegoating and suspicion is one

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<sup>21</sup> We should recall here that at this time the Soviet Union, the sole established bastion of world socialism, was facing the rising threat of fascist aggression, Hitler hellbent on the destruction of all things Judeo-Bolshevik; thus, to be labelled a “traitor” in the Soviet Union was a serious matter indeed.

to which Wright himself has unwittingly and unhappily contributed—through his silence. He is not altogether outside of that which he criticizes.

### **FIVE: The Early Version—Small Edits Matters**

The plot of the Young-Swann episode itself can be found in a very similar form in both “Black Confession” and in the published version of *American Hunger*, but the framing differs significantly in each case. In the published version of *AH*, Wright frames this episode in ways that make it easy to write off as an account of the peculiar paranoia and lunacy of the Communist party and its unique organizational and ideological culture of accusation, suspicion, and fear. We are all welcomed to have a long laugh at “those crazy reds,” or even better, those “Stalinists.” As if an avowedly “anti-Stalinist” or non-communist, or avowedly “non-Marxist” left group need not worry about such things. But this is not the case with the early version.

Consider four small but important changes:

First, whereas in *AH* the charges that Young makes are presented through the vague but specific jargon of the CP’s paranoid assault on “Trotskyism”—Young at one point exclaims that “We need a purge!”—in the original “Black Confession” version the charges are not labelled in this way. There is no mention of Trotskyism. And rather than calling for a “purge” (a term that in the anti-communist post-war USA conjures images of “Stalinist” Russia and the Moscow Trials), Young contends merely that Young “is blackening the name of the club” and “We must redeem it.” (Interestingly, especially in conjunction with Wright’s original title, the Party’s luacy here is associated with a fear of having its name “blackened.”) Wright at one point even concedes that some of Young’s initial criticisms of Swann may be somewhat valid—in BC we get a fuller account of political and aesthetic debates taking place in the Club more generally<sup>22</sup>—but he emphasizes that the zeal of the attack is unwarranted.

This is to say, while in *AH*, the introduction of loaded (anti)Communist *\*content\** makes it easier to dismiss as a peculiarly “Stalinist” ordeal, in BC, Wright focuses on the *method* of Lewis/Young’s attacks (and the way the club and party respond to them), asking readers to confront both the way in which even a criticism that may have some merit can be undone by the disruptive and exaggerated manner in which it is expressed. At the same time, Wright highlights the way in which it can be difficult in the heat of practice to tell a fallacious claim from a legitimate one.<sup>23</sup>

Second, in “Black Confession”, Wright reflects back on this embarrassing episode not only to suggest the “madness” of those in and around the Party, but also to expose a dangerous double-vulnerability in left organization and culture. A generation before the exposure of COINTELPO’s manifold tactics for “neutralizing” the Black Panther Party and other radical

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<sup>22</sup> One particular aesthetic-political debate explored in the early drafts, but deleted from the published version, has to do with whether or not communists working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) cultural programs of the New Deal constituted a harmful “class collaborationism” or a strategic seizing of cultural space and resources for the radical movement.

<sup>23</sup> We should also note that Wright’s own comments on Stalin’s own ideas and writings, in all version of his autobiography, remain strikingly positive, particularly around the National and Colonial Question.

organizations in the late 1960s and early 70s, Wright asks us to consider the ways that left organizational culture could be taken advantage of by true enemies of the movement, including police agents bent on the disruption and destruction of the party and its allied organizations. As Wright reflects in BC—but *not* in *BB/AH* : if a mental patient could fool them in this way, couldn't agents of the state do the same thing? The point here thus becomes not only about how "crazy" those Communists ("Stalinists!") can be, but about the difficulty of defending Club and Party against \*genuine\* counter-revolutionary agents *without playing into their hands*. The dangerous paradox is that it is possible to become so concerned with "security" and "safety" that one does more damage to left culture and organization than one's feared "enemies" could do themselves. (Those who have experienced internal left group debates about "security culture" may hear the contemporary resonance.) A left group that sacrifices trust and comradely warmth on the mantle of "security," after all, is likely to become incapable of viable political work in the first place. There is thus real danger in ignoring the threats posed by genuine enemies, provocateurs, and counter-revolutionaries, and likewise real danger in inflating such dangers out of a fear of them.

Wright does not dismiss the possibility (indeed, the documented historical *reality*) of police infiltration and organizational sabotage of radical left groups, nor does he fixate on it. But he does call our attention to an ironic fact: in its understandable zeal to "take seriously" even the most unsubstantiated and shocking of allegations against its members, the Communist Party, and the movement it is trying to lead, paradoxically runs the risk of creating conditions that make its workings *more* susceptible to sabotage, whether by the state or the mere ravings of the mentally ill. After all, if a single extreme accusation, made with fervor but lacking substantiation, can compel an organization, in the name of safety and security, to engage in toxic in-fighting, time-consuming extra meetings, the censorship of members, and suspension of vital work, then such efforts to "protect" the organization and its members may quickly become counter-productive. Self-protection becomes self-destruction. In this a sense, Wright points us to the way that *the left's culture of accusation and denunciation constitutes itself a kind of lunacy*, or at the very least, an environment that makes it difficult to tell the "mad" from the sane.<sup>24</sup>

Third, and more broadly, as we have suggested above, whereas in *AH* Wright's depiction of the Club and CP leadership is overwhelmingly negative, a fact that makes the Young-Swann episode read like little more than the 'nail in the coffin' of a moribund organizational culture, in BC Wright's account of the Club and CP relations are more nuanced and often positive—if often laced with criticism, humor, and irony. To give just a couple of examples that I will discuss at greater length elsewhere: 1) Whereas in *American Hunger* Wright's mother is manifestly hostile and closed off to Communism, a fact mirrored by dismissive party members, in "Black Confession," Wright paints a picture of reciprocal interest and curiosity. And 2) whereas in *AH* Wright suggests that he is quickly, even prematurely, thrust into leadership of the John Reed Club simply because he is black—which is to say, as a result of Communist opportunism that coldly instrumentalizes Wright's blackness as a way of warding off non-Communist contenders

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<sup>24</sup> Arguably the problem in our contemporary is compounded. Lacking a durable mass party such as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century CPUSA, and fending with the new and divisive forces of Social Media, smaller, and less well-resourced groups can become easily exhausted or worse by such vexing processes.

for the position<sup>25</sup>—in BC Wright emphasizes that his promotion to leadership is based on experience and merit. He’s been working at the Club for an extended period prior to his election, and other members of the Club have been greatly impressed by his public speaking abilities and his grasp of important political and social issues, including not only “the Negro question” but also the question of political art. In short, in AH Wright is thrown into leadership by others as a result of their wanting to use his blackness; in BC Wright’s own talents enable his quick rise within the club, an accomplishment that he assumes with both pride and seriousness.<sup>26</sup>

The treatment of leadership and organizational culture around the CP-led Club in BC thus shifts the meaning of the destructive Young-Swann episode *from a confirmation to an exception*. In the published version, it signifies just one more example of ‘how crazy those Commies’ are. In the unpublished early drafts, the Young-Swann story signifies the paranoid and destructive lunacy that can tear at even sincere revolutionary and democratically accountable left organization.

This leads us to our fourth clear difference in Wright’s framing of this incident between the text of AH and BC. Whereas in the published version of AH Wright sums up the Young-Swann episode as rendering him a “sober and chastened *Communist*,” as if this lunacy was some kind of exclusively Red rite of passage, in BC Wright concludes this chapter without pointing us back to “Communism” at all, writing merely that following this experience, he became a “*thoroughly chastened young man*” (emphases added).

It might seem a small edit: Three words crossed out and replaced with two others, “Communist” substituted for “young man.” Still, in context, it’s an important change, one that narrows the lesson to be learned here in a dangerous way. Not just dangerous because it harshens Wright’s depiction of the communist movement to a degree that is historically suspect and perhaps unfairly antagonistic to his former comrades, but dangerous also because this narrowing of Wright’s human experience to some abject category of “Communist chastening” makes it too easy to imagine ourselves inoculated from the “lunatic” tendencies he presents.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, in “Black Confession,” the point comes through that Communist errors are not extrinsic to human ones; indeed, the Communists here are all too human.

In boxing off this lunacy as just a “Communist” (“Stalinist”!) thing, we run the risk of failing to see how Wright’s account contains vital and prescient cautionary lessons for the American Radical Left project more generally, perhaps even for us today.

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<sup>25</sup> As Wright points out in *BB/AH*, the Club’s political commitment to cultivating black proletarian leadership in generally makes it difficult to speak against a particular African American candidate.

<sup>26</sup> This is just one example among many.

<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding Wright’s legitimate criticisms and understandable hurt feelings: we might even broach the thought here that Wright’s bitter estrangement led him to become a kind of *Young* figure himself, levelling inflated charges against (former) comrades.

### SIX: Conclusions: Lost Lessons for combating Lunacy on the Left

Shorn of much of this compartmentalizing (sectarian) distance or deflating (cynical) disavowal, Wright's "Black Confession" makes available crucial organizational and cultural lessons for the Left that the published version of *American Hunger* would cordon off. Drawing from this Young-Swann example alone—again, one of *forty* major alterations I've tracked so far—we might venture six such lessons:

1. One does not need to be a "mad" person to enable madness; sincere revolutionaries can do it easily enough, by simply allowing their critical thinking faculties to be silenced by fear of upsetting political bodies that appear to be above questioning. Left cultures and organizations that suppress the critical questioning of the zealous and the 'absolutely certain' run the risk of having their organizational course determined by lunatics.
2. Absolute certainty in the absence of evidence may be a sign of insanity (or of infiltration). Arguments from sheer authority thus call for critical questioning. No political bodies should be above questioning.
3. Passionate and public accusation is not itself positive proof, but can have real and damaging effects, insofar as such prosecutorial passion intimidates critical challenge, and tends to impugn the loyalty or decency of those who dare to question its evidentiary basis.
4. The shame of having been made to look foolish by such madness creates a strong incentive for left organizations and individuals, who claim to represent principles of reason and justice, to bury the truth of such complicity and confusion. This then creates the new risk that the Left will continue to repeat rather than learn from its experiences with such lunacy.
5. In light of the above, there is a genuine danger that individuals such as Swann are thrown 'under the bus' and left there unjustly.
6. Procedures of due process remain crucial for protecting Left organization from such (self)destructive tendencies.

As he recounts it in both versions of his autobiography, Wright would himself soon become a target of suspicion, of rumor, of ostracism, and even physical expulsion at the hands of former comrades. By the end of *American Hunger*, as published, Wright is targeted by those who distrust his "unorthodox" reading practices, his "intellectual" manner of speech, and his stubborn adherence to views about political revolution and artistic practice that challenge dominant party positions. Wright makes his criticisms of his immediate antagonists clear—though the terms of the critique are substantially different when we move from BC to BB/AH. But, like Swann, Wright's targeting is enabled by those who are too uncritically loyal or afraid to question the authority of ruling 'political bodies,' party leadership and dominant movement culture.

Though Wright himself is never (in either version) formally charged by the Party with misconduct or counter-revolutionary activity, he shows himself in both BC and AH as being driven away from a party whose professed communist mission he still loves and seeks to serve, but whose methods he often finds counter-productive at best, self-destructive at worst.

And this brings us to a seventh, broader, lesson, one I alluded to in the epigraph to this essay. Lamenting how communists often spend more time fighting with each other than they do fighting the actual ruling class enemy, Wright reflects on the material and historical basis for the lunacy he sees at work, drawing connections to his own violent childhood under Jim Crow. “As I spoke to them,” he writes, “I recalled the time when my mother slapped me when I had asked her—in the far-off days of Arkansas—why my “uncle” had run away from the white people...fear had made her do it. And I felt that it was the fear of their enemies that made Communists—unconsciously compensating for their fear—fight one another so doggedly and persistently.” Wright here, much to his credit, reaches for a material and historical—not merely moralistic or personalized—explanation for the prevalence of self-destruction he sees at work on the Left. At the same time, the presumptive last line of this epigraph—“But I did not tell them that; they would not have understood.” -- points to an enduring tragedy (and arguably, a betrayal). Wright himself lost faith that his comrades could hear and understand the critical thoughts he had to offer; he stopped trying to communicate with those comrades, even though he saw them going astray. (To be sure, the betrayal was mutual, as many erstwhile CP comrades turned on and gave up on Richard Wright as well.)

In his closing pages of *American Hunger*, Wright reflects further on the ways that the historical traumas of American society have damaged many would-be Communists:

The blindness of their limited lives—lives truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism—made them think that I was their enemy. American life had so corrupted the consciousness that they were unable to recognize their friends when they saw them. (BB/AH 374)

Alas, Wright would not be a “friend” for long. By the end of the war he would leave and turn his ire on his “erstwhile comrades,” not only by revising “Black Confession” into “The Horror and the Glory,” snippets of which he agreed to print in the avowedly anti-communist publication *The God That Failed*, but even more harshly in his later 1953 novel *The Outsider*, where Communists are often described by Wright as if they are hardly better than the Fascists, (notwithstanding the millions of Reds who went to their deaths to defeat the Nazi war machine). Compounding the irony and tragedy here, the ‘madness’ that Wright endured led him to turn on his former comrades and his former party, at best criticizing them in an exaggerated and public manner that made it exceedingly unlikely that his various and even valid criticisms would actually receive a sympathetic hearing. At worst, Wright played into the worst tropes of anticommunist dogma—even as he remained committed to aspects of a revolutionary Marxist outlook for the rest of his life. The Party of the post-war period was thus left without a talented, critical communist voice it desperately needed. And readers ever since have been left to settle with a distorted and diminished record of Wright’s radical engagement, one that is much less useful to us today than Wright’s “Black Confession” might have been.

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