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ABSTRACT

This essay develops a reception history of the Communist Party of the USA's (CPUSA) responses to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Drawing on what Fiona Paton calls "cultural stylistics," I argue that the voices residing in *Native Son* itself participated in the broader interpretive politics surrounding the novel. Specifically, Wright's primary character, Bigger Thomas, functioned as a disruptive performance of blackness that revealed the limitations of communist orthodoxy for bringing expression to black subjectivity. I conclude by reflecting on the ways cultural stylistics poses salient ethical challenges to all of us who engage in the labor of critique.

Even before its publication in March 1940, Richard Wright's first novel, *Native Son*, bore an enormous burden of representation. The book appeared in the midst of what Brian Dolinar calls the black Cultural Front during the Great Depression. Emerging after the decline of the Harlem Renaissance, the black Cultural Front consisted of artists such as Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, and Wright who produced highly influential work and broadly identified with leftist politics and the labor movement. Wright was himself a member of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) at the time of *Native Son*'s publication, although his relationship to the party was already strained by the time the book was in print. There existed an expectation across a broad range of reading publics that *Native Son* would provide definitive artistic commentary regarding race relations in the US (see Rowley).

Following its publication, a variety of critics responded to *Native Son* with reviews that sought to deliver on these expectations. Wright biographer Michel Fabre notes that the novel's publication amid a zeitgeist forged by economic despair, racial tumult, growing labor and other leftist militancies, and concurrent anti-communist paranoia ensured that *Native Son* "would never be judged on literary merit alone" (178). Rather, writers from across the political spectrum figured Wright's novel as an activist document, or what James Baldwin ("Everybody's Protest" 584–85) pejoratively called

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a "protest novel," that, to varying degrees, functioned as a vital commentary on the fate of the nation (Fadiman 52–53) or a deeply problematic text trading in violent nihilism (Cohn 661). Among the most salient commentaries regarding *Native Son* were those that emerged from the communist left, whose members laid claim to Wright's novel even as the young, black author increasingly sought independence from CPUSA discipline. Communist critics, writing in the context of prevailing CPUSA norms regarding political art, characterized Wright's novel as a promising but deeply flawed text that failed to sufficiently speak through party discourses.

This essay advances a reception history of interpretive discourse regarding Wright's *Native Son*, engaging in what Steven Mailloux calls rhetorical hermeneutics. Agreeing with Mailloux that reception histories are best performed through rigorous contextualization, I situate communist commentaries regarding *Native Son* within the normative political aims of the CPUSA at a time when Marxists and other members of the radical left were deeply invested in mobilizing artistic production toward revolutionary ends. However, I also advance the narrative of the novel itself as a context providing valuable insights into the interpretive politics surrounding *Native Son*. Specifically, Wright's primary character, Bigger Thomas, functions as a disruptive voice within the novel as well as against communists who commented on *Native Son's* aesthetic and social relevance following its release. Bigger Thomas, as a distinctly stylized aesthetic creation, functioned dialogically in relation to the other voices that circulated on the pages of *Native Son* and those of the CPUSA's activist periodicals. Specifically, whereas the communist voices in and around *Native Son* spoke in lucid authoritative discourses that gave expression to the party's broader theoretical and political commitments, Bigger Thomas spoke in a language expressed through deeply personal frustration, resentment, and often silence. The collision of these voices within *Native Son* and, following its release, the collision of critical voices with the novel itself complicated CPUSA attempts to situate the novel's narrative within a discrete political project.

In order to clarify the ways Bigger's voice and the other voices of *Native Son* participated in the novel's reception history and resisted the discipline of interpretation, I engage in what Fiona Paton calls "cultural stylistics." Expanding upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Paton argues that critics are too often inclined to neglect the nuances of aesthetic practices in favor of radical contextualization. I agree with Paton that the choice between text and context is a false one, and that we should instead dwell within the text just as surely as the broad historical relations that contextualize it. Bakhtin ("Discourse" 264) argued that the defining characteristic of novelistic discourse is the collision of languages and voices in ways that demand reflexivity and resist closure. Thus, I imagine the context contained within *Native Son* to be as salient to its reception history as the historical context that surrounded the novel itself. By virtue of its status as a novel, *Native Son*

participated in deliberations regarding its meaning and relevance as a racial text on the eve of the Second World War, revealing the limits of communist orthodoxy for bringing form to blackness. I am ultimately arguing that we should view the voices between the covers of a novel and those public voices that comment on it as comprising a heteroglossic interpretive context. This confluence of internal textual voices and the interpretive voices that commented on *Native Son* following its release broadly constitute the rhetorical force of *Native Son*.

This essay advances in three parts. First, I describe cultural stylistics as an approach to rhetorical hermeneutics, highlighting the ways the text itself deliberates with and challenges the orthodoxies of its historical moment. Second, I attend to the ways *Native Son* participated in interpretive discourses following its release, paying special attention to its encounters with authoritative discourses from the CPUSA. Finally, I conclude with reflections on the heuristic value of approaching texts as rhetorical agents when developing reception histories, as well as the ethical implications for those of us who engage in the labor of critique.

Cultural Stylistics and Reception Histories

Critically engaging the public reception of literary texts is an invaluable resource for appreciating the ways context determines a text's role in shaping public discourse. But such approaches often subordinate the text to its external context when a more fruitful approach would reject such clean distinctions between text and context. For Mailloux, treating the interpretation of texts as a focal object resists recourse to foundationalist models of hermeneutics that presuppose transcendent notions about how one might accurately read a text. The payoff of such an approach, which Mailloux calls rhetorical hermeneutics, is a richer sense of the ways a text operates in a historical moment. He argues that "interpretation takes place in a political context and each interpretative act relates directly to the power relations … involved in that context" (50). Thus, Mailloux concludes that rhetorical scholars interested in the study of literary texts should interrogate the ways public discourses about such works shape the public sphere (see also Eberly).

Approaches such as Mailloux's evade the text. One could argue that this is precisely the point, as he is explicitly invested in analyzing the public receptions of texts and, therefore, not the interior dimensions thereof. However, we should also be mindful of the consequences of contextualizing texts at the expense of attending to their aesthetic content. The text becomes a symptom of its context rather than a somewhat (but not entirely) autonomous creative expression therein. Granting agency to the text need not result in an abandonment of contextualization, but a richer sense of what context might entail (Felski 184–85; Lane 456). Paton's approach, which she calls cultural stylistics, provides a helpful

avenue for attending to textual nuances while also honoring the salience of broader historical forces in the execution of critique. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, Paton imagines texts as dynamic domains of intermingling voices that constitute their own social world and interact with the world from which they emerge. In the Bakhtinian lexicon, discourse is always in a state of production and never arrives at normalized stasis. The utterance is without origin, but is instead a continuation of dialogue, as are the myriad other utterances with which it interacts (see Morson and Emerson 52).

I am interested in this essay in the ways novels such as *Native Son* can engage in dialogue with audiences. Because novels are inherently mobile (i.e., they circulate among audiences and communities), they interact, and therefore dialogue with, a range of people and cultures. Bakhtin writes, the "work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers" ("Forms of Time" 254). A novel does not cease speaking after the author writes her last sentence, but continues speaking as it intermingles with other voices across time and space (e.g., Bowman 116). This element of Bakhtin's work is central to Paton's cultural stylistics, for it enables her to examine the ways the author's stylistic choices, which result in the mobilization of various voices, engage in a broader sphere of deliberation regarding the text itself and its broader historical moment.

Bakhtin was deeply suspicious of authoritative discourses that relied on tautological logics that subordinated the cacophony of social life. Such suspicions led Bakhtin to speak pejoratively of rhetoric, arguing that it was inherently invested in resolution and discursive control (e.g., Haskins and Zappen 329–30; Murphy 268–73). Against rhetoric, he posited the novel as the ideal dialogic discourse. The properly dialogic novel is a hybrid of voices that allows languages to be observed from the perspectives of other languages. While Bakhtin's characterization of rhetoric should inspire critics to understand its potential dangers (Murphy 274), it need not preclude recognizing the value of his work for understanding the rhetorical character of literary texts. Rather, one of Bakhtin's chief contributions to the practice of rhetorical criticism is the recognition that myriad voices precede and follow a text's genesis, and that the text itself contains multiple voices speaking a variety of languages. The collision of voices within the novel and the novel's encounters with critical voices are fundamentally rhetorical—provided we understand rhetoric as more dialogic than Bakhtin did (e.g., Bialostosky 25; Halasek 6; Jasinski 24; Paton 173). While the text as such need not be taken off the table in the service of a more dialogic criticism, it should be understood as a participant in a broader dialogue that resides in and exceeds formal textual boundaries.

Below, I discuss the dialogic character of Wright's *Native Son* by attending to the ways the novel engaged with and, ultimately, frustrated critical interpretations from the CPUSA that sought to locate the novel squarely within party orthodoxy. By placing his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, in conversation with a range of voices on the pages of *Native Son* itself, Wright ultimately resisted the ideological discipline of interpretation through a disruptive performance of blackness.

A Cultural Stylistics of *Native Son's* Reception History

Resonating deeply with Wright's (*Black Boy*) own lived experiences, Bigger Thomas was a black teenager living in Chicago under conditions of abject poverty. After securing employment with an affluent white liberal family, the Daltons, Bigger accidentally suffocates their daughter Mary, destroys her body in a furnace, attempts to flee arrest upon discovery, murders his black girlfriend Bessie in the process, and is eventually convicted and sentenced to death for the Dalton killing. One of Wright's most provocative moves in *Native Son* is to imbue Bigger's violent acts with life-giving sustenance. Prior to accidentally killing Mary Dalton, Bigger was an anonymous young black man whose resentment toward white people and his own community left him frozen in a state of unactualized rage. Following Mary's death, Bigger feels empowered for the first time in his life, endeavoring to double down on his acts by staging Mary's kidnapping and forging a ransom note designed to implicate her communist boyfriend Jan. Even after his arrest and conviction, Bigger concludes, "He had never given himself whole-heartedly to anyone or anything, except murder" (383). *Native Son*, by many accounts, stands as an exemplary testament of black rage. Baldwin, who was highly critical of Wright's novel, nonetheless claims, "No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas in his skull" ("Many Thousands" 678). Wright himself explained that Bigger Thomas was a composite of many troubled, rebellious, and, above all, angry black men (and some white men) he encountered during his life in the Jim Crow South and industrial North. In his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright explains,

> [The] civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses. (226)

One of the many voices that sought to "hold and claim" Bigger's "allegiance and faith" was the CPUSA. For the purposes of this essay, I attend to Bigger's encounters with the fictionalized voices that represented the CPUSA and, by

proxy, the critical voices of communists following the novel's release. Through cultural stylistics of this element of the novel's reception history, I describe the ways *Native Son* resisted critical foreclosure upon the meaning of Bigger Thomas and the contours of racial politics in general.

Challenging Communist Orthodoxy

Given its close attention to racial inequality and poverty, *Native* Son certainly lends itself to a Marxist reading. Furthermore, Wright's status as a CPUSA member only enhanced the temptation to figure the novel as Marxist and transform Wright into a mouthpiece for the party. However, the young author's relationship to the CPUSA was complicated, as was the novel he wrote. Wright joined the party in the early 1930s, believing, in the words of his biographer Hazel Rowley, that "Communism was the most effective path to solidarity between workers of all races" (80). However, while Wright frequently contributed articles to the CPUSA's various newspapers (see "High Tide"; "We of the Streets"), he also argued in his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," "Yet, for the Negro writer, Marxism is but the starting point," adding, "After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live" (477). Wright always characterized himself as a black writer first and a communist second. But Wright, like many black writers, activists, and workers in the early twentieth century, saw the CPUSA as one of the best-organized groups that placed anti-racist organizing at the forefront of its efforts, as well as a theory of revolutionary agency that sought nothing less than the full liberation of humanity. Even if they did not embrace party dogma wholeheartedly, many black Americans chose to cast their lot with the communists (see Dolinar 8–9; Kelley 92–93; Mullen 21).

When Wright joined the CPUSA, it was deeply invested in orienting cultural production toward anti-capitalist political practice. The "Draft Manifesto" of the John Reed Club (JRC), a party front group consisting of communist artists and fellow travelers, stated, "We call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides" (4). Reflecting the period's social realist zeitgeist, the JRC challenged artists to produce work that reflected the period's key political struggles in explicitly partisan ways. For them, art was a superstructural expression of the class antagonisms that served as the base for social life. While Wright viewed the JRC as a promising mechanism for pursuing his artistic ambitions, he, like many other black radical artists at the time, believed his artistic calling entailed something more than the production of propaganda (Rowley).

The party was especially interested in attracting and promoting the work of black artists at this time. When Wright began affiliating with the CPUSA, the party theorized the "Negro Question" in the US as a national question. Understanding a nation as a "historically developed community of people" (Jackson 28), the CPUSA regarded black Americans as a nation within a nation. Like other struggles for national liberation, the CPUSA insisted that the emancipation of black people hinged on "self-determination." However, the self-determination of which the party spoke was not without conditions. It was, rather, premised on a faith that, when allowed to make the choice freely, black Americans would choose communism. In an internal document from the period, an unnamed author insists, "These demands of the Negro liberation movement can only be realized through the revolutionary fighting alliance of the Negro masses and the revolutionary workers under the leadership of the Communist Party against imperialism" ("Theoretical Defenders" 4). The burden was on black Americans to become sufficiently "developed" as proletarian and make the seemingly obvious choice to invest their political energies in communist orthodoxy. The legitimacy of party analysis lingered as an unquestioned warrant from which all other analysis flowed.

This lingering warrant, expressed in lucid, militant, and triumphant tones, mobilized Bigger Thomas' encounters with CPUSA discourse in *Native Son*, as well as the party's reception of the novel following its publication. Three characters figure into Bigger Thomas' encounters with the CPUSA in *Native Son*: Mary Dalton, the daughter of the affluent Dalton family whom Bigger accidentally kills; Jan, a young and idealistic communist engaged in a romantic relationship with Mary; and Boris Max, the lawyer who represents Bigger during his trial for the Dalton murder. These characters are well-intentioned white people who, in Wright's hands, were profoundly naïve to the experiences of Bigger Thomas or other black people. They speak in confident authoritative discourses of revolution and interracial solidarity that lead them to see in Bigger a story to be generalized—a black subject for them to mobilize in the interest of a revolutionary telos. The collision of these discourses with the figure of Bigger Thomas reveals the inability of party orthodoxy to give sufficient expression to black life.

Two episodes in *Native Son* illustrate Bigger's fraught encounters with party discourses. The first occurs early in the novel during Bigger's first evening as an employee at the Dalton estate. While her parents instruct Bigger to drive Mary to a college night class, she persuades him to drive her and Jan around Chicago and into the city's impoverished black neighborhoods. Both Mary and Jan speak earnestly to Bigger about racial equality and solidarity. For example, while Bigger drives along the Chicago lakeshore, Jan comments on the city's beautiful skyline and proclaims, "After the revolution it'll be ours. But we'll have to fight for it. What a world to win, Bigger! And when that day comes, things'll be different. There'll be no white and no black; there'll be no rich and no poor." Following

Jan's declaration, Wright simply explains, "Bigger said nothing. The car whirred around" (69). Jan sees his encounter with Bigger as a pedagogical opportunity to expose this poor black teenager to the lucid discourses of revolution. Wright narrates, "Bigger listened to the tone of their voices, to their strange accents, to the exuberant phrases that flowed so freely from their lips" (68). Jan's didactic speech contains a clarity that, when juxtaposed with Bigger's restrained horror, reads as profoundly rehearsed and dogmatic. Jan could have delivered precisely these lines to any young black man he encountered—indeed, one might suspect that he had done so on many other occasions. Jan and Mary also ask Bigger to disclose details of black life in Chicago, while advancing the party as the solution to the hardships he describes. Jan explains, "That's what we Communists are fighting" (74), adding, "Don't you think if we got together we could stop things like that?" (75).

Bigger remains largely silent and, in so doing, interrupts the authoritative, revolutionary Marxism that Jan voices. He offers only brief equivocal responses, for he questions Jan and Mary's motivations and feels intensely the trained paranoia associated with his black body occupying anything but subservient space with two white people. For instance, in spite of Jan's insistence that he stop doing so, Bigger repeatedly responds to his passengers' requests with deferential phrases such as "Yesssuh." The pages chronicling Bigger's evening with Jan and Mary comprise a stark contrast between their energetic platitudes and his brief responses. While Jan and Mary consider the encounter as a tiny act of rebellion in a capitalist society rotten to its core with racism, Wright's Bigger Thomas would like nothing more than to be left alone. Wright narrates, "These people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black" (69). Rather than narrating a generative dialogic moment befitting a moment of interracial solidarity, Wright offers his readers a frustrating encounter that is generative in its own respect.

If, as Bakhtin argues, the dialogic novel enables languages to collide and produce new wisdom, the lesson of this fateful evening is that the clarity of communist discourse appears oblivious, even malicious, in the face of Bigger's paranoid and bitter inner thoughts. While, earlier in the novel, Bigger complains aloud to a young black friend, with whom he shares vernacular traditions, about the privileged lives of white folks and the racialized barriers standing between him and any modicum of success (22–23), he finds no conditions for dialogue with these "exuberant" purveyors of revolution. Rather, Wright typically subordinates Bigger's vernacular speech to the author's own narration of his main character's thoughts (see Gates 106). While readers, communist and otherwise, are fully aware of Bigger's resentments, communists and other white characters in *Native Son* acquire no such insights through most of the novel. Wright juxtaposes their

confident declarations with Bigger's frustrated silence, and narrates this collision of discourses for his audience.

While Wright's rendering of this encounter between Bigger and two young communists resists an orthodox Marxist interpretation of the novel, CPUSA commentators situated the novel within the authoritative discourses thereof. For example, in a March 1940 article appearing in the Marxist magazine *New Masses*, CPUSA member Samuel Sillen praises *Native Son* for its brutal realism. He writes, "Every arrangement of a class society conspires to maim Bigger for refusing to submit without challenge. The overbearing environment which engenders his suffering mutilates the forms of his protest and aspiration" ("Richard Wright's" 24). Enlisting a precise Marxian vocabulary, Sillen argues that Wright provided a lucid description of the ways capitalist exploitation suffocated Bigger Thomas until the point of explosion. However, the novel itself suggests that communist platitudes, particularly those delivered by earnest white party members, were equally constraining and overwhelming. In a later article regarding *Native Son*, Sillen argues, "There is a revolutionary potential in Bigger, however frustrated or perverted it may be by the discriminatory order in which he lives" ("The Meaning" 26). Implicit in Sillen's commentary is the CPUSA claim vis-à-vis the "Negro Question" that party principles alone could unlock black people's "revolutionary potential." However, *Native Son* reveals a failed encounter between the discourse of revolution and Bigger's "undisciplined and unchannelized impulses." The dialogic encounter between *Native Son's* narrative and Sillen's commentary invites us to speculate whether the communist reviewer willfully evades the conspicuous linguistic impasse between Bigger and two young white communists.

To the extent that he addresses Jan's didactic naiveté early in the novel, Sillen does so in ways that allow him to situate Wright's story within the authoritative discourses of the party. Specifically, Sillen emphasizes Jan's later character development embodied in his visit to Bigger's jail cell after his arrest for the murder of Mary Dalton. Emphasizing Jan's character arc enables Sillen to reconcile Wright's story with the narrative that underwrote the party's position on the "Negro Question" at the time. Jan chooses to forgive Bigger, telling him that their experience together "taught me that it's your right to hate me … I see now that you couldn't do anything else but that; it was all you had" (267). Sillen writes, "His character, like Bigger's, emerges from the novel as a whole rather than from one scene. Both men *grow*. And in the end, both men have made a bridge over the great gulf which originally separated them" ("The Meaning" 27). Here Sillen gives expression to the party's anti-racist telos, which rests on a narrative of white party members overcoming "white chauvinism" and black workers coming to radical class consciousness. In both cases, white and black workers "grow" steadily toward political actualization through the authoritative discourses of the party (see "Theoretical Defenders"). Furthermore, Sillen advances a broader vision of art that "strives toward the resolution of conflict on progressively higher levels of

consciousness" ("The Meaning" 26). Whereas Wright ultimately leaves his protagonist alone in a death-row cell embracing his violent nature, Sillen orients his attention toward the promise embodied in the apparent resolution between a condemned black man and a white communist. He characterizes Bigger and Jan's relational arc as metonymy for the broader conditions of possibility for solidarity between white and black workers.

In many respects, Wright's characterization of Jan arriving at a more nuanced understanding of his relationship to Bigger complicates *Native Son's* status as a germinal text reflecting the doomed relationship between black people and the Marxist tradition (e.g., Robinson 293–99). During his visit to Bigger's jail cell, Jan still relies on communist platitudes that advance a facile solidarity between the young white communist and the condemned black man. For example, Jan comments, "I don't suppose you're so much worse off than the rest of us who get tangled up in this world" (268). Such a comment, delivered to a black man preparing to stand trial for the rape and murder of a white woman, resonates deeply with the party's authoritative discourses on race, which imagine racial oppression as one of many vectors of capitalist exploitation. Yes, Bigger may be heading to the execution chamber, but he is also, in Jan's analysis, one of many working-class nodes in the vast machinery of capital. But Jan also speaks in ways that express more vulnerability than earlier in the novel, telling Bigger, "I—I loved that girl you killed. I—I loved…" (267). Wright explains that Bigger is struck by Jan's change in tone, explaining, "Jan's words were strange; he had never heard such talk before. The meaning of what Jan had said was so new that he could not react to it; he simply sat, staring, wondering, afraid to look at Jan" (268). Jan's transformation from an exuberant communist to a reflexive white man complicated Bigger's own understanding of whiteness, leaving him perplexed and still unable to engage in coherent dialogue with Jan. The character of the impasse between the two men has changed and presents a new dialogic moment to readers. Sillen is correct that both men change throughout the course of the novel, but do so in dramatically different ways. Whereas Jan retains a fervent, if more nuanced, investment in communist orthodoxy, Bigger proceeds to stand trial, is sentenced to death, and comes to understand himself as a subject overdetermined by violence (see JanMohamed 77–137). These divergent paths traveled by two characters separated by language and social position, when placed in dialogic relation to Sillen's commentary, suggest that the resolution this communist reviewer and so many of his comrades sought through social realism was far more complicated than party orthodoxy would indicate.

Prominent Harlem communist Ben Davis, Jr. took more explicit issue with Wright's portrayal of CPUSA members in *Native Son* and challenged such characterizations through recourse to party discourses. While he characterized the novel as "the most powerful and important novel of 1940," Davis added, "The

fact that it projects the role of the Communist Party, even though in a confused manner and in a distorted form, gives it great political as well as literary consequence." He argued that *Native Son* "portrays the Communist Party as the main and only force having an understanding of the difficulties of the Negro people and of the relation of these difficulties to the rest of society" (4). In other words, for Davis, the measure of *Native Son's* success was its capacity to faithfully represent what he regarded as the CPUSA's central role in combatting racism in the United States. To the extent that the novel, in Davis's reading, accomplished this, it was a brilliant work of political art. For example, Davis writes, "The book is a terrific indictment of capitalist America," explaining that Wright's novel is at its strongest when it "brings relentlessly to the fore … the existence of special oppression of the Negro people as a nation" (4). When *Native Son* described black life in ways that resonated with the party's interpretive protocols, Davis was satisfied.

However, when Wright characterized the party in ways that struck Davis as problematic, the Harlem organizer was quick to correct his comrade. Davis, in his capacity as a black leader in an organization whose social-realist orientation toward artistic expression was predicated on the capacity of aesthetic creations to advance the revolutionary cause, appeared sincerely concerned that *Native Son* would threaten the legitimacy of the CPUSA in the context of a broader war for cultural hegemony. For example, Davis criticizes the "patronizing attitude" embodied in Jan and Mary's evening driving through Chicago with Bigger, claiming, "The Communist Party, in life, ruthlessly burns out such chauvinist ideas." He worries aloud that "ruling class enemies will seize upon Jan and Mary and present them as typical of all Communists and Party sympathizers" (4). Davis's critique of this portion of *Native Son* is rooted in a party discourse that is deeply convinced of CPUSA members' capacity to thoughtfully engage with difference and lead workers to communist orthodoxy. Thus, Wright's characterization of Jan and Mary as zealous and self-absorbed white evangelists for the party collides with the authoritative discourses that contextualize Davis's response to the novel.

While Sillen's and Davis' preoccupations are with the apparent accuracy of Wright's portrayals of CPUSA practices and theories of capitalism, transparent realism does not appear to be Wright's primary objective. While the forces of poverty and racism—as well as personal isolation, misogyny, and sexual frustration—loom large in the novel, Wright's story is fundamentally one of a young man seeking voice in a world that would deny it to him (see Miller 506). As Wright explained in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," no element of civil society could provide Bigger "spiritual sustenance" (226). The party shares space with patronizing affluent white liberals, a cunning prosecutor, and a devout black preacher in constituting the various authoritative discourses that fail to provide Bigger a road to salvation. Just as Bigger's dialogic encounters with these voices reveal their limits, *Native Son*'s encounter with Davis' review suggests the limitations of the party's social-realist orthodoxy for capturing and mobilizing blackness.

While *Native Son* was realist to the extent that it portrayed the perils of black poverty and isolation in visceral detail, it was not mimetic of authoritative discourses in its descriptions of black life under capitalism or communist political organizing at the time. Rather, it was suggestive of a more fundamental loneliness, expressed through colliding languages spoken by differently positioned and racialized bodies, that was not reducible to racism, poverty, or revolution. Wright's art did not necessarily exist "for its own sake," but it did not exist for the sake of the party. Thus, the dialogic encounter between *Native Son* and Davis' review reflects a fundamental disagreement about the role of art in public life.[1]

An Uncooperative Specimen

Whereas Bigger's encounters with Jan and Mary reveal the limits of white benevolence and, by implication, the CPUSA's analysis of the "Negro Question," Wright's portrayal of Bigger's attorney Max gestures toward the limits of fixing the novel's protagonist as a discrete object for analysis. Furthermore, the novel's dialogic mingling with CPUSA reviews in this regard suggests a broader critique of party orthodoxy regarding the "Negro Question."

Following Bigger's arrest for Mary's murder, Jan arranges for Boris Max, or simply Max, to represent Bigger at trial. Max is a white Jewish Communist who, in Wright's hands, functions in the tradition of the great activist attorney Clarence Darrow.[2] Max's relationship to Bigger and his defense strategy during the trial provide most of the narrative thrust during the last third of Wright's novel. Many reviewers claimed that Max's closing arguments at Bigger's trial functioned as the novel's thesis, as if Wright were speaking through the radical lawyer to situate Bigger's dire predicament within a discrete authoritative discourse (e.g., Poore 29). However, attending to the novel's dialogic character suggests otherwise. While Max undoubtedly speaks in lucid terms, employing the discourses of class warfare and anti-racist militancy, his oratory functions as another authoritative discourse that, through its encounter with Bigger's silence and agonizing frustration during the trial, seeks but fails to speak for the novel's protagonist.

From Max's first encounter with Bigger, it is clear that he seeks to use the discourse of the party to generalize his young defendant's actions to a broader emancipatory project. During a confrontation with the opportunistic state's attorney prosecuting Bigger, Max explains, "If I can make the people of this country understand why this boy acted like he did, I'll be doing more than defending him" (271). Bigger initially resents Max's interventions. Wright explains, "He hated this; if anything could be done in his behalf, he himself wanted to do it; not others. The more he saw others exerting themselves, the emptier he felt" (272). Later, as Bigger stood silently in a crowded jail cell with Max, the state's attorney, the Daltons, his mother

and siblings, as well as the family's minister, Wright discloses, "Hate and shame boiled in him against the people behind his back; he tried to think of words that would defy them, words that would let them know that he had a world and life of his own in spite of them" (275). Wright surrounds Bigger with characters representing discourses that sought to bring closure to the young character's dire situation, but Bigger rejects them all. He would not, indeed could not, be so disciplined by these authoritative discourses. Furthermore, Bigger doubted that the forces that mobilized his violence could ever find coherent expression. According to Wright, "He knew as he stood there that he could never tell why he had killed. It was not that he did not really want to tell, but the telling of it would have involved an explanation of his entire life" (285–86). While the party sought to explain Bigger's actions in terms of class warfare and the minister hoped Bigger would get right with God, Wright's Bigger understood that explaining his actions would exceed the constraints of any singular authoritative discourse.

From its inception, Max's defense of Bigger was rooted in grand political designs spoken by a white man through the authoritative discourses of the party. Bigger, in other words, was to become a political instrument in the service of party orthodoxy. In Wright's telling, Bigger's trial is a legalized lynching. The state authorities thrive on the energies of the white mobs calling for black blood to atone for the killing and alleged defiling of the young Mary Dalton. To the extent that Bessie's far more brutal murder figures into the prosecutorial narrative, it is only to further entrench the theory that Bigger is a murderous black savage who threatened the very foundations of white civil society. Max concludes that a jury trial would only seal Bigger's fate with the electric chair and instead persuades his client to enter a guilty plea and seek a life sentence. Max employs a defense strategy focusing on the grand regimes of capitalist violence that he believed produced Bigger's rage and, therefore, his murderous behavior. Even though Bigger agrees to this approach, he harbors much doubt and resentment. Says Wright, "A small hard core in him resolved never again to trust anybody or anything. Not even Jan or Max. They were all right, maybe; but whatever he thought or did from now on would have to come from him and him alone, or not at all" (315). Much like Wright, complete distrust of communists such as Jan and Max does not motivate Bigger. Indeed, Bigger concludes that they represent his best, if still slim, hope of escaping execution (331–36). However, he also understands that his actions and motives are indecipherable to anyone other than himself. No totalizing language of revolution could sufficiently explain the ways this young black man experienced the world or why he did what he did. If Max endeavored to use the discourses of the party in order to expose the ghastly skeleton of the broken world that produced Bigger Thomas, his defendant still searched in vain for a language that would help him "plant flesh upon those bones" ("Blueprint" 477).

The most striking characteristic of Max's lengthy closing argument is the relative absence of Bigger Thomas therein. To be sure, Bigger is right there in the

courtroom and Max is obviously his lawyer. However, as the idealistic attorney tells Bigger earlier in the legal process, "Well, this thing's bigger than you, son. In a certain sense every Negro in America's on trial out there today" (340). He would invoke authoritative discourses to generalize from Bigger's actions and anger to indict the system as a whole and provide commentary regarding the experiences of all black Americans. During his closing arguments, Max declares,

> The complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol. The prejudices of men have stained this symbol, like a germ stained for examination under the microscope. The unremitting hate of men has given us a psychological distance that will enable us to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism. (354)

Adopting scientific metaphors, Max posits Bigger as a specimen suitable for interrogation. While Bigger lacked the vocabulary to clearly express his motives and desires, Wright's fictional lawyer seeks to render his defendant coherent. Max seems to say, *this man, right here, provides a lucid and damning testament to the horrors of the capitalist system as theorized by the party*. Max adds later, "This boy represents but a tiny aspect of a problem whose reality sprawls over a third of this nation" (361). While Wright gives us no reason to believe Max does not wish to save Bigger's life, it is also clear that the attorney seeks to situate his client's case, indeed his very life story, into the authoritative discourses of the party. Max's continued use of racially charged terms such as *son* and *boy* when referring to Bigger is also suggestive of the attorney's failure to dialogue with his client as a full subject, but rather to treat him as an instrumentalized trope.

Wright also employs Max's oration to provide what, based on the author's narration of Bigger's frustrated inner thoughts, reads as a faithful rendering of how our protagonist regards his violent deeds. Commenting on the killing of Mary Dalton, Max explains, "It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him" (364). He later adds, "He was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live" (366). Max makes the risky, arguably idiotic, legal move of asking the judge to consider that this young, poor black man found purpose through killing, but he also insists that the court recognize that such morbid self-actualization was predicated on what society had done to Bigger Thomas. Max, therefore, acknowledges, as best he can, Bigger's response to his own crimes, while also situating that response in a distinctly Marxian theory of social determinants. Max, through Wright's written words, provides *Native Son* the kind of radical analysis many CPUSA readers so deeply desired. It is at such times in the narrative that Wright's juxtaposition of Bigger's thoughts and CPUSA discourse are not antagonistic. Such encounters constitute a collision of discourses that reveal *Native Son's* ambivalent relationship to communism—it is not a communist novel nor is it anti-communist. While Bigger's voice functions to

reveal the limits of party orthodoxy inside and outside the novel proper, it also resists the kind of closure that would come from a full disavowal of CPUSA discourse.

In spite of—possibly because of—Max's impassioned exposition on the perils of black life under capitalism, the court sentences Bigger Thomas to death. The voices that called for Bigger's lynching prevailed over Max's radical oratory (345). Months pass as Bigger sits in his cell, refusing visitors and largely numb to his grim fate. On the day of the execution, Max visits Bigger after exhausting all available options to save his life. This final encounter between a condemned man and his lawyer facilitates an act of existential freedom for Bigger and a final commentary on the inability of party discourses to contain blackness. Upon entering Bigger's cell, Max places his hand on his client's shoulder to offer comfort and asks, "Is there anything you want me to do on the outside? Any message you want to send?" (385). Bigger succinctly declines Max's offer to further instrumentalize his experience in the service of mobilizing a broader communist public. Max proceeds to opine regarding Bigger's place in the grander scheme of society, further reifying party discourses that sought to articulate black life to the inhumane structures of capitalism theorized by the CPUSA. Referring to the tall Chicago buildings outside Bigger's cell, Max declares, "The men who own those buildings are afraid. They want to keep what they own, even if it makes others suffer. In order to keep it, they push men down in the mud and tell them that they are beasts." He continues, "But men, men like you, get angry and fight to re-enter those buildings, to live again." While Max also insists that Bigger's violence "was not the way to do it," the lawyer, just as Sillen did, nonetheless figures Bigger as a potent, if distorted, embodiment of black resistance against capitalist exploitation (390). He also gestures toward interracial class solidarity when he says of the ruling class, "They rule and regulate life. They have things arranged so that they can do those things and people can't fight back. They do that to black people more than others because they say that black people are inferior. But, Bigger, they say that *all* people who work are inferior" (391). While clearly saddened by his client's impending execution, Max continues to speak in the authoritative discourse of the party regarding revolution and the "Negro Question." In the final equation, Max does not regard Bigger as an individual but as one of a legion of working people languishing under the forces of capital. Whereas Bigger seeks actualization in this moment, Max continues to rely on party discourses to bring meaning to his defendant's grim fate. In showing that Bigger cannot find closure through the language of the party or any other authoritative discourse, Wright preemptively critiques CPUSA voices who would seek to subordinate the novel to a narrow Marxist analysis.

Bigger engages Max with more vulnerability than with most white characters in the novel, but remains silent for most of his attorney's exposition, or replies with brief, often mumbled, phrases. Nonetheless, Bigger recognizes in this moment a final opportunity to speak on his own terms about all that had transpired. Still, he struggles for the words. Narrating Bigger's thoughts,

Wright explains, "He had lived outside the lives of men. Their modes of communication, their symbols and images, had been denied him" (386). In other words, Bigger existed outside of the various authoritative discourses in his orbit and had yet to find a language of his own. Indeed, it is not until Bigger ceases trying to express his thoughts through authoritative "symbols and images" that he finally manages to give them voice. Wright explains, "He stopped trying, and in the very moment he stopped, he heard himself talking with a tight throat, in tense, involuntary whispers; he was trusting the sound of his voice rather than the sense of his words to carry his meaning" (385). Whereas the authoritative discourses of the CPUSA and other voices in the novel sought to bring closure to Bigger's story by tethering it to discrete normative projects, Wright suggests that Bigger's opportunity for actualization through voice came when he surrendered to contingency.

However, Bigger quickly discovers that the lawyer who so passionately advocated for him before was no longer there, for Max no longer recognizes Bigger through the limited lens of party discourse. More than anything, Bigger Thomas craved connection at this moment, but he and Max were now worlds apart. They embodied two discourses colliding and producing no synthesis. When Bigger seeks connection, "Max turned and looked at him; it was a casual look, devoid of the deeper awareness that Bigger sought so hungrily" (386). Nonetheless, only hours away from death, Bigger was determined to have his say. He continues to struggle but manages to form words that he hoped would solidify the gulf between him and Max. Wright narrates, "Bigger saw Max back away from him with compressed lips. But he felt he had to make Max understand how he saw things now." "I didn't want to kill!" Bigger declared, adding, "But what I killed for, I *am*! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill!" Wright describes Max's elevating discomfort in the face of Bigger's truncated and visceral testimony, writing, "Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not." The idealistic lawyer begs Bigger to cease talking, but Bigger continues, "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for them." Wright continues to describe Max's reaction, explaining, "Max's eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still" (392). Max gradually gathers his belongings and leaves the cell, heading down the prison corridor after offering his condemned client one last, barely audible "goodbye." Whereas Max had sought to render Bigger intelligible at trial and during these final hours of his life through the authoritative discourses of the Party, Bigger's language of actualization through death renders the charismatic lawyer silent, shocked, and disoriented. This was not the black subject of party doctrine regarding the "Negro Question." Rather, Bigger ultimately emerged as an indecipherable subject who revealed the limits of communist discourse embodied in Max and rendered it silent. If Bigger had finally found a language he could speak, it was not one Max was prepared to hear. Bigger simply watches his last advocate on Earth leave, and

Wright provides us with his novel's final three sentences: "He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut" (393).

To the extent that any character in *Native Son* provides an explanation of Bigger's motivations as Wright narrates them, it is Max. To be sure, Max endeavors to subordinate Bigger's experiences to the authoritative discourses of the party. But, in his review of *Native Son*, Davis took issue with Max's closing argument, suggesting that it did not faithfully adhere to party doctrine. Davis claimed that a more accurate rendering of the party's legal strategies would have focused on the cultivation of mass support around Bigger's innocence, rather than a guilty plea laden with psychoanalytic logics that Davis dismissed as "mystical" (4, 6). Rather than functioning as an explicit endorsement of CPUSA discourses, Max's closing argument is a function of the collision between the language of the party and the figure of Bigger Thomas. Max attributes Bigger's actions to the forces of capital, but also describes Bigger's own existential investments in his violent deeds. Max's speech is unsatisfying to its communist audience because it subjects party discourse to the scrutiny of Bigger's lived experience, resulting in a speech that fails to adhere to a singular authoritative discourse.

But while the activist lawyer offers as sympathetic a rendering of his defendant as one might plausibly expect in a fictional trial so intensely saturated with white supremacy, our final glimpse of Max is not as a bold, heroic lawyer, but as a terrified, bumbling white man. He is barely able to conjure a coherent sentence upon hearing Bigger's final testimony in his death row cell. The notion that this young black man would embrace his status as a killer traversed the epistemological parameters of Max's discourse. While, in Wright's hands, Max was able to deliver a soaring closing argument that embodied the collision between Bigger and party discourses, Max is speechless in the presence of Bigger's actualized agency. To see Bigger for who he truly was, rather than as what Max fashioned out of authoritative discourses, was a demand that exceeded the lawyer's linguistic and epistemological boundaries.

In addition to taking issue with Max's closing argument, Davis expressed concern about the social consequences of Bigger's embrace of his own violent nature. While he recognized that Bigger Thomas enabled Wright to "show the most degrading oppression of the Negro" (4), Davis feared that Thomas's violent behavior and lack of political lucidity would reify some of the worst stereotypes of black people in the US. Noting that "the average unemployed Negro youth … does not become a rapist, a murderer, and fall into the pitfall of crime," Davis claims "the author overwrites Bigger into a symbol of the whole Negro people." He adds, "The bourbon enemies of the Negro people will try to seize upon this weakness to further their slanders against the whole Negro people despite the fact that the book as a whole says the contrary" (4). Curiously, Davis claims that Wright posits Bigger Thomas as synecdoche for the totality of black life. Wright

specifically answered this criticism by explaining that he did not intend for Thomas to represent all black people in America, or even to be reducible to blackness. The author wrote, "I made the discovery that Bigger was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere" ("How 'Bigger'" 223).

Subsequent critical engagements with *Native Son* characterize the novel's narrative arc as a move from a scientific naturalism to existentialism. In other words, what began as a sociological protest novel on race ended as a meditation on one character's quest for actualization. Such a shift in style is itself a function of the novel's dialogic character, for it emerges as the various discourses therein coalesce around the figure of Bigger and produce no lasting synthesis—protest gives way to a solitary black man smiling while he awaits execution. Thus, Wright's claim that Bigger "was not black all the time" resonated strongly with his own evolution as an artist (see Afflerbach 108–9; Goldstein 22). Furthermore, the dialogic encounter between Bigger and Max suggests that it is the communist lawyer and, by proxy, the CPUSA who seeks in the novel's protagonist a generalizable symbol of blackness. It is through a triangulation of Bigger's violent subjectivity, Max's didactic rhetoric, and the CPUSA's desire to mobilize *Native Son* in the service of party building and revolution that we recognize the limits of CPUSA discourse for explaining black life in the US. In keeping with Bakhtin's understanding of the properly dialogic novel, *Native Son* resists closure within its own narrative and in its encounters with critical voices.

For Davis, the most important role that *Native Son* could have played in the class war was to provide through Bigger or other black characters a more heroic vision of the black proletariat. He argued that Wright should have provided a broader representation of "the Negro masses." Said Davis,

> It is, of course, inevitable that where they do not see the light some of the Negroes are forced to take the path of the anti-social criminal but the overwhelming majority are responding to the changed attitude of large sections of white labor as a consequence of Communist and other progressive struggles. (4)

Earlier in the review, Davis also reflected on the proliferation of black class-consciousness and the central role of CPUSA organizing therein, claiming, "It is these courageous activities which made Wright see the light" (4). Referring to the author, his fictional creation, and "the Negro masses" in quasi-religious terms (i.e., "see the light"), Davis insisted that Wright's own success as a black author of the radical left refuted some of the novel's most problematic elements. At the review's conclusion, Davis said of Wright, "He, himself, is part of that great progressive Negro mass which is barely suggested in the book" (6). The "Negro masses" figured as Davis's and the party's preferred modality for mobilizing blackness in public life. For him, a novel such as Wright's could only succeed if it portrayed blackness in the most instrumentally political terms possible. Sillen shares Davis's concern when commenting on Max's closing arguments, writing,

"Whatever judgment legal experts may pass upon the correctness of the procedure adopted by the defense, the plea itself leans too heavily on an involved psychological approach that gives a confusing picture of the political issues in the case" ("The Meaning" 27). Indeed, Max's speech and the totality of Bigger's encounters with communist doctrine confuse the political contours of his case. For Davis and Sillen, confusion was *Native Son's* fatal flaw. The CPUSA discourses that contextualized their interpretations of Wright's novel did not permit the kind of ambivalence that mobilized the novel's narrative. Both men's reviews occurred in the context of a party deeply invested in the appropriation of black art in the service of revolutionary politics. They, along with other figures in the CPUSA, hoped that *Native Son* would be a revolutionary instrument. Wright delivered something very different.

For Wright, Bigger did not speak solely as a political subject and resisted the authoritative discourses of the party. While he was obviously a young black man conditioned by the forces of racism and poverty, Bigger did not represent all such men. Rather, he possessed individual nuances that, while certainly troubling, might require something like "an involved psychological approach" rather than a rigid Marxian hermeneutic. *Native Son* was not a story of "the Negro masses," but of an individual black subject. *Native Son's* narrative in general, and the character Bigger Thomas in particular, resists demands for political clarity and functions as a preemptive critique of a prefigured black subject. Rather than serving as an instrument for revolution, Bigger renders the language of revolution silent.

Objects Push Back

Following *Native Son's* release, some CPUSA members recommended creating a party bureau that would screen members' written work before sanctioning publication. One party member wrote Wright shortly following the novel's release, "I told the [local CPUSA] branch … that I felt your trouble was that you had not studied the Theory of Proletarian Revolution, and that this accounted for the skepticism which colors [*Native Son*]" (qtd. in Rowley 201). While Wright expressed no investment in writing a novel whose singular purpose was advancing the party line, key CPUSA figures intervened in the novel's emergent literary public to discipline its dialogic prose and subordinate it to party discipline. As Afflerbach explains, the figure of Bigger Thomas was incoherent to characters within *Native Son* and to the novel's critics—he was always already misread. For Afflerbach, this incoherence enabled the novel to function as a commentary on liberalism's contradictory investments in individual and collective justice (92). By bringing cultural stylistics to bear on the novel's reception history, I have demonstrated the ways *Native Son* also functioned as a critique of communism's authoritative discourses. Bigger's frustrated silence collided with the confident discourses of communism within *Native*

Son's diegesis and with those CPUSA voices commenting on the novel following its publication.

By attending to the ways the voices between the covers of a novel such as *Native Son* collide with voices engaging in interpretive practices following its release, we are able to generate nuanced reception histories that account for the role of the object of interpretation therein. Through their misbehavior vis-à-vis various interpretive protocols, literary and other texts are capable of resisting interpretive discipline by dialogically revealing the limits of discourses that attempt to bring coherent form to focal objects. In the case of *Native Son*, we can understand Bigger's ultimate refusal to cooperate with the authoritative discourses within the novel's narrative as something more than one character's successful quest for voice (see Miller), but also as a participant in a broader debate about the political character of blackness and the social responsibilities of art. Recognizing such resistance requires a turn toward the text in ways that complicate Mallioux's arguments about rhetorical hermeneutics. For him, critical engagement with the act of interpretation itself, rather than the stable text, is necessary if one wishes to avoid the pitfalls of foundationalist arguments regarding interpretation. I have argued that the text is a participant in the cultural context from which interpretive practices emerge and in which they participate. To turn toward the text in such a way is not to lean toward dogmatic theories of interpretation, but to do precisely the opposite. Just as surely as the critic is capable of imposing her will on the text in ways that presuppose stifling notions about proper interpretation, so too do book reviewers and other members of interpretive communities whose teleological commitments place burdensome demands on texts. By considering the ways the text itself functions as a historical agent at the level of the languages that collide therein and with critical voices, an approach to rhetorical hermeneutics informed by cultural stylistics illuminates the capacity of texts to complicate their own reception histories.

If *Native Son's* encounters with CPUSA commentary reveal the limits of communist orthodoxy in the context of black art and politics during the Great Depression, there is a broader lesson to be learned regarding political and critical practices in general. Robyn Wiegman writes, "Being made by the world we seek to change is always at odds with the disciplinary demand to make critical practice the means and measure of our capacity to do so" (85). Translated into a Bakhtinian vocabulary, Wiegman is claiming that being situated in the dialogic realm of the social renders all critical vocabularies incomplete. She argues that disciplinary formations, whether academic units or social movements, invested in the production of identity knowledges cannot keep pace with their own objects of study—critique cannot provide closure. Notions of blackness, womanhood, queerness, and other categories ultimately come to resist the critical protocols, or authoritative discourses, we develop to make sense of them (e.g., Moten 26). Thus, just as *Native Son* resisted interpretive practices that sought to render it coherent within communist discourses, those of us who

engage in the labor of critique would do well to attend to the ways our own focal objects resist our attempts to discipline them through even the most seemingly emancipatory critical languages. The practice of critique is always fallible and incomplete, requiring a radically self-reflexive orientation that invites frustration and rejects the presumption that the critical task can ever achieve closure (Goltz 388). Cultural stylistics provides one avenue for coming to terms with such fallibility and delivering on the ethics that drive Mailloux's anti-foundationalist project by remaining open to the ways objects push back.

Notes

1. This disagreement would become further pronounced following Wright's public break with the CPUSA (see "I Tried to Be a Communist").
2. Afflerbach notes that Max's relationship to communism is ambiguous (96–98). While the character's relationship to the party proper is questionable, Max nonetheless speaks in the language of a left-labor militancy that, if not explicitly aligned with the CPUSA, certainly resonates with it.

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