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South Side, World Wide: The Fusion of History and Literature in Richard Wright and James T. Farrell's Chicago

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South Side, Worldwide: The Fusion of History and Literature in Richard Wright and
James T. Farrell's Chicago

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
and
The Division of Languages & Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Introduction

You can learn a lot from a street sign in Chicago. When walking or driving near the outskirts of the city and the street signs' hard edges become rounded, when their ivy coloring becomes softer and more pastel, when a sign next to an overhead streetlight loses its cardinal directions and the four or five digit number at its bottom, then you know you are no longer in Chicago. With a letter, a number, and a fair memory of the grid system, a street sign can tell you exactly how far north, south, east, or west you are from any of the city's major street corners and landmarks. A family with longstanding ties to their neighborhood might have hanging in their house or garage a battered, taxi-yellow sign with a local street painted in black letters, a remnant of an era long passed and replaced (with precious few exceptions) by a sea of green and white.

A close observer in Chicago will notice, here and there, a smaller brown sign, perched on a lamppost just beneath the name of the street. One of them, on the corner of 53rd and Kenwood in the Hyde Park Neighborhood, reads “***HONORARY CHAKA KHAN WAY***”. Another in the near Northwest Side's Wicker Park, just off of Damen and Evergreen, stands for Nelson Algren. The history of the surrounding space is usually significant: the sign on the Northwest corner of Chicago Avenue and Leavitt in Ukrainian Village, for example, recognizes Ukrainian American Veterans. Often these signs serve to commemorate a landmark worth remembering, like the tribute to the historic Maxwell Street Market on the corner of 1200 South Halsted. Sometimes they are a humorous wink, like the side street named after a local hot dog stand, and sometimes they are somber memorials, like the stretch of East and West 71st street dedicated to Emmitt Till. For the most part, they're insignificant, and few pay any attention to them unless a new one springs up on a nearby corner. Even if they're functionless, unasked for, and at times

questionable in taste, you might get just a small sense of a tiny little part of why that space is defined the way it is.

There is no little brown sign on the corner of 58th and Prairie, where so much of the action in James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy takes place. In all likelihood, that's because that stretch of 58th Street between Indiana Avenue and Martin Luther King Drive (formerly South Parkway), where Studs Lonigan and the "58th Street Gang" spend so much of their adolescence, is now principally occupied by vacant lots and a few empty storefronts. Instead, the brown and white sign reading "Honorary James T. Farrell Way" is found just a couple blocks northwest, on the corner of 57th and Indiana. There is no little brown sign in Chicago for Richard Wright. Standing at the corner of James T. Farrell Way, it's just a twenty block walk directly north on Indiana to reach the parking lot where Richard Wright's apartment once stood. A small marker stands on the sidewalk outside the building next door, which now houses a nonprofit for homeless teens, like the brown street sign the only reminder that somebody important once called that space their own.

Even without these small acknowledgments, these two writers are written indelibly into the history of these spaces, because they themselves helped write those histories. But they did not write history in an academic sense. With some exceptions here and there, Wright and Farrell wrote fiction. Wright is best known for his 1940 novel *Native Son* and two-part memoir *Black Boy/American Hunger*. Farrell gained recognition for his *Studs Lonigan* Trilogy, published between 1932 and 1935, comprising of *Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, and *Judgment Day*. All of these are works of fiction, but the substance of this project is to show how, precisely, their works might function as a kind of history, accomplishing in a different manner the same positive functions that a history text also might.

Before detailing how I will go about this, I ask the reader to take a moment to consider one's frame of mind when reading a novel and when reading history. There is a sharp dichotomy in the connotations of a "history," as opposed to that of a novel or of "literature" in general. Though I have no scientific poll to validate this, I suspect that a popular definition might broadly place history in the realm of the "real," of people, of constructed spaces, of institutions and events that existed in our world once upon a time. The novel, meanwhile, largely concerns the "unreal;" no matter how much basis in those elements of history the people, places, and actions of a novel have, it can still ultimately be reduced to something imagined. In this framework, which other scholars have considerably broken down in other ways, history and the novel in fact seem fundamentally opposed to each other. Thinking narrowly, one might say that they are mutually exclusive.

I ask the reader to quickly rid themselves of these notions, because nothing is so cut and dry, of course. I also ask the reader to contemplate three "big picture" questions, whose answers will clarify my approach in examining Wright, Farrell, and their work. First, consider that written history, like a novel or anything else that has ever been put on paper, has a voice. When you read history, whose voice are you reading? Though the perspective of the writer is not usually taken for granted in history as it is in the case of a novelist, a historical writer and researcher is still human, after all, and may, despite all efforts to the contrary, have their own set of preconceived notions, ideas, and biases that can color their work in any number of ways.

Next, ask yourself how you consider the substance of a historical text to be conferred to a reader, next to that of a novel. Stylistic flair and creativity are usually thought to fall under the tree of fiction and the novel; an uninformed assumption might be that the novelist is an *artist*, creating something from nothing in the manner they best see fit. The historian, meanwhile, is a

scholar, and his art is in the collection of information that is then *presented* to the reader. The novelist simply *displays*. That may be a rather disingenuous conventionalization, but they are nonetheless categorizations that an untrained eye might be inclined to make. For my purposes, none of that matters much. At heart, history is, like a novel, tells a story. There are a thousand different ways to construct a narrative, but more often than not, we are fundamentally talking about the same thing. In short, person (or people) X perform action Y, resulting in consequence Z. That too is a drastic oversimplification, but it is a reduction necessary for understanding how I am considering the processes of creating historical and fictional literature in this project.

Next, I ask the reader to unpack what exactly it is that brings history into that realm of the “real.” The materials that a historian uses in an attempt to create an understanding of what comprised the reality of a particular place and time are considered to be records of that place and time created by the people occupying it. This is what gives history its weight: who can better tell us about it than the people who are there? When a historian makes an assertion, they must provide the documentary evidence leading to that assertion. As you might see, however, in the interest of creating a coherent narrative to properly explain implications of that evidence, the historian must to some extent use conjecture. But even a well-supported conjecture is still just that. This appears to be self-evident. The entire point of a history text is to use that conjecture to make a best guess at what we can never actually experience.

In light of this, I lastly propose a hypothetical. We may never truly know “history,” because all of academic history is still ultimately conjecture, even if well documented. But what if an artist, a writer of fiction with a keen eye for the world around them, writes a novel, not of a fictional place with fictional people, but of the place they live in, with representations of the people they live with? What if that hypothetical novelist is as aware of their own personal biases

as a historian might be, and attempts to write with a kind of honesty that refuses to allow explicit editorializing, so that they may only comment on that time and place's reality through the vessel of their characters and how they themselves might have experienced the world. What if the work created by that novelist contains no concrete facts, documents, or citations, but manages to encapsulate in those characters and the settings in which they are placed the dialogues, the worldviews, and the values that the real people of that time and place engaged with on a daily basis. It seems natural that from there, we might learn about what those people cared about, what their hopes, fears, and feelings were, and most importantly, how they comprehensively regarded the world that they lived in. If such a novel existed, and we were able to extrapolate such information from it, would that not tell us many of the same things we might hope to learn from a history text?

In this project I argue that those novels existed, and that Richard Wright and James T. Farrell were two individuals who wrote them. For both of them, the setting was Chicago during America's interwar period, a place and time uniquely suited for the creation of fictional literature functioning as a kind of history. The city of Chicago was and is unique in a number of ways. Its central midwestern location on the shores of Lake Michigan resulted in it becoming a hotbed of cultural and industrial migration from both the American South and East Coast. For exhibiting such tremendous size and activity, it was a young city; by the time Wright and Farrell were actively writing in the later 1920s and 30s, it had existed for hardly a century, and thanks to the Great Fire of 1871, even the oldest components of the vast majority of its urban landscape had stood for barely half of that. It has been shaped and reshaped time after time by the populations that flocked to it en masse, which by the early 20th century made it an ideal case study for the

University of Chicago's budding sociology department to theorize and create a new understanding of sociocultural dynamics in urban America.

None of this was lost on either Wright or Farrell. In my first chapter, I examine Wright's posthumously published first full novel *Lawd Today* alongside *Black Metropolis*, the magnum opus of Chicago sociologists Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake. *Lawd Today*, taking place on Abraham Lincoln's birthday in a year of the mid-1930s, follows a single day in the life of Chicago postal worker Jake Jackson as he fights with his wife, plays bridge with friends, goes to work, visits a brothel, and returns home to fight with his wife some more. Jake, like Wright, lives in Bronzeville, Chicago's geographically tiny and residentially cramped black ghetto created by a massive influx of Southern migrants combined with racist, quasi-legal housing restrictions. As such, the book's thematic substance treats primarily with the frustration, fear, and consequences of black life in Jim Crow America. Unlike Wright's later work, *Lawd Today* is rich with photographic detail, constantly making obscure cultural references, media snippets, and political overtones unique and particular to the South Side Chicago of the 1930s. By this time, Wright was well-versed in Chicago sociology, and a close reading of *Lawd Today* is contextualized by *Black Metropolis*'s transcendent blend of sociological data and theory with rich human narrative. In reading these texts side by side, I attempt to articulate how through examining the elements of *Lawd Today* that do and do not sufficiently match with *Black Metropolis* and other historical texts conception of Chicago during this time, we might achieve an equally historical understanding of what it meant to exist in that particular space.

My second chapter, like the first, is an entirely independent study, the focus moving to the Chicago constructed by Farrell in his *Studs Lonigan* trilogy. Focusing primarily on the latter two installments, I use Farrell's portrayal of Irish-American culture to further examine not only

interwar Chicago's ethnic makeup, but the historical consciousness and logic behind the behaviors and ideologies that drove many of the city's racial and ethnic relations. Reading *Studs Lonigan* alongside a number of texts concerning class, ethnicity, and identity throughout the early history of Chicago, I make an effort to show how these historical forces are intimately reflected and illustrated within Farrell's fiction. The essence of the chapter lies in understanding Farrell's account of the "spiritual poverty" afflicting the people he grew up among and wrote about. I contend that Farrell's unflattering portrayal of these people and places demonstrates processes and actions that allow a close reader to witness the city of Chicago at a series of transient, interstitial moments that show from an intensely human perspective concepts that analytical histories often have difficulty articulating.

Finally, this project's third chapter attempts to construct a comprehensive framework for the political and literary philosophies that Farrell and Wright operated under during this period. The two met in 1935 at the American Writers Congress in New York, and Farrell's surviving letters to Wright from 1935-45 (documented in Wright's archived papers at Yale University) indicate a deep dialogue between the two men regarding literature, America's racial problems, and the preeminent left wing political conversations of the time. In charting the evidence of Wright's development as a writer from the failure of *Lawd Today* to the success of *Native Son*, I find a pointed discourse on the relationship between literary form, thematic substance, and political intent. Meanwhile, Farrell's animated engagement with philosophy and literary criticism provides significant insight on how he interacted with the era's literary and political orthodoxy, interactions that shed further light on how he himself conceived of the writer's role within a greater historical context. While not quite a mentor-mentee relationship, the already-established Farrell's part in the development of Wright's literary theory within his greater political ideology

has rarely merited critical attention, and provides a fascinating context for the examination of their work accomplished in the first two chapters.

In the end, there is not necessarily a straightforward transposition of the novelist and the historian. What is gained from considering the two side by side is something that fits neatly into neither category, but might nonetheless be new and interesting. When one places all of this into the chaos that was Chicago in the early 20th century, one can understand how, as Wright himself said in the introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, in "that great iron city, that impersonal, mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke, the snowy winds, the blistering suns; there in that self-conscious city, that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating, we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have, and we were pushed and pounded by facts much too big for us." The draw of Chicago, as we will see, is manifold. Ultimately, it produced something that had never quite been seen before, and has never quite been replicated since.

Representative Mailmen: Richard Wright's *Lawd Today* and an Intimate Understanding of Segregated Chicago

“Since the middle twenties the only party of over-average height to stop off here awhile was a Mississippi Negro named Wright. And he soon abandoned his potentialities, along with his people, somewhere along Forty-seventh street... For the artist lucky enough to come up in Chicago there ought to be a warning engraved on the shinbone alley tenement which was once Wright’s home: Tough it out, Jack, tough it out.”

Nelson Algren, 1951

Introduction

When *Black Metropolis*, Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake’s magnum opus of the University of Chicago School of Sociology, was published in 1945, Chicago was the nation’s second most populous city; a messy, corrupt, multicultural mishmash of more than three and a half million people. The society *Black Metropolis* described was unlike anything else in the United States. Chicago’s black belt, born as a result of the so-called “Great Migration” of African-Americans from the South in the years during and after the Great War, was by 1934 the center of life for the vast majority of Chicago’s black population, nearly 250,000 strong. In a city scarred by riots and racial tensions among its exponentially expanding ethnic communities, it rapidly became a city unto itself, a massive residential, business, and vice district all in one, confined to just a few square blocks and boulevards. It was a world that would soon change. 1948 saw the United States Supreme Court strike down racial housing covenants as in violation of the 14th Amendment, finally opening the floodgates for city-wide housing integration. By the end of the 1950s, construction of Chicago’s superhighways, routed through the cheapest land the city could appropriate through eminent domain, fundamentally changed neighborhood structures across Drake and Cayton’s Midwest Metropolis. The life and death of Black Metropolis was brief, but its literature keeps it vividly alive in historical memory.

Richard Wright and his work are inextricable from this Chicago, and even more so from the Chicago sociological tradition that *Black Metropolis* was built upon. *Native Son* (1941) and *Black Boy/American Hunger* (1945/1977), texts intimately concerned with interwar Chicago and its sociological makeup, are far and away Wright's widely printed and read works, and are still found in academic curricula across the country. Between his relationship to the city and his relationship to the sociologists who tried to map its essence, it is unsurprising that Chicago became the focal point of some of Wright's most lasting and powerful work.

Chicago did more for Wright than provide a canvas to work upon. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright clearly enunciates the facets of sociological studies of Chicago's South Side that he feels make it work worth doing. Wright's *Native Son* is held aloft as the model of the "social protest" novel, and the way it (along with *Black Boy/American Hunger*), is thematically constructed has already been critically noted for its incorporation of sociological constructs and principles.¹ *Black Metropolis* makes an effort to "examine the social structure as though it were frozen at a moment of time" and to "describe the processes that mold Negro life as we know it today," an effort shared by Wright's approach to his early fiction. In examining the relationship between Wright's fiction and the history surrounding it, it is prudent to keep in mind and difficult to understate the profound impact sociological thinking had on his conception of his subjects. The core principles of Wright's fiction, the way that he modeled human behavior and interaction with environment, were constructed from in no small part from his own personal experiences. By his own account, however, it was only through sociology and history that he was able to formulate an understanding of how those mechanisms operated.² *Native Son* and *Black Boy/American Hunger* are his most studied works, but the inspiration that compelled Drake and

¹ Carla Capetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School" *MELUS* 12, no. 2 (1985): 30.

² Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 77.

Cayton to create a work of *science* that does not “negate the humanity of the American Negro”³ is just as strongly represented in a different work of Wright’s that would not see the light of day until after his death, a novel released under the title *Lawd Today*.

Lawd Today would not be published until 1963, but it was Wright’s first effort at a full-length novel, finished in some form by 1935.⁴ It tells the story of one day in the life of Jake Jackson, a violent, misanthropic Bronzeville resident, and like Wright both a native of Mississippi and employee in a large Chicago central post office. Outright rejected with minimal interest by a multitude of publishers,⁵ Wright shelved it in the late 30s, shifting his focus to what would become *Uncle Tom’s Children* and other works.

Despite its lack of outside acceptance, Wright himself was able to articulate even at that early time what he wanted to accomplish. *Lawd Today* would come to rest as a prototype for the basic goals of *Native Son* and much of his life’s work: “to reveal the meaning of Negro experience.”⁶ This is not, however, a study of *Lawd Today* as a prototype. It stands as an accomplishment in its own right, one that is revealing in ways that *Native Son*, despite its structural and philosophical similarities, is not. Much more so than Wright’s later work, *Lawd Today*’s design and form have more in common with the experimental styles of Joyce and Stein than the naturalistic bend of Hemingway, whose prose and technique Wright studied extensively.⁷ This is evident in *Lawd Today*’s unusually precise preoccupation with the quotidian, a tendency laid plainly bare by detailed accounts of its characters reading the newspaper, checking their mailboxes, and particular during an exhaustive account of their

³ Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & co, 1945), xviv-xx.

⁴ Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Richard Wright’s Experiment in Naturalism and Satire: *Lawd Today*” *Studies in American Fiction* 14, no. 2 (1986): 165.

⁵ Richard Wright, *Lawd Today* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), vi.

⁶ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 102.

⁷ Brian Hochman, “Ellison’s Hemingways” in *African-American Review* 42 (2008), 517.

⁸ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 176.

workday, highlighted by a thirty page sequence of nearly uninterrupted ownerless dialogue. In *Native Son* and *Black Boy/American Hunger*, Wright repeatedly creates avenues for the explication of a generally coherent and comprehensively enunciated philosophy and worldview. *Lawd Today*, meanwhile, trades conceptual clarity for an intense fixation with minutiae of the commonplace. It contains nothing like Boris Max's exhaustive courtroom sketch of *Native Son's* ideological purpose. The cumulative result produced in *Lawd Today*, a fusion of modernist stylistic experimentation with political intent, allows for an appropriately nuanced understanding of the world of "Negro life"⁹ Wright was attempting to portray.

The Caged Postal Worker

Wright later became critically recognized for the tonally harsh social realism of *Native Son*, but this style dominates his early work considerably less. In *Lawd Today*, Wright uses experimental literary technique, particularly long interjections of uninterrupted conversation and media content, in combination with historically idiosyncratic character construction to create an unconventional yet striking representation of everyday experience. A way of understanding the connection between Wright's literary form and the society he seeks to replicate is to examine Wright's treatment of Jake Jackson through the lens of his occupation as a postal worker. *Lawd Today* was written during a time when Wright was in the midst of a dedicated but complicated engagement with the Communist Party. Already preoccupied with writing about the day to day existence of the typical resident of Black Metropolis,¹⁰ the social dynamics of labor and occupation were a topic near the heart of his intellectual efforts during *Lawd Today's* genesis. Wright spent many of these years employed seasonally by the Chicago post office, the largest in

⁹ Wright, *American Hunger* 103.

¹⁰ Wright, *American Hunger*, 83.

the world,¹¹ and it was through the post office that he was first introduced to the people who would help him enter Chicago's literary and political circles.¹² Acknowledging the intimate knowledge Wright had of the inner workings of a real-life counterpart to Jake's post office, we can assign a special importance to the elements he chooses to highlight, exaggerate, and simply include in his literature.

To explore this, we go to part two of *Lawd Today*. It is entitled *Squirrel Cage*, and it is from start to finish an account of Jake's full work day (or night, rather) at the post office's late shift. Part two generally details the dull work processes of Jake and his friends, until a dramatic narrative shift in its fourth and final chapter. If the "squirrel cage" itself is the post office in which the protagonists labor, this last chapter of the section is where Wright's language and pace reflect the metaphor. By this time, Jake Jackson and his coworker companions, Bob Madison, Al Johnson, and Nathan "Slim" Williams are in the final phase of their workday. It is the one that allows them the greatest freedom of uninterrupted conversation of nearly any other place or space in the novel. Before diving into an extended sequence of rapid dialogue, we are given a brief introduction to the conventions of this part of their day.

"They stacked batches of mail carefully on the table, pressed them together firmly, and carried them slowly to gurneys. When they grew tired like this, when most of their workaday preoccupations had been drowned in exhaustion, their basic moods would blend and fuse. They had worked in this manner for so many years that they took one another for granted; their common feelings were a common knowledge. And when they talked it was more like thinking aloud than speaking for purposes of communication. Clusters of emotion, dim accretions of instinct and tradition rose to the surface of their consciousness like dead bodies floating swollen upon a night sea."¹³

¹¹ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Holt & Co, 2001), 60.

¹²Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 79.

¹³ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 158.

This passage is brief but ultimately key in revealing the significance of the four friends' subsequent conversation with respect to the world Wright is attempting to reflect. He certainly captures it in a literal sense. By the time what became *Lawd Today* was completed, Wright had lived in Chicago for the better part of a decade. He was an equal authority on the post office and the territory of the employees *Lawd Today* follows. The day to day operations of the post office and the menial chores that Jake, Al, Bob, and Slim drift through are almost mimetically reflective of what Wright saw during his own period of post office employment, and he can be considered an equal authority on the states of mind present in many post office laborers. The mail-sorting that constitutes the bulk of Jake's day was a very real process, as was the physical and mental exhaustion accompanying it.¹⁴ What Wright describes of that state of mind is what is of importance to understanding Bronzeville and its people.

In the novel, of course, the actual labor at hand is secondary to what comes out of that labor's dull repetitiousness. It is worth asking what Wright is trying to do by precluding thirty pages of snappy dialogue with the above passage. It stands to reason that he is signifying something about the nature of the conversation that succeeds it. The way their activity and type of conversation is described, "common feelings" and "common knowledge" and "dim accretions of instinct and tradition," strike the impression of their thoughts and ideas synthesizing into a kind of collective consciousness. What we are about to witness, Wright seems to be saying, is a snapshot of what a group of Bronzeville postal workers might say or think of any particular element of their everyday reality.

We must still ask what is it about making these characters postal workers that makes their conversation more relevant to Wright and the world he speaks to than if the scene were

¹⁴ Philip Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 30.

transposed to a floor in the stockyards. For this, is it useful to turn to *Black Metropolis*, an easy and contemporary reference for probing Jake Jackson's world. Drake and Cayton in breaking down their hierarchy of positional prestige in the Bronzeville labor market take the time to place the socioeconomic situation of the postal worker even more precisely. They note the high level of education often found in post office employees, and demarcate for them a space "ranking lower socially than professionals and businessmen, but of definitely high status."¹⁵ Within their broader social hierarchy of Bronzeville during this period, Drake and Cayton afford the postal worker a position of considerable respect, a respect rooted in the post-Civil War integration effort. After the war, the post office was the first bureau of the federal government to which black Americans were admitted, and not without resistance.¹⁶ While not sentimentally romantic or glamorous, work in the post office (with its guarantee of full-time, year-round employment) remained for years one of the standard bearers of "making it" in white dominated America.

Particularly during the Great Depression, an African-American in Chicago could not hope for much better than a post office job. Jake's position in the post office entails a yearly salary of \$2100,¹⁷ a figure which would have put him in the 82nd percentile of *all* Chicago earners for the year 1935 (the year Wright completed *Lawd Today*), and the 96th earning percentile for black Chicagoans.¹⁸ Jake and his cohort are characters that easily fall within the very upper levels of Bronzeville's socially nebulous middle class. The ability of the middle class to meander between the borders of the social strata above and below allows for the flexibility to comment germanely on issues (social, cultural, economic, or otherwise) broadly applicable across the social spectrum. Throughout Chapter IV, Jake, Al, Bob, and Slim exhibit this

¹⁵ Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 510.

¹⁶ Rubio, *Always Work at the Post Office*, 20.

¹⁷ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 124.

¹⁸ Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 513

variability to its full extent. Wright's decision to use the postal worker as a focal point of his narrative can itself be viewed as a hint at the complexity of the experience he was attempting to document. His own experience in the Chicago post office was, for the time, a true exercise in diversity. In addition to the black employees that would serve as the basis for *Lawd Today*, Wright came into contact with a number of different social types. The post office was frequently a part-time haven for University students working their way through school, and multiple biographers note Wright's budding friendships with particular Irish and Jewish coworkers.¹⁹ In a highly segregated Chicago that by 1940 had nearly two thirds of its African American population living in communities that were African American by a proportion of 90% or greater,²⁰ this perspective would have been highly useful for a young migrant hell-bent on achieving a more complete understanding of the world around him.

Contradictory Characters

In that light, we can interpret the postal clerks' discourse as a cross section of Bronzeville life. *Black Metropolis* is acclaimed for its honest and human portrayal of its subjects in juxtaposition with their data and generalities, particularly since those generalities are derived from records of thousands of interactions between researchers and the Bronzeville community. *Lawd Today* contains no science or statistics, but in it Wright attempts to fully portray the individual human elements that can either justify or confound sociological assertions. The characters' atypical traits may be indicative of the ordinary logical discrepancies of life that often go unaccounted in macrohistory. Focus on an ordinary individual does not often play a part in constructing a comprehensive picture of a society, but in doing so Wright makes a statement

¹⁹ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 61. Also see Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 79.

²⁰ Lionel Kimble Jr, *A New Deal for Bronzeville: Housing, Employment, & Civil Rights in Black Chicago, 1935-1955* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 15.

about his society nonetheless. Wright's construction of his protagonists' lives goes for the most part strongly against the broader grain of their social status according to Drake and Cayton's behavioral archetypes.

Drake and Cayton note the positive occupation and economic connotations of a post office job because it was associated with a type of person who generally maintains "respectable" habits and relationships. As a government institution, the post office salary is consistent, and its workers are held to a higher standard of behavior.²¹ Jake and his friends, however, habitually act in a pattern exactly consistent with what Bronzeville's upper social strata consider to be "lower class behavior."²² Throughout the one day in the life of Jake Jackson captured by *Lawd Today*, when he is not in the workplace, he is as often as not found at a policy station, alcohol den, or brothel, some of the "primary institutions" of Bronzeville's underworld.²³ Given that Bronzeville's vice district constituted a huge physical section of the community relative to its already confined spatial boundaries,²⁴ access to such institutes would have been readily available. To an extent, their lives outside of work nearly revolve around it. It puts them in contact with a type of community that many of the middle class concentrate great effort in avoiding, and it ultimately broadens the scope of the society Wright wishes to represent.

The substance of these intersections between diverse social situations is an abstract picture. The "common knowledge" that Wright creates is a fusion of voices illustrating cultural impressions of matters ranging from the Scottsboro Boys to Gertrude Stein to the certainty of God's existence and whether Jesus might have been black. Take the following exchanges:

²¹ Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 510.

²² *Ibid*, 560.

²³ *Ibid*, 610.

²⁴ Kimble, *A New Deal for Bronzeville*, 21.

“‘But that old Wilson was a tricky bastard!’
 ‘He tried to mess this country up...’
 ‘...by getting us all in that war.’
 ‘Yeah, when they find out the truth about that guy I’ll bet you he
 was a Red!’
 ‘He wanted all the nations to get together...’
 ‘...and that’s just what the *Tribune* says the Reds want.’
 ...
 ‘But boy! That guy over in Roosie! That Leenine...’
 ‘...he was a dog!’
 ‘He scared the piss out of them rich white folks!’
 ‘And they scared *yet!*’
 ...
 ‘I heard a Jew boy say that [Trotsky] wanted a revolution that went
 on always...’
 ‘Always?’
 ‘*Always*, man!’
 ‘What kind of revolution’s that?’
 ‘Damn if I know.’
 ‘Gawddamn, I’m scared of them kind of folks.’
 ‘Yeah, everybody’s scared of them guys.’
 ‘The Reds sure scared them white folks down South when they put
 up that fight for the Scottsboro boys.’
 ‘The American white man is a natural born coward.’²⁵

Their discussion of the communists is not consciously informed by any kind of doctrine or philosophy, and there is little consistency in any of the individual opinions thrown into the conversation. But we know that at least one person in the room reads and is probably influenced by the *Chicago Tribune*’s reporting and editorializing on communist activity. At this time, the *Tribune* was owned and operated by Robert McCormick, an influential Chicago politician and military officer during World War I, we can start to see a representation of a historical process. McCormick was staunchly anti-Roosevelt, and the *Tribune* under his watch was known for its

²⁵ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 176-78.

crusade against far-left politics.²⁶ On February 12 1936, the day of *Lawd Today*'s setting, the *Tribune* ran a front-page editorial lambasting New Deal government subsidization of agriculture, accusing it of having cost the American people more than \$500 million.²⁷ Directly to the left ran a cartoon celebrating Lincoln's birthday, depicting "the young Lincoln" striding confidently forward amidst a torrent of doubters (see appendix).²⁸ If Jake Jackson is a regular reader of the *Tribune*, and this is typical of the material he would see, there is a potential explanation for why Jake accepts so wholeheartedly the "bootstraps" axiom of American capitalism.²⁹

That Jake reads the *Tribune*, rather than the *Chicago Defender*, one of the country's biggest and most influential black newspapers,³⁰ is telling. Wright surely would have been aware of the implications: Though he is economically in the upper middle class, Jake does not identify very strongly with the tastes of the black upper middle class's typical member. He is not one of the "intelligentsia" that read the *Defender*.³¹ As a result, Jake is completely blind to the ways in which capitalism contributes to the dilemmas in which he finds himself, repeatedly reaffirming his affection for capitalist ideals and disgust for communism. "If you talk to a crackbrain two minutes he'll start slobbering about Roosia!"³² he comments, exaggeratingly echoing a young, uninformed Wright's initial impression of Communist soapbox speakers in public spaces.³³ However, when the bottom line is the intimidation of whites, as expressed in the block quotation, all semblance of ideological consistency is forgotten, and "Leenine's" Russia becomes a positive

²⁶ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 239.

²⁷ "The Mule Was Right (Editorial)," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), February 12, 1936

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ Brannon Costello, "Richard Wright's 'Lawd Today' and the Political Uses of Modernism" *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003), 47.

³⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1957), 176.

³¹ *Ibid*, 177. It is worth mentioning that while Frazier's study is contemporary to the postwar period, its writer as a long-time researcher possessed a keen view of his subjects' history, and for the most part does an excellent job of historicizing his conclusions linearly even if they are at times harsh and uncompromising.

³² Wright, *Lawd Today*, 59.

³³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 315.

example. Furthermore, despite the presence within the post office of one of the country's first and most important black unions,³⁴ Jake et al. consistently display minimal awareness, much less interest, in the labor dynamics that contribute to their poor conditions. In Jake's political naivete and utter lack of desire to further understand the forces perpetuating a frustrating, unnatural social structure that he *knows* to be oppressive, a consistent pattern emerges. Wright's literature has long been associated with much of the period's naturalistic determinism, but it is clear that in this he only goes so far to apply that determinism to those who ultimately refuse to engage with even the little opportunity they might be given to attain that further understanding. How Wright constructs these contradictions makes the point that in quality of life, economic circumstances matter less than one's awareness and knowledge of the world around them.

The picture Wright paints is not particularly satisfying to one looking for uplifting humanity. It was sometimes cited by potential publishers as a reason for its rejection.³⁵ "But, Mr. Wright" he imagines his critics of Bigger Thomas asking. "Why don't you portray in your fiction the *best* traits of our race... Don't represent anger and bitterness."³⁶ Though rarely represented adequately, all those conflicting human elements were still a part of the reality both the artists and the academics sought to explain. Wright was not concerned with whether the masses would be able to handle the inexorable coarseness of his experience. He believed that black writer in America was "being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die."³⁷ As Wright would have it, his work can be read complementary to the sociological works it was influenced by.³⁸ Fiction does not attempt to do on a macro scale what

³⁴ Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office*, 30-50.

³⁵ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 131.

³⁶ Richard Wright, *How Bigger Was Born* in *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Library, 1968), xxiii.

³⁷ Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 1937, in *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 57.

³⁸ Wright, "Introduction" in *Black Metropolis*, xvii.

sociology or history do. But it fills an equally important historical space: it gives its audience an intimate glimpse of the experiential processes that the latter often cannot sensitively capture. Wright believed that the longevity of creative work gave it important qualities not possessed by unambiguously political texts.³⁹ Understanding this desire to create political art without explicitly espousing political doctrine in conjunction with the conversation's single continuous underlying theme, that of existential frustration in the face of white domination, we can understand how these jumbled dialogues may show a kind of history only it can articulate completely properly.

Staying Alive and the Ceiling over Bronzeville

In *Lawd Today*, Wright constructs these contradictory personalities in a manner that allows them to be informative of what had been to that point an underrepresented historical experience. We can start by better contextualizing historically their idiosyncratic elements. *Black Metropolis* prefaces the ground-level sociological work it does in this section by breaking down Bronzeville's "axes of life" into five principal values "around which individual and community life involve," listed in order of importance: "Staying Alive; Having a Good Time; Praising God; Getting Ahead; [and] Advancing the Race."⁴⁰ Even these are broad categorizations for the meticulous detail captured by the authors and researchers, but they serve as a neat and informal prospectus of what, generally speaking, mattered to Bronzeville's 300,000+ residents during this time. I will examine the text in light of the first two of these axes to illustrate how Wright invests into *Lawd Today* the matters that made up the typical Bronzeville experience.

Wright's treatment of the postal workers' Squirrel Cage conversation serves as an excellent representation through which aspects of these tenets can be observed. It is not

³⁹ Wright, *American Hunger*, 90.

⁴⁰ Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 385.

accidental that Drake and Cayton give “staying alive,” the most general and broadly applicable of the five principles, the highest degree of significance. It is noted throughout that nearly every aspect of life in Bronzeville operates under a ubiquitous consciousness of the city’s institutional white supremacy, and the implicit danger that imparts onto the subjugated population. Though ever-present, it is important that this danger to the individual is tacit, rather than overt and explicit. This forms a contrast with the visible danger of the South’s lynchings, Jim Crow codes, and extrajudicial violence that Wright and Cayton had both experienced.⁴¹ They were both aware of the the conundrum this created, the paradox of a free “Black Metropolis,” a community encased in a Jim Crow snow globe, that in great part gives Bronzeville cultural and social conditions that make it such a fascinating illustration of segregated life in the urban North. The simultaneous latency and urgency of “staying alive” as a guiding principle are what gives it such gravity. Though the black American in 1935 may be as “free” in Bronzeville as anywhere else in the country, “he does experience life in the Black Belt as a struggle for existence, a struggle which he consciously interprets as a fight against white people [who practically control their destiny].”⁴²

While the nature of urban life necessitated the creation of a function socioeconomic hierarchy within Black Metropolis, the conditions under which it exists are only conducive to creating an unhappy facsimile of the society it wishes to be. On the level of the “Black Bourgeoisie,” to whom Jake Jackson may ambiguously belong, Frazier’s critical eye sees an unsuccessful mimesis of white social structures.⁴³ The futility of American principles, the impossibility of that “bootstrap” narrative promoted in the name of Lincoln in a society so

⁴¹ Robert Bone, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 116.

⁴² Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 386.

⁴³ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 203.

strictly ghettoized through housing covenants, is a social failure that can allow and account for the existence of such sociological contradictions as Jake Jackson. We know that a black postal worker of some experience was in a better financial position than most Chicagoans of any category could hope to be during the middle years of the Depression. Jake makes his money, but arriving at work, “all he could feel was the agony of standing on his feet till they ached and sweated, of breathing dust till he spat black, of jerking his body when a voice yelled.”⁴⁴ Even in such a prestigious position, Jake is reflection of the “toilers,” the vast majority of black Chicagoans who make their living performing the dirty jobs required to make an industrial city function.⁴⁵ At a base level, the potential for ever rising above such demanding menial labor is visibly minute. This sense of futility is fundamental to grasping the processes that drive Jake and his peers. In Wright’s reasoning, this consciousness manifests itself as an inarticulate cloud of anxiety and discontent that hides behind nearly any thought or action. These are the intangible elements of experience whose sentiment cannot be completely captured by any kind of scientific description.

Lawd Today might be described as a blunt scream attempting to forcefully shatter conceptions of life in the black belt. The message is present, yet it is housed within such a whirlwind of experiential forces that it often fails in explicitly articulating its more critical sentiments.⁴⁶ To better parse them, it is helpful to turn to where he later found more success in expressing it. *Native Son* evolved to be more subtle, and more powerful in picking its spots for showcasing its perpetual insecurity. The elucidating interviews in *Native Son*’s third part between Bigger and the communist lawyer Boris Max are its most expository and explicitly

⁴⁴ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 116.

⁴⁵ Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 523.

⁴⁶ More on this and a further exploration of the reasons for *Lawd Today*’s commercial failure will be found in Chapter Three.

sociopolitical. Over and over again in these parts, Bigger's explanations and endings can only be reduced to the fact of his blackness, and the ultimate hopelessness that entails. "What I got to care about?" Bigger broods. "I knew that some time or other they was going to get me for something. I'm black. I don't have to do nothing for 'em to get me. The first white finger they point at me, I'm a goner, see?"⁴⁷ Here, "staying alive" is not taken as a simply instinctual objective of any living creature. In this case, Bigger is clearly aware of the precariousness of his circumstances, even if he is only able to outwardly articulate it in retrospect. Nelson Algren, in his outspoken voice of the working class, captures this ubiquitous, overhanging dread most succinctly when he says "the Negro is not seriously confronted here with a stand-up and head-on hatred, but with something psychologically worse: a soft and protean awareness of white superiority everywhere, in everything, the the more infuriating because it is as polite as it is impalpable."⁴⁸ It is in this manner that "staying alive" is preeminent over everything and anything else, because as Bigger displays, it was not something over which the residents of Bronzeville ever had complete control. As a result, the threat to it is pervasive across the entire breadth of black society, no matter what facet. *Black Metropolis* is an exceptional work for the way it is able to simultaneously quantify and humanize this aspect, but it is only through a work of literature that a true outsider is able to place themselves in the shoes of such a person.

Having A Good Time

Proceeding with this understanding of "staying alive" and its all-encompassing shadow, we can make a nuanced approach to *Lawd Today's* personalities, as characters and as imagined members of Wright's community. The nature of the job ceiling, the idea that in a segregated

⁴⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 325.

⁴⁸ Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 45.

world, upward occupational mobility was inherently capped,⁴⁹ meant that in Bronzeville, the income range for the large majority of the population was exceptionally narrow. Again in 1935, the percentage of black families in Chicago making less than \$1000 per year was more than double that of the “native” white or immigrant population.⁵⁰ This in addition to the physical boundaries of Bronzeville enforced by restrictive covenants created a situation where with few exceptions, space for economic separation was minimal in senses both physical and quantitative. Nearly everyone, across nearly the entirety of Bronzeville’s socioeconomic spectrum, was in relative close proximity to everyone else. After all, as one of *Black Metropolis*’s most famously recorded maxims goes, “if you’re trying to find a certain Negro in Chicago, stand on the corner of 47th and South Park long enough and you’re bound to see him.” A comment on the liveliness of that corner, no doubt, but telling in other ways. To a far greater extent than in Chicago’s other defined spaces, the rich, poor, and all other types of social classes walked the same streets and crossed the same corners. The mass migration of Southern blacks to the urban north in addition to the economic leveling of the Great Depression meant that the markers of social status in black communities were shifting away from the customs that had evolved out of slavery. Rather than going by manners or physical features, “those who were becoming ‘socially’ prominent were beginning to ask, ‘What is his profession?’ or ‘What is his income?’”⁵¹ That being said, breadth of status in this confined space was still small enough that economics alone could not arbitrarily

⁴⁹ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 112.

⁵⁰ *Percentage Distribution of Family Income in Chicago, 1935-36* in Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 513. The inclusion of “Native White” as category itself exhibits a categorical flaw in the time’s sociological conceptions of race and space. If there an arbitrary cutoff at which one is no longer identified as an immigrant of any generation, it is not noted. We might ask how, exactly, one becomes a “native white,” despite the fact that there might not exist a single Chicagoan who can trace their lineage in the area even to the turn of the 19th century. It is a categorization highly informative of how ownership of space was conceived of in this segregated society. If “native” is taken to imply some sort of original right of occupancy to a particular space, the question is begged of how much agency any non-white resident of Chicago may exert within the city’s community. More attentioned will be paid to this contradiction in Chapter Two.

⁵¹ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 198.

determine status and standard of living. Just as critical was how one spent the money they made: that is, their style and leisure.

Broadly, that is the central component of “having a good time.” From the rapid fire conversation of Chapter IV, we can glean any number of things that these characters enjoy. We hear it in everything they talk about. In his critical appraisal of an early draft of *Lawd Today*, a commentary which Wright continued to draw from in his later revisions,⁵² James T. Farrell notes the significance of the four “lads’” use of story and anecdote to escape the drudgery of their labor.⁵³ With their bodies and concentration occupied incessantly, they talk about what they’d rather be doing. They enjoy boxing and baseball, they play bridge, they like to gamble and to visit and discuss women. Naturally, they spend their work time anticipating their leisure time. A consideration of leisure time is useful, especially in the context of an essentially closed space like Black Metropolis, because it is the aspect of life over which a person exerts the most tangible control. What makes Wright a kind of historical writer distinct from the sociologists he studied is how he incorporates the intangible elements of lifestyle into his fiction. When speaking historically or sociologically, statements attempting to understand the reality of a place, a people, their culture, and quality of life are often made in terms of things that are quantifiable. Effectively, what one materially has and the landscape one functions within can be measured. Wright does not operate in that space. The instances where people and reality are motivated by what they do *not* have, what they desire, what they have lost, and importantly, what is denied to them (either explicitly or implicitly) are much more difficult to concretely gauge. These are the gaps that literature, especially a literature so attentive to detail as Wright’s, can fill with its own studies in fictional representation. Where a work of such breadth as *Black Metropolis* may

⁵² Fabre, *Richard Wright*, 123, 135.

⁵³ James T. Farrell, letter to Richard Wright, 2 June 1935. Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 97, Folder 1327.

sometimes struggle to do more than isolate and elucidate the unmet and unfulfilled desires of the individual, *Lawd Today* may succeed in expressing them actively within the broader sociocultural background. The unmet and unfulfilled desires in its' characters tell us something of how the habits and processes of the people they represent are constructed. Take the following passage:

"There was some good days in the South...'
 'Yeah, in the summer...'
 'When you didn't have nothing to do but lay in the sun and live.'
 'I use' to get out of the bed feeling tired, didn't want to do *nothing!*'
 'Look like the South just makes a man feel like a millionaire!'
 'I use' to go swimming in the creek...'
 'Fishing's what I love! Seems like I can smell them catfish frying right now!'
 'And in the summer when the Magnolia trees is in blossom...'
 ...
 'And in the summer at night the sky's so full of stars you think they going to fall...'
 '...and the air soft and warm...'
 '...smelling like water.'
 'And them long rains in the winter...'
 '...and you set inside and roast corn and sweet potatoes!
 'Boy, the South's good...'»⁵⁴

This is perhaps one of Wright's most unexpectedly sentimental passages. The exchange itself is introduced by a series of observation about the South's atrocities and inhumanity. Yet it is one of a rare few times within Wright's work, particularly before his immigration to France, in which he places his characters in any kind of peaceful, serene, aesthetically pleasing environment. It is

⁵⁴ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 179-80.

it as far removed from Bronzeville, "a darkly surrealistic world" created by the "physical and emotional extremes" endured by its inhabitants,⁵⁵ as we ever get.

It is a small but not to be overlooked fact that none of the quartet are native Chicagoans; all are emigres from the South. The cognitive displacement between Jake's native Mississippi and Bronzeville's brutal urban landscape has been used in the past to explain his impulsive naivete.⁵⁶ All four vehemently disavow their homeland, yet they are still capable of painting its ideal picture. How they construct that ideal picture reveals something about the reality they measure it against. Wright makes nearly tangible the satisfaction of the characters merely remembering smelling fried fish, tasting corn and sweet potatoes, feeling the coolness of the creek in the summer. It is a tranquil, sublime picture. It is an experience to be found nowhere near the heart of Chicago's South Side, an inescapable fact in the filthy, dusty, dispiriting bustle of the post office. But that doesn't need to be highlighted by their daydreaming.

There is a kind of openness in their picturesque memory of the South that permeates the spatial and the psychological. The rural, non-industrial South surely has those feelings, sights, and smells that Chicago cannot replicate. Economically, however, we know they are well enough off that they can adequately placate the physical needs they wish they could satisfy with fishing and roasted corn. It is what they associate that satisfaction with, that feeling of "the summer... when you didn't have nothing to do but lay in the sun and live," that holds the key to their unfulfillment. Broadly speaking, the unavailability of fried catfish on the South Side of Chicago is immaterial (though it is a problem I can confirm to have been solved here in 2018). Oppressive as the Jim Crow South is, these moments of leisure in which they could in fact lay in the sun and live, physically and spatially unencumbered, are truly nonexistent in Black Metropolis. This is

⁵⁵ Robert Butler, "Farrell's Ethnic Neighborhood and Wright's Urban Ghetto: Two Visions of Chicago's South Side." *MELUS* 18, no. 1 (1993): 105.

⁵⁶ Costello, "Political Uses of Modernism," 49.

the kind of psychological openness they find themselves at a loss for: there simply is no such space. Now, the characters' hobbies and distractions are those of the urban North. Built into them are the same walls and ceilings that, as Wright attempts to illustrate, so drastically reduce a person's capacity for humanity. To demonstrate this, I will turn to a different component of their conversation: sports.

Sports and Social Implication

Like any other major American metropolis, Chicago loves its sports franchises, and Wright does not fail to include them in his picture of the city's cultural landscape. Sports were a popular form of leisure in Wright's Chicago, a sentiment reflected in the conversation between *Lard Today's* four protagonists. Consider the following passage from Part II Chapter IV:

“‘And I’ll *never* believe as long as I live that old Joe [Louis] lost to Schmeling fair.’
 ‘Aw, he was doped.’
 ‘He could’ve whipped old Schmeling with one hand if he hadn’t been doped.’
 ‘The white folks tricked ‘im.’
 ‘They giving Joe the same old screwing they gave Jack Johnson.’
 ‘The white folks just ain’t going to let no black man get to the top.’
 ...
 ‘I bet you Joe’ll never be champion.’
 ‘How come?’
 ‘Cause the white folks is scared it’ll stir up riots all over the country.’
 ‘Yeah, I like to hear ‘em tell about how folks acted when old Jack beat Jim Jeffries...’
 ‘You know, they say down South the day Jack Johnson beat Jim Jeffries a nigger walked into a white cafe and asked the white bartender: ‘Say, white man, give me a cup

of coffee strong and black as Jack Johnson and beef steak
all beat up bleeding and red like Jim Jeffries.”⁵⁷

The topic of boxing is raised several times throughout the chapter. Being one of the country’s largest commercial entertainment enterprises, it dominated sports conversation nationwide. The characters’ treatment of Joe Louis is more than idle talk of a nationally known figure. Critical to their discussion of leisure time and recreational interest is what the possibilities for it would be were they not financially limited as they are. In spite of the reality in which their personal habits and difficulties are still overwhelming regardless of their stable income, they frequently cite the wealthy and famous, including Louis, Chicago chewing gum magnate Philip Wrigley, English businessman Thomas Lipton, and wealthy professional baseball players as dreams and fantasies. Of all the images they conjure of wealth and power--they also turn periodically to Lenin, Hitler, and Mussolini--Louis is the only black representative. Several years later in New York, Wright himself was to see and interpret his cultural and political significance to black Americans. In his *Daily Worker* account of Louis’s 1938 rematch against the aforementioned German Max Schmeling, among some other cringe-inducing political analogues (“Schmeling’s bluff was as thoroughly called and exposed as was Hitler’s during the recent Czechoslovakian crisis.”), Wright vividly described “Harlem’s mocking taunt[s]” to the defeated German, from gleeful chants of “Heil Louis” to derisive Nazi salutes as Schmeling was battered.⁵⁸ Jake and his company would have been glad to know that, despite their laments, that time it took Louis less than three minutes to dispose of his Aryan opposition, and he did indeed become champion.

Taking place nearly two and half years before that fight, however, the sentiment *Lawd Today* expresses in regards to Louis and his career is compelling. Multiple times in discussing

⁵⁷ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 170-71.

⁵⁸ Richard Wright, “And Oh--Where Were Hitler’s Pagan Gods?” *The Daily Worker*, 24 June 1938. Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 5, Folder 102.

Louis, the quartet refer to Jack Johnson, who roughly thirty years prior had become the first African American heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Johnson's career peaked during the first two decades of the 20th century, and he was famously loathed by the white population of the Jim Crow South for his skill and cockiness. In 1912, at the height of Johnson's fame, he was imprisoned on dubious, if not outright fraudulent, charges of violating the Mann Act.⁵⁹ He was the heavyweight champion of the world, the pinnacle of sporting fame, and he still fell victim to the forces of white authority. When the characters cite Jack Johnson in expressing their doubts about Joe Louis, they are giving a frame of reference to their own fatalistic anxieties about the limitations of their own aspirations. Somebody in the dialogue above expresses it themselves: "the white folks just ain't going to let any black man get to the top."

A few sentences later, the characters relate their sentiments about Louis to white fear of nation-wide riots. In other words, they have an understanding that whites consider artificial dominance over sports to be an integral component of a more broadly effective white supremacy. Even through their leisure and their own interests, this how Wright wants us to believe one of his neighbors at a post office station sees the world around them. Wright weaves a sense of entrapment and inaccessibility into the extraneous elements of everyday conversation and existence, showing the naturalistic determinism more explicit in his later work to be present even at this experimental stage. This in particular is Wright's attempt to show the processes and apprehensions that manifest themselves nearly ubiquitously throughout reality in this harsh space.

Relating to sport, if boxing was at the forefront of the characters, city, and country's thought, baseball was not far behind. The strongly provincial aspect of baseball fandom in a

⁵⁹ Incidentally, the man who convicted him, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, would shortly thereafter serve as Major League Baseball's first commissioner, delaying its integration until 1947.

league including sixteen teams spanning eleven cities between the Mississippi and the Atlantic has historically been magnified in Chicago, which possesses a sharp sociocultural dichotomy between the Cubs of the North Side and the White Sox of the South. This is a fact clearly not lost on Wright or his characters:

“‘Aw, I don’t like them Cubs, give me the Sox any day.’
 ‘Aw, the Cubs is all right?’
 ‘How can they be all right when the Sox beat ‘em every year in the city series?’
 ...
 ‘You got a grudge against the Cubs, that’s all!’
 ‘Gawddamn right! They don’t want no colored folks out at Wrigley Field. The white folks throwed a pop bottle at me one day.’
 ‘But that ain’t no reason to be against the Cubs.’
 ‘Why the hell ain’t it? I’m against *anybody* what’s against *me!*’
 ‘Aw, them white folks don’t know you alive!’
 ‘Don’t care if they don’t. I don’t like them Cubs!’⁶⁰

The inherent limit of these characters’ aspirations is evident even in their discussion of baseball. It is representative of their constant awareness of what spaces and institutions they are welcome to, and which they are not. The dynamic between the White Sox and Cubs portrayed here is indicative of an understated historical divide that is more than simply geographic. With which team a person aligned themselves was more than a statement of personal taste. Before television and radio, the culture associated with a team was identified substantially with the population it could serve. Wright’s dialogue justifying why a working resident of Bronzeville has particular feelings for one over the other expresses a consequence of these forces in action, and how its presence in Jake Jackson’s life indicates a deeper reasoning for a historical reality. In this sense,

⁶⁰ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 168-69.

literature captures in just a few lines an idea of a personal element of sports fandom that a more analytic investigation of a population's characteristics might fail to quantify.

That being said, there is still historical reference for articulating the reasons for these associations. Wrigley Field, serving base to the Cubs at the intersection of Addison and Sheffield on the city's North Side, was built in 1912 in a neighborhood populated primarily by native whites of whom the majority either owned their own homes or paid exorbitant rents.⁶¹ Dating to 1910 at the corner of 35th and Shields on the other side of town, Comiskey Park headquartered the White Sox in Bridgeport, an enclave of the Irish working class. Its neighbors to the west were the Union Stockyards, the Black Belt to the east, and more heavy industry to the northwest.⁶² In the zones including and adjacent to Wrigley Field, the average price of an acre of land was \$84,075. In the space surrounding Comiskey Park, the same average acre of land sold for \$41,215, less than half of its counterpart.⁶³ A discussion of team affiliation like the one above implicitly includes connotations of class and status. Though Chicago was a desegregated city de jure (excepting the nebulous legality of the racial housing covenants), the character's experience at a Cubs game serves as an effective reminder from one level of the city's social hierarchy to another that their status, and standard of living, is categorically denied to him. Ultimately, conveying this is what Wright strives to achieve through these bits and pieces. Even in discussing to sports to relieve the monotony of their workday, the harsh limits of the circumstances the characters must live under shape their attitudes and outlooks.

Black Metropolis's literary qualities are a great part of what makes it such an exceptional piece of sociology. But it is not a novel, and does function on the level of individual psychology

⁶¹"Map of Chicago, Showing Types of Cultural and Economic Areas, 1930-35" map, University of Chicago Library Map Collection, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/1595409>.

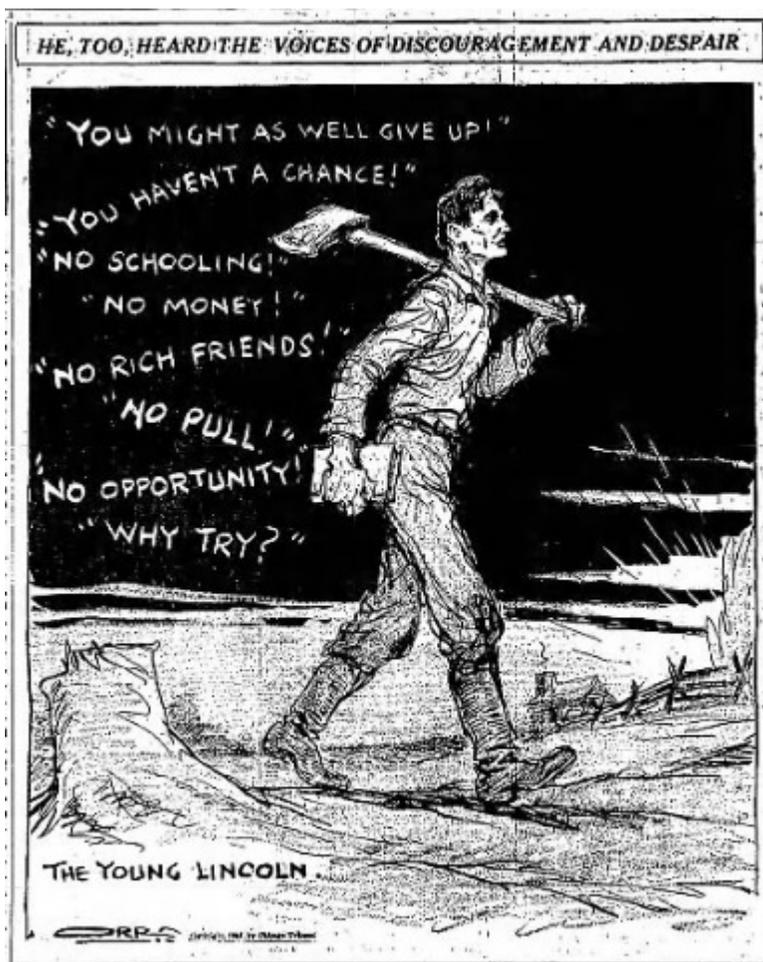
⁶²"Distribution of the Foreign Born" in Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, 15.

⁶³"Map Showing Land Values in Chicago, 1928," map, University of Chicago Library Map Collection, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/1595409>.

that Wright's fiction does. Likewise, the sociological aspects of *Lawd Today* and *Native Son* are some of the most memorable and distinct features within a work of 20th century literature. But they cannot, and do not attempt to, achieve the same empirical understanding of society that history and sociology do. That does not mean painting a more complete picture of the Chicago they describe is impossible. Framing them as complementary to each other does not work quite like two puzzle pieces, fitting snugly together to fill in the gaps of the other. Still, they each reach conclusions that the other cannot, and one may answer a question that the other can only ask. Wright himself believed that "sincere art and honest science were not far apart,"⁶⁴ and the voraciousness with which he consumed sociology meant that his fiction became imbued with enough reality that each artistic choice he had the freedom to make carried with it its own set of values and implications. *Black Metropolis* could only dive so deep into an individual case study without making its subjects' singularities more clear than their commonalities, and Jake Jackson was not a real person to be taken as truly typical of interwar Chicago. But each interview in *Black Metropolis* and each character in *Lawd Today* still inform us and each other of the great mosaic of people and institutions that made up the whole of Bronzeville. Put together, they give us a better, more comprehensive idea of how any individual might have perceived the sprawling, complex society they were a part of.

⁶⁴ Wright, "Introduction" in *Black Metropolis*, xviii.

Appendix



Cartoon on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, February 12 1936

Financially Stable, Spiritually Poor: James T. Farrell and the Immigrant Identity in Early 20th Century Chicago

*“We’re the South Side Irish, as our fathers were before,
We’re from the Windy City and we’re Irish to the core,
From Bridgeport to Beverly, from Midway to South Shore,
We’re the South Side Irish, so let’s sing it out once more!”*

The Irish Choir, South Side Irish, Chorus

Farrell, His Characters, And His Community

In some more recent studies, James Thomas Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy has been awarded a consciously tardy place of honor in the lexicon of 20th century American fiction. Stylistically, Farrell is known for his realism, yet the full scope of what that realism captures is frequently understated, and his reputation has at times been harshly degraded to that of a “mechanical photorealist” and “compulsive overwriter.”⁶⁵ In these modern reevaluations, the trilogy is described as remarkable for many of the same reasons as it was originally dismissed. Rarely have characteristics of people and neighborhoods been constructed on the page with such precision. It was this conscious precision that largely led to *Young Lonigan*’s (1932) lack of immediate critical impact. Upon first landing, the book was consistently knocked as being little more than a sociological case study, albeit an effective one.⁶⁶ Farrell’s realism captured not only physical detail, but conscious and subconscious perceptions of class, race, and social order in a manner that appears to have been frequently lost to a critical audience. As an overarching principle, understanding the expression of that world and the part of reality he encapsulated, principally in his early short stories and the latter two novels of the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, is my primary pursuit. Farrell’s depictions of people and their reality often coalesced into a criticism of

⁶⁵ Chicago Tribune, October 3 1996 “Writers, Relatives Look Anew At James Farrell’s ‘Studs Lonigan’”

⁶⁶ Robert Landers, *An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell* (San Francisco: Encounter Press, 2004), 122.

his native Irish-American culture that he would broadly describe as suffering from a kind of “spiritual poverty.” This chapter is an exploration not only of what constitutes this spiritual poverty, but how and why the circumstances that engendered it came to exist.

Initially, it may be helpful to consider Farrell alongside a purely Irish writer, James Joyce. Joyce was a writer famously at odds with his complex Irish background, and through his semi-autobiographical novels and stories sought to expose a greater truth by detailing with total honesty the light and dark of his own culture and society. Farrell’s literary relationship with Chicago’s South Side Irish might be taken the same way. The series is filled with composites and truly fictive personalities, but many of its most important characters are heavily based on the real figures Farrell knew growing up in Chicago’s Grand Boulevard and South Shore neighborhoods. Names were changed minimally, and the publication of *Young Lonigan* caused quite a stir among the South Side residents who had known young Jimmy Farrell and his sizable extended family.⁶⁷ Not among the most pleased was the family of the late Studs Cunningham, the very real young man who served as the explicit inspiration for Studs Lonigan. The balance of criticism being tilted towards the novels’ overt honesty may not have been fair, but it is not difficult to see why it might have been interpreted so. It was Cunningham’s death from pneumonia in 1929 at age 26 that prompted Farrell that year to write the short story character sketch *Studs*, the genesis of what would become the *Lonigan* novels, and the historical relationship between Cunningham and Farrell mirrored that of their literary counterparts Lonigan and Danny O’Neill. Upon the recommendation of his University of Chicago professors, this ultimately resulted in *Young Lonigan*, published in 1932.

⁶⁷ Edgar M. Branch, *Studs Lonigan’s Neighborhood and the Making of James T. Farrell* (Chicago: Art’s End Books, 1996), 43.

The early contraposition of Studs and Danny is critical to achieving a nuanced reading of Farrell's broader body of work. Farrell has been quoted describing the two as being "diametrically opposite."⁶⁸ This can be used as a window into the relationship between Farrell and the people about whom he wrote, which allows us to better understand the world they inhabited and how he expressed it to his readers. Reflecting on the 1929 *Studs* short story six years later, Farrell wrote "this... should suggest the experience and background of these books, and my own relationship to their background. But for the accident of this story, and of the impressions recorded in it, I should probably never have written the Studs Lonigan Series."⁶⁹ The characters of Studs and Danny grew and developed far beyond the brief images of this initial story. Yet when Farrell wrote that note, the same year the trilogy's final installment was published, he himself still gave a substantial amount of weight to its impressions and perceptions. Farrell may have invented a life for Studs Lonigan, but its conclusion was determined from its first beginnings. Just as Studs' ultimate end in the novels, dead from pneumonia, remains as initially prophesized, so generally remain unchanged the nature of Studs and his old companions' character, as described by Danny.

"They kept on talking, and I thought more and more that they were a bunch of slobs ... [Studs] would have gotten a good break, too, if only they hadn't given him Extreme Unction. For life would have grown into fatter and fatter decay for him, just as it was starting to do with Kelly, Doyle, Cooney, and McCarthy. He, too, was a slob, but he died without having to live countless slobbish years." *Studs* in *Chicago Stories*,

In the *Lonigan* novels, Danny eventually disappears from Studs' life, but as affirmed by the preceding note, Farrell's attitude towards Studs and the people he surrounded himself with did not. They were slobs: louts, boors, do-nothings, the epitome of sloth, willful ignorance, and

⁶⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁹ James T. Farrell, *Studs* (1929) published in *Chicago Stories* ed. Charles Fanning (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 64.

unfulfilled opportunity and potential. Farrell's alienation from his own people is more clearly evident in those aforementioned later works, with quasi-autobiographical protagonists. Farrell and his wife Dorothy left Chicago for New York and then Paris in 1931, and with *Young Lonigan*'s publication a year later, never returned to living full-time in his hometown. It was that sentiment of Danny O'Neill towards Studs and his comrades, that the people of his childhood were rife with wasted people, "living countless slobbish years," that drove Farrell's aloofness from his people. Whoever Kelly, Doyle, Cooney, and McCarthy may have been, Farrell saw them as exemplary of a community he could not fully be a part of. Neither the relationship between him and his family nor the sentiments the remnants of his old community expressed towards him were ever terribly acerbic. But there remained a fundamental sense of difference and disconnection between the author and his subjects that acutely manifested itself in his literature.

Spiritual Poverty: The Glue of Farrell's Chicago

It is clear through his autobiographically tinged work that Farrell felt his community was replete with a kind of backwardness that touched all aspects of their lives and perceptions of reality. He termed it "spiritual poverty," and it thematically dominated his early work. Though *Young Lonigan* saw modest success upon release in 1932, Farrell's career as a writer was still far from financially stable when he completed the story *All Things Are Nothing To Me* that same year. Like a younger Farrell, its protagonist Joe is a young student at the University of Chicago, living with his aunt, uncle, and cousins near Washington Park.⁷⁰ Joe finds that his studies have

⁷⁰ Washington Park, an expansive, multi-use public park stretching North to South from 51st to 60th Streets and from Cottage Grove to Martin Luther King Boulevard (formerly Grand Boulevard and then South Park Avenue) East to West, has both historical and literary significance to this work. In the first half of the 20th Century, the park served as a meeting place for the boundaries of multiple distinctly different neighborhoods, including the historic

increasingly alienated him from his family, who treat him with contempt and suspicion due to his aspirations of being a writer, and more critically, the threat an association with the University is perceived to pose to their lives' central institutions and principles. Within the story's first few lines, a fundamental and almost explosive disagreement of core beliefs is attributed to the University. "What are you, a nigger lover?" Cousin Jim demands of Joe upon having seen him conversing with a black classmate. "Did that A.P.A. University do that to you too?"⁷¹ Here, from the very beginning, the University signifies far more than a simple scapegoat for Joe's apparent betrayal of his family's racist values. By correlating the University with the American Protective Association, a virulently anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant organization of the late-19th century,⁷² Jim is essentially accusing his cousin of subscribing to an ideology explicitly attacking his own basic identity as an Irish Catholic. It is an absurd, hyperbolic expression. The American Protective Association had ceased to function in 1911, and by the 1920s was no more than a bogeyman in what Farrell constructs as a Catholic victim complex. Still, it is the first of many taunts and comments in the same vein Joe is subjected to throughout the story. Joe eventually identifies "a poverty not only of mind, but of spirit, even a poverty of the senses"⁷³ that divides him from his family and community. Walking through Washington Park, Joe reflects on what he feels to be at the root of their difference and this poverty.

"It was not just that they, his people, could not accept him. He could no longer really accept them. Worlds had been placed between them both ... Every day, almost, it seemed that they strove to discourage him by telling him that he was wasting his time, and that he would be a failure. It was jealousy, envy, spite. And it was fear. And hatred, the hatred begotten from narrowness, bigotry, ignorance. They hated knowledge. It was

Black Belt, heavily Irish Woodlawn, and cosmopolitan Hyde Park, home to the University of Chicago, and is the site of several important events in the literature of both Farrell and Richard Wright.

⁷¹ James T. Farrell, *All Things Are Nothing To Me* in *Chicago Stories*, 86.

⁷²"American Protective Association," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Protective-Association>.

⁷³ Farrell, *All Things Are Nothing to Me* in *Chicago Stories*, 91.

something mysterious and dangerous. Knowledge in politics would disturb the politicians with their hands in the grab bag. And the politicians were leaders, models, heroes, in the Irish milieu that had been his.” *All Things Are Nothing To Me* in *Chicago Stories*, 93

Spiritual poverty is clearly many things that consistently escape a single, succinct definition. Four decades later, in conversation with scholar Edgar Marquess Branch, Farrell would reaffirm that it lay at the heart of how he portrayed this community.⁷⁴ It is the idea that was so frequently lost in the early understanding of *Studs Lonigan*. Branch notes that critics and students assigned to read *Lonigan* often used Farrell’s realist technique to inadvertently transfer Studs’ own unscrupulousness to the real-world setting in which he was placed. That may be credited to the fact that in writing *Lonigan*, Farrell limited himself to speaking on Studs’ terms, which naturally reflected his own crude and often boorish sensibilities. He worked “only [with] the use of such words and conceptions, that both language and conception were within the range of Studs’ experience, mentality, knowledge and associations.”⁷⁵ This does not mean that Farrell was not being entirely true to the world he wrote about. It is a way of constructing a more complete view of reality. On the surface, a reader understands Chicago and the world at large exactly as Studs understands it. But we are not limited to only that understanding. Simultaneously, it becomes our job as readers to unpack the relationship between reality from the explicit perspective of Studs and the implicit perspective of Farrell, Studs’ spiritual opposite, as an author.

Critically, Farrell’s intimacy with his subject and setting sometimes worked against him. One could hardly escape sociology in the vicinity of the early-20th century University of Chicago, and Farrell was no exception. His work was read in the same systematically objective vein that would later be applied to Wright’s *Native Son*, often considered the pinnacle of sociological fiction. But Farrell rejected the contention that Studs, like *Native Son*’s Bigger

⁷⁴ Branch, *Studs Lonigan’s Neighborhood*, 43.

⁷⁵ Farrell, quoted in *Studs Lonigan’s Neighborhood*, 3.

Thomas, was simply a victim of the space he was born into. During his time there, Grand Boulevard and South Shore were nowhere close to “slums.” Farrell intended to show that the communal poverty that drove Studs to be a paramount of a wasted life was far from physical. “Spiritual poverty has to do with values,” he emphasized. “It has to do with a sense of past, present, and future. [It] is the failure to understand that the most important thing we can do... is to develop the mind.” A conscious understanding of this is what made, in Farrell’s literature, Danny O’Neill and the previously discussed Joe outliers. It is what differentiates them from their peers, and why they are able to transcend the beliefs and consistencies that in great part gave those peers a sense of their community. Conversely, the absence of that “sense of that, present, and future” is what dooms Studs Lonigan. Following, to understand the way in which Studs was an exemplary product (and victim) of his reality, we must have an understanding of what his perception of that reality was, and how the *Lonigan* narrative creates a dialogue informative in practice of how that reality functioned. In practice, this means understanding what Studs thought to be his own cultural identity.

Defining Irish Chicago

When discussing the identities of cohesive diasporic immigrant communities in Chicago, it is necessary to resist referring to a broad “assimilation.” If there must be a single term referring to the cultural evolution of these communities, I prefer “Americanization.” The development of these communities was a complex, non-static process that does not have clearly defined temporal or material boundaries and standards. To categorize an ethnic or cultural group as assimilated is in this context anachronistic; it might imply a self-fulfilling prophecy, that assimilation is a conscious end to itself. Americanization indicates a contribution to the complexity of what it is to be an American. When or how a Polish person, for example, assimilated into a pre-existing

normative American culture but what specifically it meant to them to be Polish or American at any given moment in time.

These definitions can clarify the spiritual poverty Farrell develops in his literature. Put together, Farrell's idea of spiritual poverty is a broad culture of antiprogressivism, often self-contradictory, that manifested itself in fear, suspicion, and hatred of those who do not belong or subscribe to their particular set of identities and institutional beliefs. Naturally, all this exists as a function of the Irish-American community and identity in Chicago. This element of cultural insularity is evident in how the *Lonigan* books themselves are considered. Despite its lack of ethnic "parochialism," the *Lonigan* novels take an undoubtedly Irish-American character not by ascribing a narrow Irish identity to most of their characters, but by genuinely portraying their dialogue with both other defined ethnic communities and with broader ideas of American identity.⁷⁶

To understand how and why this played itself out in the way represented by Farrell, we can unpack how this community constructed and perceived its own identity, how it positioned itself relative to other identities and communities, and how the different developments of those communities informed the nature of those relationships. The spatial realities of these different groups within Chicago are foundational in how these perceptions were formed. One measure of these differences was how the space that Studs Lonigan identified as his own was valued economically. The Washington Park neighborhood, at the heart of which lay the corner of 58th and Prairie about which Studs Lonigan spends the last years waxing nostalgic, was a moderately prosperous neighborhood at the time of his youth. In 1910, when Studs would have been four years old, the roughly square mile tract of land including this community was worth 68.54% and 98.14% more than the respective mean and median prices of land in the seven other tracks

⁷⁶ Daniel Shiffman, "Ethnic Competitors in Studs Lonigan," *MELUS* 24, no. 3 (1999), 3.

adjacent to it.⁷⁷ By 1928, however, the black belt had rapidly expanded South into Washington Park (a fact Patrick Lonigan caustically attributes to “kike real-estate bastards,” revealing within himself an ideology of opposition and competition towards non-Irish cultural groups),⁷⁸ and the Lonigans had followed many of their brethren southeast to the Jackson Park Highlands. In that same year, 1928, the property values of that neighborhood were more than twice those of the adjacent blocks, and had increased by between 60-90% since 1910 adjusting for inflation, while value in the Washington Park area was practically nonexistent.⁷⁹⁸⁰ Indeed, it would be highly mistaken to ascribe Studs’ loutishness to slum conditions. Economically speaking, Studs’ community was decidedly middle-class, and was in fact better off than many of their neighbors. If there was a poverty that contributed to Studs’ demise, Farrell was accurate in asserting that it was certainly not a material one.

The demographic makeup of Studs’ neighborhood complicates our understanding of Chicago’s Irish-American community. Census and University of Chicago ethnographic data show that the neighborhoods themselves were actually of mixed ethnic makeup. Though there was an active and clearly identifiable sense of cultural community among the Chicago Irish, it was no longer defined by central clusters of immigrant populations from the motherland. Farrell was aware of this, and credited institutions such as schools and churches as significant aids towards giving the space surrounding them a culturally “cohesive” quality.⁸¹ Relative to other distinct Chicago ethnic groups during the same time period, this is an aberration. The 1920 census shows that Chicago possessed only one contiguous geographic area, the adjacent

⁷⁷"Map of Chicago Showing Land Values, 1910," map, University of Chicago Library Map Collection, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/1595409>.

⁷⁸ James T. Farrell, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* in *Studs Lonigan: A Trilogy* (New York: Library of America), 420.

⁷⁹ Inflation rates are calculated from January 1913 on, the first dates available from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁸⁰ University of Chicago Library Map Collection, *Map of Chicago Showing Land Values, 1928*.

⁸¹ Branch, *Studs Lonigan’s Neighborhood*, 38.

neighborhoods of Bridgeport and Canaryville (which have remained to the present day remarkably insular) in which the population was made up 15% or more of Irish immigrants.⁸² In 1930, that number was zero. Comparatively, in that same year, there were at least four distinct geographic communities with significant numbers of Italian immigrants, six of Polish immigrants, three of Czechoslovakian immigrants, and another three of Russian immigrants.⁸³ As with the ethnic Germans that dominated the city's north side, though Irish lineage made its presence abundantly clear throughout many South Side neighborhoods, relative to Italians, Poles, and Czechs, the Irish were no longer a significant proportion of Chicago's first generation immigrants.

It was not just the larger institutions like schools and churches that gave their neighborhoods an ethnic cohesiveness. In non-Irish ethnic enclaves, the concentration of non-English speaking immigrants was high enough that banks, stores and boutiques, and newspapers could essentially maintain the ethnic characteristics of the motherland. Working class social historian Lizabeth Cohen notes that a concerted effort from the large industrial manufacturers that employed large numbers of these immigrants in addition to the development of a broad "American" mass culture enabled by technological innovation, followed by the economic ruin of the Great Depression, contributed to the eventual loss of that ethnic cohesiveness.⁸⁴ But individually, many Irish were able to transcend a relative lack of local, distinctly Irish institutions in maintaining their sense of cultural community. "Sara Walsh," for example, "an immigrant from Kerry, [Ireland,] remembered her neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s as Irish, though the census reveals that it was composed of a broad array of Germans, Poles, and

⁸²"Census Tracts of Chicago, 1920: Percent of Population Born in Ireland," map, University of Chicago Library Map Collection, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/3402025>.

⁸³ All same as above but for [*Born in*] *Ireland, Italy, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Russia*

⁸⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago 1919-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 160-211.

Lithuanians.”⁸⁵ When critics and readers note that indubitable Irish-American character of Farrell’s novels, they reveal in them a reflection of a sentiment that clearly had a foothold among those who identified as Irish in these areas of the South Side. Following, in asking how and why this development in Irish-American identity occurred, we may be able to elucidate a more tangible, concrete idea of Farrell’s spiritual poverty.

Take Me To Church: The South Side Irish and Religion

The essential question at hand is why by the interwar period, when Eastern and Southern Europeans Southern African-Americans had largely replaced the Irish, Germans, and Swedes as Chicago’s numerically dominant migrant groups, the Irish community was able to maintain a distinct sense of ethnic cohesion. A look into the role of Irish Catholic Churches, as cited by Farrell, may further elucidate this. On a fundamental level, Catholicism played a large part in differentiating the Irish from Chicago’s other early immigrant groups. Simply put, the communal significance of the church was far lesser in the primarily Protestant and Lutheran faiths that predominated among German, Swedish, and Scotch-English immigrants. More importantly, it was the relation of Irish Catholicism towards the practices of other Catholic immigrants, particularly Italians and Poles, that particularly reinforced many of the ideological concepts central to Farrell’s spiritual poverty. The adaptation (and resistance to said adaptation) of traditional, old world Catholicism to the standards of American church organization was one of the defining processes of “Americanization” among Polish and Italian immigrants. A multi-decade reform effort beginning in 1915 by Archbishop (and later Cardinal) George Mundelein

⁸⁵ Timothy Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 128.

strove to ensure the uniformity of Catholic practice within Chicago.⁸⁶ For this, the primary mode of implementation was to remove the distinctly ethnic qualities of Polish and Italian churches by standardizing English services and regulating the homiletic emphases unique to each church culture.⁸⁷ That the Irish brand of Catholicism *was* the standard to which Mundelein strove to level the rest⁸⁸ indicates a kind of cultural hegemony Irish-Americans had a vested interest in maintaining a claim to.

That being said, Irish Catholic spaces in and of themselves did not signify Irishness in the same way that a church conducting services in Polish or Italian helped maintain those identities. Church for the Irish American was still a significant place and space for marking social and cultural identity. But by the time of the mass arrival of other European Catholic immigrant groups and then Mundelein's ascent, it had become an institution reaffirming Irish-American identities rather than one keeping alive the flame of the motherland. Farrell's story *The Hyland Family*, written between 1933 and 1943, is a snapshot of the lives of an upper class South Side Irish family. Importantly, it is the setting of the church service at the story's beginning that allows Farrell to establish this context.

“Andrew, Sr. knew that he was one of the leading members of the parish, and he accepted, as an obligation, the responsibility of fulfilling all his religious duties without laxity. He was one of the largest contributors to the annual church collections. He received the sacraments regularly. He strove, in every possible way, to be a model Catholic layman. And for years he had required his family to remain kneeling for a few moments after mass, saying extra prayers.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Mundelein's status as an Irish Catholic icon in Chicago is nearly unrivaled, and the impact of his tenure and reforms, including his failures, cannot be understated. He was something of an institution in and of himself, and has for nearly a hundred years literally been so, as the largest seminary in the United States is situated in the North Chicago suburb of Mundelein, Illinois.

⁸⁷ Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 90.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

⁸⁹ Farrell, *The Hyland Family* in *Chicago Stories*, 148.

For the Hyland family, church is opportunity to reaffirm their place within their community's social hierarchy. There is significance in Andrew Sr.'s self assertion as a "leading member of the parish." In this case, as was and still is commonplace among Chicago's South Side Irish Catholics, the parish supersedes the neighborhood or any political designation as the geographic marker of the community. Catholic ritual and the historical role of the parish as a pillar of immigrant communities gave it a particular significance to the Irish as a cultural institution.⁹⁰ In this sense, Irish populations in Chicago were spatially defined by their churches. Again, these churches were not characterized by their Irishness in the same manner that a church dedicated to St. Stanislaus conducting services in Polish would have been recognizable by its Polishness. The Irish did not need an "Irish" church as an aid to the survival of their diasporic ethnic identity. What maintained that identity was the fervent religiosity of the Irish tradition itself. It was a religiosity that continued to elevate the space of the church and the ideologies espoused within it, and so the cohesiveness of the Irish Americans it served was predicated largely on the agreement of the values and habits encouraged by that elevation.

Farrell viewed this devotion to religious authority as a primary contributor to the spiritual poverty of his community.⁹¹ Farrell's previously quoted expressions of what makes up spiritual poverty, "hatred of knowledge," in combination with his dedication to the value of education as a potential escape from it (highlighted broadly in his defining works both by Studs Lonigan's rejection of education and Danny O'Neill's embracing of it), might at first give even a dedicated reader the impression that he was to some degree and intellectual elitist. In the Hyland family, however, Farrell is able to further assert that the greater problem of the Irish community

⁹⁰ Eileen McMahon, *What Parish Are You From? A Chicago Community and Race Relations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 4.

⁹¹ It should be noted that Farrell's loss of religion as a young adult while studying at the University of Chicago was a significant moment in his life, and would be revisited and considered repeatedly in his literature.

transcends class and the educational opportunities afforded by it. Andrew Hyland Jr, an aspiring writer and star student at Notre Dame,⁹² finds an almost perverse kind of enjoyment in his intellectual merits, thinking that “study was not a burden to him as it was to many young men. And to be able to answer questions in a classroom, proving that he had studied, was a pleasure. It enhanced his sense of his own worth and superiority.”⁹³ Contrary to the other educationally inclined literature aficionados littering Farrell’s lexicon, Andrew Jr. does not strike a particularly sympathetic character. Unlike Danny O’Neill and Joe, the aforementioned protagonist of *All Things Are Nothing To Me*, Andrew Jr. is not aloof and estranged to his people from his pursuit of knowledge. It reinforces a preconceived notion of his own inherent superiority, an undoubtedly negative connotation in Farrell’s worldview. A closer look at the kind of views the Hyland family subscribe to may clarify Farrell’s seeming distaste for his own characters:

“‘Father Kilbride preached a good sermon, didn’t he?’
 ‘Did you notice, Dad, that he mentioned G.K. Chesterton?’ Andrew, Jr. asked.
 ‘Yes. I’ll have to read that fellow sometime.’
 ‘Dad, I wish you would. Read his book, *The New Jerusalem*,’ Andrew, Jr. advised.
 ‘What’s it about?’
 ‘The Jews. He says the Jews are an Oriental people and that they should live and dress like Orientals instead of Occidentals.’
 ‘Say--that’s not a bad idea,’ Andrew, Sr. exclaimed, the light of knowledge dawning in his eyes.’”⁹⁴

This passage imparts two significant messages. The knowledge that Andrew is reading GK Chesterton, and that his father and presumably their family endorse even one of his more absurd ideas, would have been to Farrell a damning marker of personal character. The views of

⁹² In this case, it is telling that Farrell chose Notre Dame as the institution of higher education for the purposes of this story. While the University of Chicago, DePaul University, and Loyola University are all referenced throughout his early literature, Notre Dame indicated membership to a particularly exclusive and elite upper crust of Irish Catholic society. As recently as 2017, 81% of admitted students identified as Catholic, and use of the “Fighting Irish” as the school’s mascot is telling of the University’s historical connotations.

⁹³ James T. Farrell, *The Hyland Family* in *Chicago Stories*, 160.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 153.

Chesterton, a novelist turned Catholic philosopher, would have been strongly opposed and probably morally distasteful to those of Farrell, at the time a dedicated Trotskyist. That Andrew Sr. would feel “the light of knowledge dawning” within him upon agreeing with Chesterton’s anti-semitism becomes heavily ironic just moments later when he bemoans the economic hardship of the Great Depression, a fact that he attributes to the Catholic Al Smith’s loss to Herbert Hoover in the 1928 Presidential election. ““But, Dad, why are they all against us because we’re Catholics?” [His daughter] Helen asked, a questioning look shadowing her face. ‘Bigots,’ Andrew, Sr. answered with positiveness.” Despite the family’s proud economic and educational standing, this hypocrisy and ignorance is nonetheless a distinct symptom of the spiritual poverty that Farrell found within all corners of the Chicago Irish community.

That church is the catalyst for the expression of such views is no accident on Farrell’s part, and further reinforces his view of its dominance in Irish American culture as a source of its toxicity. Throughout his work, priests are not only portrayed as figures of influence within their communities, but also express an awareness of the power vested in their position. The harsh conservatism of the Irish Catholic tradition then causes it to be a considerable force in maintaining the ideologies characteristic of spiritual poverty. In *Judgment Day*, a broke, jobless, generally down and out Studs Lonigan finds solace in his initiation to the Catholic Order of St. Christopher. “So many Catholic men from all walks of life, rich and poor, young and old, marching to the altar rail in a body, receiving Communion, like true knights of the church.” He observes. “Seeing that, being one of those in it, he had been proud of his Church, proud to be entering an order of men so closely connected with the Church... Yes, he was glad, damn glad, that he had been born on the right side of the fence.”⁹⁵ In this case, the Church validates the “us

⁹⁵ James T. Farrell, *Judgement Day in Studs Lonigan*, 663.

vs. them” binary internalized in Studs’ worldview. Ultimately, it represents a significant part of what allows Studs to repeatedly justify the attitudes and actions that led to his demise.

The Good, the Bad, and the Irish of Chicago: A Brief Aside

Before a discussion on hatred, discrimination, and violence (literal and implied) can commence, it must be acknowledged that the history of Chicago from the moment of its founding is in many ways predicated on violence. The first permanent settlement in what would become Chicagoland, Fort Dearborn (located in what is now the heart of downtown Chicago’s commercial district), was a military structure built as a result of violent conflict with the native Potawatami.⁹⁶ Chicago’s expansion after its incorporation in 1833, like the greater part of the country’s Western expansion, would not have been possible without a series of coercive treaties giving the American government a “legal” monopoly on the sporadic violent conflict between Natives and what amounted to an American invasion.

This inherent violence, rooted in Chicago’s existence, grew beyond initial conflicts between settlers and Native occupants. If Chicago’s large Irish population was a result of the massive influx of Irish canal and other infrastructural laborers from the East coast, then the lasting impression of Irish cultural dominion in Chicago can be just as much attributed to Irish desire to create an American space for their culture largely free of the bigotry they had initially encountered in Eastern metropolises. For much of the 19th century, Irish presence in America continuously prodded at an Anglo-Protestant nativism present in the country’s founding roots,⁹⁷ leading the Irish to develop a unique perspective on American inclusiveness while still maintaining their own ethnic distinction. In his landmark text *How The Irish Became White*,

⁹⁶"Fort Dearborn," in Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified June 2, 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fort-Dearborn>.

⁹⁷ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish-American Dimension in The Irish in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 1-5.

“whiteness” historian Noel Ignatiev cites an antebellum meeting of Irish coal miners in Pennsylvania in which it was emphatically declared “We do not form a distinct class of the community, but consider ourselves in every respect as CITIZENS of this great and glorious republic.”⁹⁸ Irish immigrant embracing of their Americanness appears to be a country-wide phenomenon not unique to developments in Chicago, but something more critical to an Irish-American identity on a macro level.

While this chapter and section primarily highlights the dark and violent sides of these cultural evolutions, we must also acknowledge there exists a sincere legitimacy at the root of the Irish “bootstraps” narrative, in spite of how many of them managed to twist its logic. Farrell may have been “scrupulously honest [and] immune to sentimentality,”⁹⁹ but this brand of honesty also exposes a personal bias in Farrell that works against his dedication to total truth. Equally significant to the survival of Irish solidarity in Chicago into the 21st century are the positive and constructive bonds that identity created. The Irish are responsible for some of Chicago’s oldest, most impressive, and historically significant architecture. Some of the city’s oldest archives and genealogical records have been preserved for more than a century and a half at Old St. Patrick’s Church, one of the city’s few and remarkable structures to have survived the Great Fire of 1871. Attendees at Chicago’s annual South Side Irish parade, a St. Patrick’s day celebration unaffiliated with the municipally operated downtown parade, winding its way through some of the South Side’s historic Irish neighborhoods, will find a demonstration of all that Chicago Irish culture has to celebrate. Groups of bagpipers, traditional Irish singers, Church and Parish organizations, youth athletic teams, and of course, plenty of indulgence on the South Side’s famous Western Avenue bar scene encapsulate nearly everything about Chicago Irish culture

⁹⁸ Noel Ignatiev, *How The Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

⁹⁹ Charles Fanning, *The Literary Dimension in The Irish in Chicago*, 143.

worth preserving. Like many others, Irish contribution to the richness of a broader American culture cannot be properly quantified, a fact that even if it does not constitute the focus of this investigation, is worth acknowledging nonetheless.

The Irish and Discrimination

The hatred and ignorance typical of spiritual poverty is most explicit and provoking in Irish-American discrimination towards other cultural groups. It would be completely inaccurate and disingenuous to say that racism, xenophobia and misogyny in Chicago and the United States at large were traits unique or particular to Irish Americans. However, it true that Irish Americans have generally been associated with an exceptionally vitriolic attitude towards those whom they perceive to be as “outsiders” or “others.” This historical strain is visibly present in Farrell’s literature, as its Irish protagonists take advantage of nearly every possible opportunity to denigrate by race, ethnicity, or religion those they cross. In the story *Looking ‘Em Over*, the young catcaller Don Bryan disparages a woman rejecting him, “decid[ing] that she was only a goddamn Polack anyway.”¹⁰⁰ In *Reverend Father Gilhooley*, Mrs. Collins reacts to her daughter’s budding romance with venom and abuse. ““Marry a black devil out of Hell! A Protestant!” [she] exclaimed... ‘Go, you whore, and never come back for all that I may care!’”¹⁰¹ The slurs and epithets uttered by Farrell’s characters throughout his work are uncountable. The historical development of Irish discrimination begs a multitude of questions regarding the evolution of racial and ethnic ideologies in the United States. In the *Columbia Guide to Irish American History*, Timothy Meagher succinctly describes, “[there] was an explosion of books... in the late 1980s and early 1990s that both established whiteness as a major interpretation in American history and identified the Irish as the premier example of a people who learned how to

¹⁰⁰ James T. Farrell, *Looking ‘Em Over* in *Chicago Stories*, 31.

¹⁰¹ James T. Farrell, *Reverend Father Gilhooley* in *Chicago Stories*, 73.

‘become white.’”¹⁰² In the context of the Chicago Irish of the early 20th century, this idea of “whiteness” must be discussed hand in hand with concepts of Americanization, and how Irish Americans perceived themselves in relation to other races and ethnic groups.

Developments in class and concepts of nationality are useful as lenses through which we can observe these bigotries develop in the Irish American identity. The relative similarities of British and American culture in addition to the lack of language barrier meant that to the Irish, becoming “American” was a process with different markers and ideologies than those of Eastern and Southern European immigrants. For the Irish, economic success, what might colloquially be called “making it,” became a significant marker of what it was to be not only an Irish immigrant or the descendent of an Irish immigrant, but an American. Studs father Patrick, despite having immigrated from Ireland as a child, clearly identifies himself and his family to be American, in a fully nationalistic sense:

“‘Things will have to get better. That’s just what Mrs. Schwartz and I were saying to each other in the hall this morning,’ [Mrs. Lonigan] said. ‘Maybe if we get a man like Al Smith next year, and kick out Hoover who’s only a tool of the Jew international bankers, we’ll turn the corner. This country is too great and too rich to be going to the dogs the way it seems to be these days... But we got to get a strong man in the White House, a man like Al Smith or Mussolini, to kick out the bankers and grafting politicians and racketeers, and that’ll make America a country for Americans only.’”¹⁰³

One detects not the slightest trace of irony in Lonigan’s denouncement of “Jew bankers” despite the high probability that he has established relationships with at least some of the Jews we know to have lived in their integrated neighborhood, not to mention the lingering possibility of Mrs. Schwartz’s Jewishness implied by her German name. There are few clearer indictments of the Lonigan family’s spiritual poverty than that expression, “This country is too great and too rich to

¹⁰² Meagher, *Columbia Guide to Irish American History*, 215.

¹⁰³ Farrell, *Judgment Day in Studs Lonigan*, 612.

be going to the dogs... America a country for Americans only.” This diatribe simply reiterates his belief in a discriminatory ideology that is in fact completely incongruent with the world he lives in. It is a perception that there exists some kind of core, unified “America,” with a treasury of wealth and prestige that one might attain if they possess the right attributes and follow the correct path. His picture of the United States is of an exclusive and privileged society to which one must gain access. In his mind, the idea of becoming American is the point of America. His attitude thus becomes hostile to those he considers to be outside of that picture, and he routinely attributes the problems of Depression-era America to ethnic caricatures and stereotypes. Yet he also speaks of kicking out “grafting politicians,” as if Chicago Mayor “Big Bill” Thompson and his Irish-dominated political operation was not perhaps the most corrupt in the country.

Temporally, Lonigan has no basis to consider himself any more American than the blacks he violently curses for “ruining” their neighborhood, and hardly more so than the “Wops” and “Polacks” he had previously believed to have encroached on its boundaries. His possessiveness towards what he considers his space is a zero sum game; he does not consider further integration to be an option. Consciously or not, in the mind of the Lonigan family, the distinction between what makes somebody an American is based on a fundamentally misguided understanding of class and ethnicity.

Accounting for the Chicago Irish as a whole, that flawed perception can be understood through notions of identity, economic power, and political representation. Historical experiences both in Ireland and in the American Northeast in many cases led Irish immigrants and migrants to evolve an acute awareness of social role and order. Factors including the sheer relative size of the Irish population and their familiarity with an oppositional “Anglo-Saxon Protestant” political structure meant that in Chicago, the Irish seized the opportunity to make themselves politically

dominant by the turn of the 20th century.¹⁰⁴ Though their commitment in practice to Irish nationalism was inconsistent, politicians frequently invoked the cause in attempt to play ethnic solidarity for votes. At the same time, however, labor and economic issues generally took priority in Irish bloc voting habits,¹⁰⁵ exposing one of the unique ways in which Irish identity had begun to become a conscious and unconscious means to an end. This was reinforced by a pervasive culture of political patronage, extended across ethnic boundaries but nonetheless becoming a key component of Irish cultural solidarity. As a result, as more and more Irish, including Patrick Lonigan, ascended to the American middle-class, the Irish identity in Chicago became increasingly tied to a self-sustaining relationship between the perception of bloc political power and a steady climb towards economic success.

Spiritual poverty might then be defined by the Lonigan family's response to the invalidation of that identity that occurs when the Depression interrupts that process, and disturbs their idea of the relationship between class and ethnic identity. Meagher notes that the Irish jump into the middle class was accomplished in large part from the considerable number of second generation Irish who obtained "skilled blue-collar jobs [such] as painters, printers, [and] machinists,"¹⁰⁶ a group that included painters Patrick and Studs Lonigan. In 1926, Patrick Lonigan arranges several lucrative work contracts through their State Senator Barney McCormack, who could "fix it with the right fellows who are letting out the bids,"¹⁰⁷ with the intention of allowing Studs to begin running the business in the near future. Six years later, with the Depression deepening and the Lonigans near ruin, Patrick arranges another meeting with McCormack. This time, the well is dry. He bemoans to Studs:

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in America* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1997), 119.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 130.

¹⁰⁶ Meagher, *Columbia Guide to Irish American History*, 104

¹⁰⁷ Farrell, *Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* in *Studs Lonigan*, 469.

“‘He was crying about the Polacks and the Bohunks. He says that they just almost cleaned out the Irish. He kept saying to me, ‘Paddy, if you want to get anything down at the [City] Hall, you better put a *sky* on your name before you go down there.’ ... He said that these days, down at the Hall, they only speak English from one to two in the afternoon.’ ... ‘From the looks of things, pretty soon a white man won’t feel at home here. What with the Jew international bankers holding all the money here, and the Polacks and Bohunks squeezing the Irish out of politics, it’s getting to be no place for a white man to live.’”¹⁰⁸

There are several threads to unpack in Lonigan’s despair. The readiness with which he accepts McCormack’s racially charged explanation for the work shortage speaks to how he has competitively positioned his own Irish identity with regards to other ethnic groups. He associates the perceived loss of the Irish political space with what he sees as an invasion of their physical space. Lonigan essentially regards cultural competition in Chicago to be a zero sum game. Whether consciously or not, the Irish association of ethnic identity with political and economic advantage within a capitalist ideology such as Patrick Lonigan’s meant that maintaining that identity became a set of ends unto themselves, rather than simply a consequence of a number of different processes. Consequently, when a shifting societal landscape meant that those processes could no longer function as they did, he views it as an attack from other ethnic groups bent on destroying the trappings of his own. What this scapegoating most critically shows is Lonigan’s commitment to a *white* Irish American identity. That he identifies as both Irish and American is clear. More importantly, he exemplifies a case in which the Irish American participation in mainstream American racism was not solely a poisonous symptom of that identity, but had in many cases had become inextricably tied to it.

Ethnic Politics, Space, and Political Space

There are still more subtle implications of this attitude that reinforce the toxicity that Farrell sees in the means of maintaining that identity. It shows spiritual poverty to be more

¹⁰⁸Farrell, *Judgement Day* in *Studs Lonigan*, 820.

complex than a characterization of simple bigotry. The Lonigans' griping reveals what Farrell would have seen as a fundamental ignorance of the social reality that his people were a part of. What they believed to be a kind of foreign invasion was the result of a process that any Irish with a self-conscious sense of history should have been familiar with. Irish roles in Chicago politics and its consequential social implications highlight how these problematic notions of identity and hierarchy evolved. When Patrick Lonigan goes to meet Barney McCormack, he is under the impression that he "would be sitting in clover after the Democratic victory last spring."¹⁰⁹ That Democratic victory, however, was made considerably different from those of years past. In April 1931, the aforementioned William H. Thompson was emphatically denied a fourth term in office by Anton Cermak, a Czech immigrant. His election was undeniably ethnic in character. The Cermak campaign managed to bring immigrant populations, particularly the more recent and largely working class groups, into a more unified collective voting bloc than had ever been seen to that point.¹¹⁰ The cutthroat circumstances of the Great Depression made the campaign especially inflammatory along always-contentious ethnic boundaries. On April 8 1933, the *New York Times* noted that Thompson's campaign "consisted almost entirely of attacks upon his opponent, and appeals to racial, religious, and class prejudice."¹¹¹ The same day, the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* was adorned with a large cartoon portraying Thompson as being carted away by Cermak in a caricature of Thompson's infamous remarks, "Tony, Tony, where's your

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 820.

¹¹⁰ John M. Allswang, *A House For All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago 1919-1949* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970). While this text provides an excellent analysis of politics and voting patterns in clearly grouped ethnic and class populations, it is severely limited, in my opinion, by an almost entirely complete disregard of Irish populations and politics. Being such a historically strong cultural force in mainstream Chicago politics, it seems that a less analytical and more interpretive and revealing text would not be possible without at least some deliberation on the Irish role in the political establishment these ethnic groups were considering themselves in relation to.

¹¹¹ "Chicago Ousts Thompson; Cermak is Elected Mayor By a Majority of 191,916," *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 8, 1931.

pushcart at? Can you imagine a World's Fair mayor with a name like that?"¹¹² Thompson's famous last words are almost fitting. Cermak's election was perfectly representation for new classes of Chicagoans that were beginning to make their voices heard.

The sudden effectiveness of Cermak's ethnic coalition is visible in its staying power. After Cermak's assassination in 1933, his Irish successors Ed Kelly and Richard J. Daley were able to effectively co-op and solidify this newly formed Democratic bloc into perhaps the most infamous party "machine" of the 20th Century. Though their political savvy and institutionalized networks meant that the Irish were able to maintain their historically prominent role in party politics, Cermak's campaign was a culmination and utilization of a growing ethnic participation in mainstream American culture that appeared to the Irish in particular as a kind of existential threat. Tensions surrounding Prohibition, Cermak's carrying issue in forming his coalition, were rife with ethnic subtext. Regarding selective enforcement of prohibition laws, Lisbeth Cohen cites notions of class and economic power as the primary motivators for claims of discrimination made by recent immigrant groups.¹¹³ It would certainly be naive, however, to believe that ethnicity itself could not have played a significant role in this sentiment. Dating from the mid to late 19th century, the Irish have historically made up a disproportionately large part of the Chicago Police Department. This development was frequently based in patronage politics, and such widespread inclusion within the institution of law and order no doubt played a part in Irish devotion to a hyphenated American identity.¹¹⁴ It is easy to see how the perception of particular leniency towards certain ethnic and economic groups could have formed. Prohibition in Chicago may never have been enforced with much gusto, but it is telling nonetheless that though the last

¹¹²"Big Bill Learns the Whereabouts of Tony's Cart," cartoon, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), April 8, 1931.

¹¹³ Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 255.

¹¹⁴ Sam Mittrani, *The Rise of the Chicago Police Department: Class and Conflict, 1850-1894* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 10.

decade-plus of middle class Irish Studs Lonigan's habitual boozing, the issue of its illegality is almost entirely absent throughout. Regardless, by the early 1930s and the setting of *Judgment Day*, the social and political assertiveness of more recent Chicago immigrant groups had begun to develop in earnest, frequently in matters and issues that directly threatened Irish domination in spaces and institutions they considered to be integral to the formation and maintenance of their own ethnic identity.

Returning to Patrick Lonigan's lament that "it's getting to be no place for a white man to live," we can continue analyzing these developments through the space of the city itself. In a young city like Chicago, the Irish had the opportunity not only create their space but cultivate it to their own particular sensibilities. As they spread throughout the South Side, they shaped their neighborhoods and parishes in deliberate response and competition to the Protestant populations they shared the city with.¹¹⁵ To the Irish, the conceptual space of the community was intertwined with cultural identity in a manner that would have been more personally and culturally sentimental than in the case of later immigrant groups, whose residential enclaves were frequently constructed and determined based on the group's dominant industrial employers.¹¹⁶

As the Lonigans prepare to move from 58th Street to the South Shore neighborhood in *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, they are less emotionally wrought over the fact of the move itself than the perceived "degradation" of the neighborhood that necessitates it. "Sunday in church, I watched Father Gilhooley." Mrs. Lonigan comments. "He's heartbroken, poor man. Here he built his beautiful church, and two years after it's built, all his parishioners are gone."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Meagher, *Columbia Guide to Irish American History*, 107.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 11-30.

¹¹⁷ Farrell, *Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, 511.

For all intents and purposes, this is real history: Father Gilhooley and his St. Patrick's Church¹¹⁸ are direct analogues for Father Michael Gilmartin and the St. Anselm Catholic Church on 61st and Michigan Ave, which by the early 1930s under different leadership was a "thriving black parish."¹¹⁹ This particular ancillary narrative is fleshed out fairly extensively throughout Farrell's canon. In the short story *Reverend Father Gilhooley*, which I have already referred to for its explicit portrayal of bitter Irish sectarianism, Gilhooley hopes to himself that "his new church would make the neighborhood grow, attracting to it the best types of well-to-do Catholics."¹²⁰ Clearly, his vision did not come to fruition. His heartbreak, however, seriously incriminates manner in which the Irish linked their identity to Catholicism. Historical investigation reveals the idea that all of Gilhooley's parishioners are "gone" is a racially charged categorical falsehood. Matthew J. Cressler's examination of black Catholicism in the context of the Great Migration of the American interwar period specifically highlights the striking success of Father Joseph Eckert, who succeeded Gilmartin at St. Anselm's in 1932 and "became nationally renowned for his missionary efforts in Chicago's Black Belt."¹²¹

Father Gilhooley's heartbreak and subsequent inability to see to completion his parish's success--he is later referenced as having been transferred slightly northwest to a parish in the Back of the Yards neighborhood--was clearly not due to a lack of resources, human or otherwise. Rather, it speaks to his conception of what constitutes a proud, model parish: Irish and economically successful. His failure to cope with the possibility of a non-idealized congregation is a severe indictment of the function of Irish Catholicism in Chicago. Just as Studs Lonigan's

¹¹⁸ As much as any other superfluous detail in these texts, Farrell's naming of his parish after the holy figure identified more strongly than perhaps any other with a single nation, St. Patrick and Ireland, emphasizes how he highlights the features that make this integrated neighborhood distinctly Irish nonetheless.

¹¹⁹"The History of St. Anselm Catholic Church," St. Anselm Catholic Church of Chicago, last modified 2018, https://stanselmchicago.com/?page_id=7.

¹²⁰ Farrell, *Reverend Father Gilhooley* in *Chicago Stories*, 80.

¹²¹ Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Catholicism in the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 40.

lifelong pattern of conflict and self destruction exposes his engagement with religion as hollow, Gilhooley comes to epitomize the practical mode in which the Irish American identities whose participation Catholicism evolved to support became in themselves more materially and symbolically important than the processes of Catholicism itself.

We have no doubt that Gilhooley is a devoted, faithful man, as certainly were many Irish Catholics. But here, we see the tangible limits of how far that faith goes when isolated from its established context. As the pastor goes, so goes his flock, particularly in Irish culture. Ultimately, the result is a community that has no choice but to perceive any disruption to the mechanisms of their cultural solidarity as an explicit attack on the identity constituting that solidarity. In practice, spiritual poverty might be defined by the environment this ceaseless combativeness begets.

In the literature, one discovers a pattern of general bellicosity towards whatever does not appear to confirm the characters' worldview. Farrell may have intentionally limited himself to writing within Studs Lonigan's frame of reference, but that did not stop him from finding an outlet for his love of philosophy and literature. Fittingly, one of the trilogy's most intellectually diverse conversations, a hectic discussion ranging from Nietzsche to Wordsworth to politics and American culture, is held between two decided outsiders: Jewish Davey Cohen and Greek immigrant Christy, waiter at Gus's Restaurant on 58th Street. Christy, one of the few non-Irish characters given an ample platform to philosophize, makes known his feelings towards the culture the novels explore. In the midst of a lengthy diatribe denouncing American capitalism, he pauses to consider the character of the novel's Irish protagonists in the context of their collective endorsement of Chicago judicial candidate Dinny Gorman. "What do they know? Silly boys." He scoffs. "They grow up, their fathers want to make money, their mothers are silly women and

pray like sanctimonious sisters, hypocrites. The boys run the streets, and grow up in pool-rooms, drink and become hooligans. They don't know any better. Silly boys, and they kill themselves with diseases from whores and this gin they drink.”¹²² To speak colloquially, Christy calls it like he sees it. He has no stake in the cultural participation that breeds this behavior. Ultimately, he is correct in his assessment, darkly foreshadowed by *Judgment Day*'s epigraph, a devotion of the mass for the dead.¹²³

More telling, however, are the characters' reactions to this lofty sociopolitical discussion. Cohen, fully aware of his outsider status, no doubt aided by the rampant casual but explicit antisemitism expressed by most of the series' major figures, “hoped Studs hadn't heard much of the talk. He didn't want them to think him completely cracked.”¹²⁴ The crew's distaste for intellectually rigorous thought and conversation is spoken for many times throughout the books, but Cohen's response suggests that the bookworm Danny O'Neill's aloofness from his community, for example, signifies more than the attitude of a single individual. Studs' anti-intellectualism is not just an element of his personal character, but a trait that identifies him with his social and cultural peer group. His inability to understand Christy and his argument leads him to revert to an ironic nativism in order to reconcile his uneasiness with Christy's ideology. “A hell of a lot of nerve he had, being an American,”¹²⁵ Studs says to Cohen, juxtaposed by the recurring images of a patriotic Uncle Sam triggered by Christy's criticism. Christy is eventually fired after Red Kelly suggests a boycott of the restaurant, a real, material consequence of this hard headedness, and we have here an opportunity to investigate Studs' own conception of Americanness.

¹²² Farrell, *Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* in *Studs Lonigan*, 477.

¹²³ Reunited for the occasion of Shrimp Haggerty's funeral, the first chapter of *Judgment Day* more or less confirms the state of decay much of Studs' cohort has reached by their mid-twenties.

¹²⁴ Farrell, *Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* in *Studs Lonigan*, 480.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 478.

The All-American Teamster

That many South Side Irish had come to strongly consider themselves American by the 1920s and 30s has been said repeatedly. To understand the confluence of circumstances that so greatly helped fuel Irish hatred of those who they did not identify in this manner, we must comprehensively consider the economic and class development of the Irish in Chicago next to that of the more recent immigrants by whom they are so threatened. By this time, the Irish lacked the residential ethnic enclaving characteristic of Poles, Italians, Czechs, and Lithuanians, a development in no small part due to the mobility made possible by increasing Irish economic success. Meanwhile, in the 1920s, the largest employer of immigrants in Chicago was still poorly paying industrial manufacturing. The Irish maintained the cohesive ethnic identity typical of a recent immigrant group, but largely, they no longer shared the industrial working class background characteristic of other distinctly ethnic populations. The divide between the Irish and “others” was as much attributable to class as it was ethnicity.

If industrial manufacturing can be considered representative of immigrant employment in early 20th century Chicago, let us look at the role of the transportation industry to contextualize the Irish. For the Irish Chicagoan, a career at such a dispatch company could well have encapsulated the potential for success and socioeconomic ascendancy so critical to their emerging hyphenated American identity.¹²⁶ The teamster is a recurring figure throughout Farrell’s canon, particularly his early work. It is a industry he would have been intimately familiar with. Farrell’s father was a career teamster, and he periodically held summer jobs at a wagon dispatch company. Two of Farrell’s most prominent early protagonists are wagon

¹²⁶ Chicago’s status as the country’s premier shipping hub in combination with its rapid population growth and an early 20th century boom in transportation technology led to a thriving workforce. Cohen’s data shows transportation, including primarily teamsters and streetcar operators, as an employer of roughly 110,000 Chicagoans, of whom the large plurality (roughly 2/3) were 1st generation or later immigrants.

dispatchers: Jim O’Neill, the literary analogue for Farrell’s father, and Ambrose McGinty, for whom Farrell’s little-remembered second novel, *Gas-House McGinty* (1933) is named. In a 1932 short story taking place some time between the War and the Great Depression, O’Neill is awarded a raise that allows him a yearly salary of \$2700, which while far from substantial, allows him to support a large family, and is a significant step from the roughly \$1800 earned in 1925 by a Chicago team driver,¹²⁷ the position from which a dispatcher would have been promoted. In the same year, a skilled painter in the vein of Studs and Patrick Lonigan (who as their own bosses could have earned substantially more) made roughly \$3400. These figures are by no means upper crust, but they represent a standard of living considerably higher than afforded the majority of the unskilled immigrant labor force. McGinty, O’Neill, and Lonigan all take great pride in their careers. It is not glorious work, but in all cases, it represents a far better standing than where their own fathers and families began: what they might consider to be the mark of a “true” American.

The history of the teamster in Chicago supports this narrative. Until the turn of the century and the intensifying of labor organization, team drivers, like the majority of the immigrant industrial labor force, worked incredibly long, difficult hours in frequently hazardous environments. Though the teamster workforce was generally diverse, it was originally populated primarily by native Chicagoans (many of whom nonetheless would have been second and third generation immigrants themselves) and English speaking immigrants, of whom the Irish constituted a large proportion. Irish presence within the teamsters was reflected on a national level; the first president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the infamously corrupt Cornelius Shea, was a second generation Irish immigrant whose base of power lay largely in

¹²⁷ United States Department of Labor, *History of Wages in the United States From Colonial Time to 1928*. Accessed online <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106007458745;view=1up;seq=4>

Chicago. His successor, Daniel Tobin, was himself an Irish immigrant. There may not have been any particularly ethnic characteristic of the teamster, but Chicago's demographics in addition to the concentration of industry on the city's South Side mean that the Irish were still well represented. That teamster historian David Witwer notes the presence of a debate over the potential membership of recent Southern and Eastern European immigrants (at a time in which Chicagoans made up a significant majority of national membership) is indicative of these groups relative dearth of representation in the industry.¹²⁸ Again, the early teamsters union was far from racially and ethnically homogeneous. Their concentrated effort to build as large a membership base as possible, including a significant number of blacks, "checked the worst racist predilections of white Teamster leadership."¹²⁹ At the same time, however, it is easy to imagine how these just discussed tendencies in the teamster workforce could have reinforced a perceived distinction between "white Americans" and the groups that populated the other working class industries that dominated the South Side.

Economically, the teamsters of the early 20th century would have been a vehicle for making the categorical jump from the immigrant working class to a more stable American middle class lifestyle. Between the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two of the 20th, the general numbers compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate a gradual climb in wage rates coupled with a decrease in hours per week. This does not tell the full story. Contemporary recounts indicate the significant lifestyle and cultural impact of union organization on the transportation industry. Though the BLS reports minimal gains in their

¹²⁸ David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 18-37.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

admittedly spotty figures until the mid-1910s,¹³⁰ noted economic historian John Commons writes of the material benefits a guarantee of regular hours and wages mandated by union action in the first few years of the century had on members. With no guarantee of steady work and seasonality within industries, the BLS could not have been able to reflect in a single rate or average a reality in which workers may have at some times had 12-14 hour days for seven days a week, and no work at all at others.¹³¹ Consistency of pay and schedule in addition to other union benefits increased the teamster's quality of life exponentially. It "gave these men a measure of respectability," Witwer says in *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*, quoting an IBT member in 1905. "The union not only regulated wages and working hours, but improved the class of the men employed."¹³² This final sentiment, perceptions of respectability and class, are concepts that greatly inform an understanding of Chicago Irish identity and its relations with others.

Farrell's characters are sufficiently nuances to demonstrate both the best and worst qualities made possible by these transformations. Jim O'Neill and Ambrose McGinty, the two most prominent teamsters of his early writing, have markedly different temperaments. O'Neill is a tough, hard worker who considers himself to be a man of integrity. He describes turning down a political patronage job in his youth. He has many struggles, but through his work, he believes he can give his children a better life. McGinty is loud, obscene, and explicitly bigoted. His standard of living is low, yet he always has the resources for drinking, smoking, and gambling.

¹³⁰ This report, the previously referenced *History of Wages in the United States From Colonial Times to 1928*, is an amalgamation of a huge number of data and statistics report on American industry, coupled with some history of the Bureau's function. Many reports have sizeable gaps and inconsistencies, and there is a conspicuous absence of Illinois or Chicago teamster data between 1899 and 1913, when the numbers are noted to be union-affiliated. It is also worth recognizing that the teamsters themselves were a highly diversified group; differences in the nature of the workplace and work itself were often specific to the particular industry a local served.

¹³¹ John R. Commons, *The Teamsters of Chicago in Trade Unionism and Labor Problems* ed. John Commons (1904). Accessed online <https://archive.org/details/tradeunionisman04commgoog>

¹³² Witwer, *Corruption and Reform*, 19.

Constant delusions of grandeur and self importance hide his insecurity. Though he has long been promoted to dispatcher, it is possible he would enjoy the following Commons characterization of the teamster. “He is more than the mere unskilled laborer, as is generally assumed.” He quips. “He is sometimes a traveling salesman and at least a traveling representative. Even the ordinary teamster looks upon his occupation as a craft, and the object of his union is to have it recognized as such.”¹³³ McGinty takes pride in navigating the ins and outs of his job, and above all, the power and agency he believes he gains as a function of it.

Of course, it would be slanderous to imply that McGinty’s worldview, the worst extremes of his personality brought out by the characteristics of his occupation, applied uniformly in the slightest to either teamsters or Irish Chicagoans. Furthermore, *Gas-House McGinty* isn’t quite the portrait of realist narrative that are the Lonigan or O’Neill books. It stands out awkwardly from Farrell’s other early work for its caricaturing and rather eccentric narrative. McGinty’s observations of other identities, however, are still useful in characterizing the relationship between how Irish perceptions of class and identity developed. It does not appear coincidental that the traits previously described of McGinty could just as easily be attributed to Studs Lonigan. Their problematic actions and worldviews are both greatly informed by a critical ignorance of the forces that have caused their lives to be what they are. The divergent development of immigrant populations and labor forces may help explain in part those sentiments.

We are introduced to McGinty’s neighborhood and “stove heat street” as he walks home from the streetcar at the end of the day.

“On the other side of the street grimy laborers, with oxen Slavic faces, slopped homeward, picks and shovels slung over their shoulders. Mac sprightened his gait and stiffened his shoulders. He felt a bit like a king.

¹³³ Commons, *Teamsters of Chicago*, 63.

He realized that he was about the highest-salaried man on the street, and that he had no neighbors who wielded as much authority as he did. He amounted to a hell of a lot more than those hunkies.”¹³⁴ *Gas-House McGinty*, 84-86.

While how he interprets it is another matter, there is little reason to doubt the veracity of what he saw in front of him. Huge portions of the recent immigrant groups spent the first twenty years of the century trapped under the poor and inconsistent wages, hours, and conditions of unskilled labor that had for much of the 19th century the charge of the Irish, among others. Thanks to experience from the violently turbulent period of labor unrest of previous decades, perhaps culminating in a 103-day teamster strike in 1905, mass employers, particularly those in heavy industry, were far more prepared for the eventual organization of these immigrant industrial workers. The conclusion of World War was a watershed for both labor and identity in Chicago. Beginning with a massive nationwide steel worker strike in 1919, labor unrest was for several years a constant in Chicago’s mass industry, with unions lobbying for the same improvements afforded the teamsters twenty years previously. Culturally, wartime jingoism contributed to a deepening of ethnic divides and identification.¹³⁵ Above all, unlike the direct and impactful concessions and powerful teamsters union that arose from the battles of the early 1900s, the outcome for these immigrants was less materially obvious, and led to different understandings of identity and surroundings.

A depressed economy between 1920 and 1921 halted labor disruption for the remainder of the decade. Popular support for unionism had waned significantly amid the highly public violence and media demonization of corruption in the years after the 1905 teamster strike, and

¹³⁴ James T. Farrell, *Gas-House McGinty* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1933) 84-86.

¹³⁵ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 29.

employee power decreased.¹³⁶ The most impactful changes to the lives of workers most frequently came on the initiative of employers. Cohen strongly emphasizes the effect on immigrant workers of newly developed welfare capitalist ideologies on the part of large industrial employers. During the years of postwar labor strife, employers frequently destabilized unions by utilizing tactics exploiting preexisting ethnic tensions and geographical enclaving, and in subsequent years prioritized arranging their labor force in a manner designed to discourage worker solidarity and maintain strict control over both their employees and their workplaces.¹³⁷ Many of these methods, however, simultaneously contributed to immigrant processes of Americanization in new and unique ways. Community investment, factory English classes, and payment in stocks greatly expanded immigrant accessibility and participation in American capitalism. The intention of these programs along with others in the minds of the employers was to instill a sense of loyalty to the company within the individual worker. In practice, their goal of maintaining the availability of a cheap and profitable workforce was often thinly veiled. Wages remained low, work inconsistent, and conditions perilous. Critically, they ultimately resulted in a different kind of worker solidarity: one of class, rather than ethnicity.¹³⁸

Spiritual Poverty in the Arena of Americanization

As immigrant workers raised children, learned English, and became integrated in the workplace, these people began to move outside the ethnic institutions that maintained the neighborhood enclave. As immigrants became naturalized citizens (notably, something that Irish immigrants generally strove for much more rapidly than other groups¹³⁹) and became familiar

¹³⁶ David Witwer, *Unionized Teamsters and the Struggle over the Streets of the Early Twentieth-Century City*, *Social Science History* 24 no.1 (2000), 188.

¹³⁷ Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 100-120.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 180-209.

¹³⁹ Meagher, *Columbia Guide to Irish American History*, 183.

with American institutions, their participation in government and politics increased, a process reflected in the rise of Anton Cermak's multiethnic power base, first as president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners (a position that remains to this day perhaps the most powerful in Chicago, next to the mayor) and chairman of the County Democratic Party, then as mayor. The institutional trappings of ethnic communities remained in place, but purely ethnic identities were slowly beginning to lose ground to other considerations and commonalities. The wiping out of these small, local ethnic institutions by the Great Depression ultimately served as the final blow to the widespread establishments of largely homogeneous enclaves.

As these gradual changes in immigrant identities occurred, the space of the enclave was forced to change with it. Overall immigration in Illinois declined in the 1920s, in no small part due to the national establishment of nativist quota legislation. Even so, immigrant families became more stable from what elements of welfare capitalism they could take advantage of, and a mass migration of southern blacks to the industrial north was well underway. Between 1920 and 1930, populations on the outer south, west, and north sides of the city increased¹⁴⁰, reflecting a rapidly growing city with equally rapid geo-demographic shifts. At a certain point, the physical space of the enclave was not enough, leading to growth and expansion. A massive influx of people into the already cramped black belt led to its quick expansion to the south, quickly encompassing Studs' old neighborhood of Washington Park. The threat of a literal invasion of space perceived by Farrell's Irish characters was a reaction to a very real and swift development in Chicago's urban landscape.

Considering industrial immigrant identity, we ought to remember that individual autonomy was the greater stake in the lives of people across classes and cultures. "In contrast to

¹⁴⁰"Census Tracts of Chicago Grouped into 148 Areas Showing Increase or Decrease of Population, 1920 to 1930," map, University of Chicago Library Map Collection, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/3434343>.

what [was] expected,” Cohen reminds us, “Chicago’s ethnic workers were not transformed into more Americanized, middle-class people by the objects they consumed... Instead, workers consumed on their own terms, giving their own meaning to possessions.”¹⁴¹ Because of the manner in which their opportunities were presented to them, working class immigrants in early 20th century Chicago did not necessarily tie the construction and maintenance of a hyphenated American identity to the fulfillment of the American capitalist narrative that surely drove so many of them overseas to begin with. In contrast, the Irish in Chicago nearly immediately sought to explicitly stake a claim in the space of the city through both participation in public and political institutions and consciously shaping their physical space in the urban landscape. Doing so appears to have eventually led in many cases to the formation of a connection between their place as Americans and the material benefits that simultaneously came as a result of the same processes that helped establish their American identity. In Farrell’s literature, the prejudice with which Irish American characters treat those they consider outside typically stems from their misinterpretation that the nature of their successfully Americanized hybrid identity signifies a right to stake claim to the spaces they came to consider to be the characteristics of that identity. In one way, this might be epitomized by what I previously interpreted to be Patrick Lonigan’s perception that space in America is a zero sum game. Other ethnic groups following their own path towards success, attempting to reach beyond the cramped spaces and poor standard of living afforded to unskilled industrial wage laborers, can only do so at the expense of those who had achieved it first. Without the perspective, knowledge, or empathy to even recognize those movements as such, the only response is one of discontent and enmity.

Though it does not mean one single thing, a great part of spiritual poverty may be encapsulated in what Farrell sees to be the inherent limitedness of a life dictated and set back by

¹⁴¹ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 120.

that ignorance and discontent. The fate of Studs Lonigan speaks to the idea that spiritual poverty in action is an almost willing misconception of how people and society in America and Chicago function. To the very end, Studs adheres to the worldview the social circumstances of his upbringing have dictated, but his consistent inability to comprehend process the dynamics of a constantly changing world ultimately leads to his destruction. Studs' death may not come until the end of *Judgment Day*, but the core of his ruin is expressed in the final pages of the trilogy's second installment, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*. A reunion of Studs' old "58th street gang" for a New Years party in a "disreputable hotel on Grand Boulevard in the black belt" ends in disaster, with most of the attendees sick or unconscious by the end of the night from alcohol consumption. Weary Reilly, Studs' old grade school nemesis, is arrested for a brutal, violent rape, and the chapter concludes with a black man stumbling across somebody passed out at a fireplug on the Lonigan's old corner of 58th and Prairie.

That somebody was "Studs Lonigan, who had once, as a boy, stood before Charley Bathcellar's poolroom thinking that some day, he would grow up to be strong, and tough, and the real stuff."¹⁴² He carries this conceit with him throughout his entire life, despite the glaring physical and material deterioration in his quality of life exposed by this sad and depraved conclusion. What Studs and the people he surrounds himself with consider to be "the real stuff" are those who embrace the exceptionalistic qualities of their identity. In doing so, they reject the pursuit of knowledge and cosmopolitanism that Farrell believes leads to mental and spiritual enlightenment. Studs and his friends go to church, because participation in Catholicism is key to maintaining the potential they see in the assertion of their identity. They internalize the cultural teachings of Irish Catholicism, fully buying into conservatism of what their local Catholic leaders and institutions believed to be necessary to maintain their status quo. Studs selectively

¹⁴² Farrell, *Judgment Day* in *Studs Lonigan*, 544.

allows the fear-based and exclusionary urgings of priests and the many deeply religious members of his community to reinforce the notion of his own exceptionalism relative to other cultural groups, while ignoring the simultaneous “immorality” of his own social and sexual habits according to actual Catholic doctrine. He fails to comprehend that his misguided commitment to his own identity prevents him from achieving what he believes to be the fulfillment of that identity. When the Great Depression levels the field and deprives him of the circumstances that allow him to pursue this fulfillment, the speed of his self destruction increases rapidly. His delusions of grandeur and unquestioning belief in capitalism lead him to lose his savings in an ill-advised stock investment. When his fiancée becomes pregnant, the need for an immediate wedding to avoid the social disaster this constitutes within Irish Catholic cultural norms drive him to the psychological limit. His fatal pneumonia is contracted amid a desperate and fruitless job search in the pouring rain, and his family is left behind in utter ruin, both economic and spiritual.

The subtext of Studs’ life and death is led by the theme of unfulfilled potential. Farrell believed it mistaken to define Studs as victim of his environment, expressing the idea that a person’s fundamental character is not altered by their circumstances. The traits and tendencies of Studs Lonigan were constructed to demonstrate how the core beliefs and ideologies of a community’s identity can create a ready-made path towards discontent, decay, and devastation in spite of the material opportunities and privilege that coexist with it. As Studs descends into death, his consciousness is haunted by religious imagery juxtaposed with the important figures and decisions of his past. He accepts that he is “sink[ing] his soul more deeply in hell,”¹⁴³ as if he finally understands the consequences of how he lived his life. Still yet, he cannot muster the strength to question the reasons that it turned out as it did. The picture of the Lonigan family as

¹⁴³ Farrell, *Judgment Day* in *Studs Lonigan*, 898.

Studs dies is heartbreaking: a drunkenly grief struck father and brother, a hysterical mother laying the emotional burden of his death of the perceived sins of the mother of his unborn child, and two broken sisters left to pick up the pieces. In the grand scheme of the great accomplishment that was the Lonigan trilogy, the lasting representation of spiritual poverty is that the power to avoid the sad end of the Lonigan family ultimately only ever lay in their own hands.

Marxists and Manuscripts: History, Politics, and Literary Technique

“We have never, in the Middle West, had ease or an indigenous culture. We have been starved since our birth. The exploiting class has not even made a culture for itself. Revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as the wheat ... Every writer in the Middle West has had to work alone as far as connection with other writers is concerned, therefore he has been in closer contact with the American experience.”

Meridel Le Sueur, 1935

Introduction: Wright and Farrell, Literature and Politics

These first two chapters have been studies of two writers whose work is heavily influenced by academic notions of history. They are largely considered independently, yet they have everything to do with each other. Fully understanding the work of Wright and Farrell as they are presented in the first two chapters is not possible without a discussion on how these two writers informed each other personally, politically, and in the realm of literature. Wright and Farrell first encountered each other at the 1935 American Writers Congress in New York City, where Farrell was one of many established, politically left-oriented writers invited to share their thoughts and ideas on the state of revolutionary literature. Wright, as chairman of his local John Reed Club and member of the Communist Party, was also in attendance. Within a month, they were corresponding with each other, beginning a relationship that would last for years. This chapter explores that relationship and ultimately ponders the question of how Wright and Farrell themselves imagined their function as writers and the function of their work within a larger historical picture.

Questions of literary form often hinge on questions about the “real.” What is “real life?” How is it best represented by invented words and symbols on a page? I have explored through these first two chapters the diverse manners in which Richard Wright and James T. Farrell have attempted to address those questions. In briefly summarizing the history of American realist

literature, Malcolm Cowley considered both Wright and Farrell, largely based on their seminal works *Native Son* and the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, exemplars of well-executed literary naturalism.¹⁴⁴ I hope that my work to this point in breaking down the understudied subtleties of their work has to somewhat complicated the categorical assignments sometimes necessary even for a critic as accomplished as Cowley. Farrell's documentary style is indeed exemplary of realist technique, but the contextual implications in his use of that technique is as frequently understated as the lethargy of his faithful chronicling is overstated.¹⁴⁵ Wright may be best known for the bleak urban naturalism of *Native Son*; Chapter One's examination of *Lawd Today* shows Wright to be far more flexible and experimental in his style than a strict definition of realism would allow. This chapter will discuss the purposes and methods used by the two writers in constructing their work. Particularly in the charged atmosphere of the 1930s, literature was inextricably intertwined with the arena of politics, a dialogue that explicitly connected narrative, technique, and theme with the historical and political realities of the era. As much as any writers of the time, Wright and Farrell were deeply involved in these conversations. Accordingly, they are an excellent conduit through which we might grapple with the greater question of this project: an examination of how "reality" can be expressed through literature as a form of history.

Any discussion of the relationship between Wright and Farrell must begin with with their leftist politics. The political bend of both Wright and Farrell's work during these years would ultimately come to be defined by their strained relationship with the Communist Party, and the literati therein with whom they were in constant dialogue. Wright was loathe to tolerate the subjective restrictions the Party imposed on his writing nearly from the beginning of his

¹⁴⁴ Malcolm Cowley, "A Natural History of American Naturalism" in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. George Becker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 439.

¹⁴⁵ Cowley is surprisingly pejorative in remarking that "Farrell writes well when he is excited or angry, but most of the time he makes his readers trudge through vacant lots in a South Chicago smog." There is validity to complaints of the sometimes overbearing nature of his description, but I call those complaints overstated because

association with the Chicago John Reed Club.¹⁴⁶ Farrell never joined the Party itself, but was an active participant in leftist literary circles and frequently found himself in opposition to the Party's literary philosophy, if not for the exact same reasons as Wright, then in the same spirit. Despite Party writers' energetic development of their own critical theory regarding the role of literature within a Marxist worldview, both Wright and Farrell were struck by the functional narrowness of the literature such a theory allowed. Farrell's first significant volume of theory, the aforementioned *A Note on Literary Criticism*, concretely demonstrated his dissenting engagement from mainstream leftist literary circles; over the course of a single section less than twenty pages long, he managed to denounce, or at least emphatically disagree with, the ideas and methods of Michael Gold, Granville Hicks, and Isidor Schneider, three of the Party's foremost writers and literary theoreticians.

Personally, Wright and Farrell were politically well-aligned with the Communists. Farrell was a voracious consumer of philosophy, and by the mid-1930s had achieved his own comprehensive understanding of Marxism. That aside, his willingness to criticize party orthodoxy on a limb meant that his ideas were open to dismissal;¹⁴⁷ as an early and severe critic of Stalin, he never officially joined the Party. Wright joined the Party in 1933 through the John Reed Club, and was quickly galvanized by the Party's attitude towards racial equality and its apparent support for burgeoning artists. The two of them both were nonetheless struck by what they saw to be the naivete of the Party and its artists towards the people they claimed to want to reach. They were both highly devoted towards their chosen craft of literature as an "instrument of social influence," as Farrell declared in the opening lines of *A Note on Literary Criticism*.¹⁴⁸ The Communists only seemed to be rather inept at purposefully creating a wieldy instrument.

¹⁴⁶Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 315.

¹⁴⁷ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 545.

¹⁴⁸ James T. Farrell, *A Note on Literary Criticism* (New York: Vanguard, 1936), 3.

Wright in *American Hunger* recalls his impression after his mother's first interaction with the *Left Front* magazines he brings home from the John Reed club.

Here, then, was something that I could do, reveal, say. The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would try to put some of that meaning back. I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of the Communists who strove for unity among them.¹⁴⁹

It must be granted that this was written not long after Wright's split with the Party in the early 1940s, and the account must be taken with the slightest grain of salt. Hazel Rowley's biography notes that above all, Wright was struck simply by the presence of "proletarian" art, a sharp contrast from the magazines of the educated elite he had previously been consuming.¹⁵⁰ 1944 may have been projecting his disillusionments onto the Wright of a decade prior (the section of *American Hunger* dealing with his experience in the Party was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title *I Tried to Be A Communist*). Still, even as they worked towards the same goal, the disconnect between his idea of art with a concrete social message and the Party's concept of functional proletarian art—work explicitly designed to make the proletariat aware of their condition—was clear. The Communists, Wright seems to be saying, recognized that the lives of the working class masses, particularly in industrial America, were awash with strife and suffering. That suffering, however, still had *meaning* embedded within it: the identity of an oppressed worker was not that an oppressed worker, but of whatever distinct goals, pleasures, and desires were unique to the individual, however small. In attempting to give the masses a collective self-consciousness, Wright judged that Communist art was simultaneously dehumanizing them. A part of this, however small, may be attributed to Wright's own

¹⁴⁹ Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 320.

¹⁵⁰ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 80.

stubbornness; he recalls one of his first reactions towards being invited to attend the John Reed Club, “nobody can tell me how or what to write,”¹⁵¹ a remarkably headstrong declaration from a neophyte writer who would soon be suspicious that his work was only being published in an effort to recruit him into the party. Even if Wright in retrospect was being generous in clearly articulating his early perceptiveness, he was not the only one to touch on such a nerve.

Revolutionary Literature and Writing Against the Grain

A Note on Literary Criticism was significant not just for its critical content but for its timing. Published in May 1936, just hardly a year after the New York Writers Congress, Farrell made his ideas public at a time when Communist activity was crescendoing as a reaction to the Depression.¹⁵² In that text, Farrell expresses in considerable detail what Wright had vaguely felt in his first impression of Communist literature. He observed that a “functional extremism” in revolutionary literature, an overly ideological approach to constructing fiction, too frequently led to an undesirable outcome. What was produced was often “a literature of simplicity to the point of obviousness, and even of downright banality. Crying for songs of ‘stench and sweat,’ it... idealize[s] the ‘worker’ and the ‘worker-writer,’ producing overdrawn pictures of both.”¹⁵³ This line of thought had been an early point of contention in Farrell’s lecture at the Writers Congress, where he had criticized writers of short stories for obviously and awkwardly “pasting on” revolutionary themes and messages due to their inability to adequately construct characters within limited space. Wright and Farrell both perceived that the Communists’ ideological constraints on what constituted a novel appropriate for precipitating social change severely curbed that literature’s effectiveness in adequately reconstructing reality.

¹⁵¹ Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 315.

¹⁵² Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Yale University Press, 1995), 5-8.

¹⁵³ Farrell, “On Left Wing Dualism” *Note on Literary Criticism*, 30.

At the time of the 1935 Writers Congress, Farrell's literary chops had already been established by the *Lonigan* trilogy, and his response to the flaws of his fellow revolutionary writers was direct and in the form of criticism. Farrell seems to have taken particular issue with Gold, then considered to be one of the preeminent Party-line authorities on proletarian literature. Gold pushed against the view held by some that proletarian literature by nature could *only* concern the working classes, but his concern that such literature was "in danger of becoming a petty bourgeois movement"¹⁵⁴ struck Farrell as alarmingly philistine.¹⁵⁵ One can see Gold's rationale; it calls to mind Wright's first meeting of the Party's Bronzeville branch, during which he was branded by Chicago's black communists as an "intellectual," a designation he would continually receive with an implication of dangerous aloofness from Party ideals.¹⁵⁶ But in terms of actual writing, there was a fundamental disagreement on how literary form and substance would be used to promote a "revolutionary" position.

Wright and Farrell differed from Gold in their refusal to conceptually condescend in an effort to reach a presumably uneducated proletarian readership. In the scope of their characters and themes, both the *Lonigan* trilogy and *Lawd Today* are predominantly concerned with the petty bourgeois. This in and of itself may not have posed a problem to leftist critics, but these works are distinguished, particularly in Farrell's case, by a resistance to ideological didacticism. In reviewing *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, Granville Hicks praised what he knew to be Farrell's revolutionary ideology, but found its execution within the novel lacking. "His novel pretty much disregards the insight Marxism can give to the psychology of the petty bourgeois." He wrote. "[Farrell] has extraordinary powers of observation and a remarkable memory, but his

¹⁵⁴ Henry Hart, "Discussion and Proceedings" in *American Writers Congress* (New York: International, 1935), 166.

¹⁵⁵ Farrell, "On Left Wing Dualism" in *A Note on Literary Criticism*, 30 (fn 3).

¹⁵⁶ Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 331.

sense of human values is distorted.”¹⁵⁷ Echoing Farrell’s other Communist critics, Hicks essentially chided Farrell for failing to explicitly introduce Marxism to his characters. It wasn’t until *Judgment Day*’s inclusion of a May Day parade scene that the *Lonigan* novels began to accrue more than faint praise from the left-wing punditry.¹⁵⁸ The frequency of this recurring line of criticism—one that ultimately reduces the value of his work to how one assesses his penchant for empirical detail—places in perspective Farrell’s repeated insistence that mainstream revolutionary writers were missing the point, so to speak. He continually pushed back against the necessity of that “pasting-on” of Marxist ideals within literature. “The class struggle is not something that the worker breaths, so that he goes about breathing two parts of ozone to one part of class struggle.”¹⁵⁹ He commented sardonically. Nearly two decades later, as if Hicks’ assessment were still fresh in his mind, he would write that “values are also implied in the attitudes we hold, in the choices and decisions we make, and in our actions ... Novels not only tell a story, but show how their characters live by certain values. In this sense, they afford a means of testing values in a society.”¹⁶⁰

In my second chapter, I demonstrated how a close reading of Farrell’s detail reveals the statements behind those attitudes and decisions. His writing is voluminous, and does at times come off as excessive. One can forgive a critic for misapprehending his work’s subtlety, where it exists. What still remains is the critical conclusion that in literature, ideological exposition by implication is an equally legitimate vessel for making a sociopolitical statement as ideological didacticism. Despite their commiserations over the Party’s frustrating imposition of doctrine into literature, even Wright as a Party member at times fell into this trap. In the real world, Farrell

¹⁵⁷ Granville Hicks, quoted in Landers, *An Honest Writer*, 129.

¹⁵⁸ Landers, *An Honest Writer*, 131-32.

¹⁵⁹ Farrell, “Individualism and the Class Struggle” in *A Note on Literary Criticism*, 125.

¹⁶⁰ Farrell, “On the Function of the Novel” in *Reflections at Fifty* (New York: Vanguard, 1954), 19.

might have argued, there would be no Boris Max, ready to clarify the world's ills in defense of Bigger Thomas at the drop of a pin. The "human values" of Farrell's characters may be vulgar and uncomprehending, but in his mind, they are the only way a human character can contextualize themselves and the space they occupy.

The Power of the Written Word

As an as-yet unproven writer with a sparse body of critical work, Wright's take on this issue must be extrapolated through his fiction itself. A card-carrying member attempting to work directly within the frame of Communist Party agendas, Wright's struggle against producing Party line dogma was fraught with conflict. It has already been noted that his resistance to subscribing to the Communist doctrine of revolutionary literature was present even prior to his introduction to the Party. He remained steadfast in his refusal to alter his methods of production. As a result, his early attempts at prose fiction went largely unsupported. That did not preclude him from finding success elsewhere.

Wright is remembered for the powerful concurrence of dark, vivid language and outspoken politics that gave *Native Son* its substantial punch. Conceiving of it as representative of a historical moment in the same manner as my first chapter dealing with *Lawd Today* begs a clarification of how Wright's development as a writer and thinker led to that moment. This begins with a technical understanding of why Wright's poetry found a critical audience, while his early novels faced continual rejection. It was poetry which vaulted him into the leftist literary circles that he predominantly engaged with throughout the 1930s. Wright's career break came when the explicitly Communist *I Have Seen Black Hands* was published in *New Masses* by Jack Conroy, whose novel *The Disinherited* was being hailed as a model of proletarian literature.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 104.

One of his most famous and successful works of verse, *Between the World and Me*, stands out in particular as illuminating Wright's stylistic development. "A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood." It reads. "And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick."¹⁶² A haunting depiction of a Southern lynching, *Between the World and Me* is an early glimpse at that visceral, highly evocative style that would later give his novels and stories such a compelling intensity. Stylistically, it is much more in line with *Native Son* than with *Lawd Today* or *Tarbaby's Dawn*, an unfinished manuscript circulated to publishers concurrently with the former. *Lawd Today* is undoubtedly fascinating and worthy of attention in its own right, but the perceived flaws that made it unpublishable ultimately made its formal qualities unsuitable for Wright's ideology of literature as an engineer of social change. It would therefore be fruitful to examine why *Between the World and Me* succeeded where *Lawd Today* and *Tarbaby's Dawn* failed.

Even at that primitive stage of his first published poetry, the power in Wright's voice was already clear. *Between the World and Me*, among others, was enough to inspire a young Ralph Ellison to explicitly seek out and understudy Wright as early as 1937.¹⁶³ Wright's mentoring of Ellison is informative of his own methods of developing literary technique. From Wright, Ellison learned to extensively to break down the linguistic and syntactic structures of successful writers. This was particularly true for his study of Hemingway, the godfather of the minimalist style of naturalism that so many writers of the 20s and 30s sought to emulate, an influence most visible

¹⁶² Richard Wright, "Between the World and Me" in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 246.

¹⁶³ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 145.

in *Uncle Tom's Children*¹⁶⁴ and present to a lesser degree in *Native Son* and the aforementioned early poetry.

Hemingway's wake may have been ubiquitous in the literature of that time, but it was far from the only factor in shaping Wright's conception of literary structure. As opposed to Farrell, whose method remained consistent throughout his career, Wright was naturally experimental in his construction. For the more historically and sociologically geared work he would produce during the 1940s, he began recording his prose vocally with a dictaphone, an approach that no doubt aided the serious yet simultaneously colloquial tone of his follow-up to *Native Son*, the documentary text *12 Million Black Voices*.¹⁶⁵ He was, at the very least, inventive. While he read Hemingway and eventually made good use of naturalist form, Wright was simultaneously becoming enamored with the era's most prolific modernists. During this formative period Wright first encountered the work of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner, amongst others.¹⁶⁶ It is unknown whether Wright made a point of scrutinizing their prose in the same manner he did Hemingway's, but their influence on *Lawd Today* and *Tarbaby's Dawn* is tangible nonetheless.

The failure of *Tarbaby's Dawn*, little discussed critically outside biographies of Wright, is a messy but illustrative link in the formation of the more impactful naturalist technique that would define *Native Son*. Also known by the working title *Tarbaby's Sunrise*, the notes and drafts found in Wright's papers show a penchant for sparse, concise language highly reminiscent of Hemingway's early novels and short stories.¹⁶⁷ It is clearly a step forward from the more

¹⁶⁴ Hochman, "Ellison's Hemingways," 517.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Wright, "Tarbaby's Dawn: Draft fragments and notes" Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 3 Folder 36.

¹⁶⁶ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 111.

¹⁶⁷ Richard Wright, "Interview with Edwin Seaver," Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 62 Folder 727.

sprawling, diverse, and rapidly shifting form of *Lawd Today*. Meanwhile, its intended structure remained fragmented and somewhat disorienting. While at least some publishers thought it compelling and gave it ample consideration, one well-established Communist literary agent dismissed both manuscripts as “a series of episodes without any real plot.”¹⁶⁸¹⁶⁹ This agent, was particularly harsh in rebuking Wright’s attempts to emulate Joyce’s *Ulysses*,¹⁷⁰ upon whose structure *Lawd Today* was clearly modeled.

A brief detour through Wright’s other literary influences may help in the contextualization of Wright’s relationship with Farrell and naturalism and his development as a writer throughout the 1930s. Outside of that structural parallel, little has been said or observed about Wright’s attention to Joyce. Working towards understanding Wright’s conceptions of history, reality, and literature, it seems this deserves at least a cursory inspection. After a censorship struggle spanning more than a decade, *Ulysses* was made widely available in the United States in early 1934, just as Wright began to fully engage himself with novel writing. He appears to have engaged with it on both a macro and micro level. Through a sequence of bulletpoints detailing the minutiae of the book’s boxing themes and terminology, we see that Wright relates the Handel chorus “See The Conquering Hero Comes” to the titular character Tarbaby.¹⁷¹ He may have been familiar with the composition itself, but it is worth noting that the same song is conspicuously alluded to in *Ulysses* with the introduction of its principal antagonist, suggesting that Wright may have been paying even closer attention to Joyce than he is usually credited for. Despite the lukewarm reception of his literal renditions of contemporary media in *Lawd Today*, which will be discussed shortly, Wright intended in at least one iteration of what

¹⁶⁸ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 132.

¹⁶⁹ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 136.

¹⁷⁰ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 133.

¹⁷¹ Wright, “Tarbaby’s Dawn” in Wright Papers.

would become *Tarbaby's Dawn* to “preface each chapter with newspaper item[s] to give [the] social atmosphere of [the] day.”¹⁷² another of Joyce’s innovations. Even years later, Ralph Ellison would note the Joycean implications within the bildungsroman elements of *Black Boy*.¹⁷³ There is little to no record from Wright himself on the matter. But in attempting to provoke in an audience a truthful, experiential impression of the severe defects of American society, it is easy to imagine how this nascent writer may have turned to Joyce as an inspiration for incorporating elements of reality that might otherwise escape the dominant literary style of the era.

A Critical Relationship and the Purpose of the Novel

Evidently, Wright’s efforts to incorporate the stream of consciousness (or dialogue) and free associative literary elements into his work were less successful. These elements of formal and structural experimentation that Wright developed early in his career were so trace in what prose he ultimately published that when *Lawd Today* was released in 1963 that even James Baldwin, one of Wright’s harshest later critics, was taken aback by how he had miscalculated the scope of his technical range.¹⁷⁴ Farrell’s own critical comments on the *Lawd Today* manuscript he received may elucidate the rationale behind Wright’s stylistic development. In 1935, as Wright was attempting to sell *Lawd Today*, then titled *Cesspool*, one of its recipients was Jim Henle, president of Vanguard press. He promptly passed it on to Farrell, his star client.¹⁷⁵ Wright had first come into contact with Farrell in New York at the 1935 American Writers Congress, and it took Farrell hardly a month to write Wright with his thoughts on the project. These letters from Farrell to Wright are among the earliest dated in Wright’s archived papers at Yale

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues” in *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 130.

¹⁷⁴ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 105.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 103.

University, perhaps indicating that it was near this time that Wright began to feel some kind of stability as a career writer. Though his impression of the manuscript was generally positive, Farrell's criticism of its extended stream-of-dialogue mailroom scene (discussed at length in Chapter One) is particularly elucidating.

When four such men get together in a group it is quite likely that they will say and act just as you portray them. Their language will tend to approximate uniformity in such a way that there is little to distinguish who speaks ... To use up the proportion of the book you do on this one factor is, I think, ineffective, because then, it gives the wrong impression. It does not give a sense of life, a sense of people, a sense of the feelings thoughts etc of these people that will cut into the reader enough to make him see them as people. The result is that, in these sections, you tend to get an effect of caricature, and that is bad. Because this book of yours should, must, and eventually, I think, will be much more than this.¹⁷⁶

Evidently, this is a point upon which Wright disagreed, as what would be published in 1963 ultimately remained largely the same as the draft distributed in the late 30s. Regardless, it begs questions of what Farrell considers to be the “realistic” in constructing fiction. It would be unwise to assert that Farrell had a broad distaste for the experimental, quasi-modernist stylistic approach Wright uses in *Lawd Today*. He glowingly observed the manner in which Joyce was able to truthfully encapsulate the spirit of turn-of-the-century Ireland, and he held Faulkner in high regard.¹⁷⁷ However, his commentary on the mailroom scene, in addition to his dislike of Wright's liberal transcriptions of radios found in the story's backgrounds—“it seems to me to be artificial”—shows that he did not find it suitable to Wright's purposes of “depicting Negro life,”¹⁷⁸ nor to his own, if his own uniformity of style is any indication. Depicting the world and a particular place and time with the intention of objectivity was something Farrell was already

¹⁷⁶ James T. Farrell, Letter to Richard Wright, Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 97 Folder 1327.

¹⁷⁷ Farrell, “Joyce and His First Self-Portrait,” *New York Times* December 31, 1944.

¹⁷⁸ Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 355.

accomplished at. It is clear he felt there were more elements to it than literally reproducing what was said and done, without commentary.

Granted, being human, his thoughts are not always coherent and in agreement. The above criticism of Wright's heavy use of stream-of-dialogue, so to speak, could be read as self-contradictory. In the same breath, Farrell credits Wright with creating an accurate representation of the kind of dialogue such a group of characters might engage in, while simultaneously claiming the extent to which Wright uses it creates a "caricature" effect, exaggerating some aspects of their character while underemphasizing others. His meaning here might be discerned by his last thought above. When he says "this book of yours should ... be much more than this," he is reflecting the sentiment, shared by Wright, that within the tradition of black American writing there was a dearth of truly accurate, multi-faceted representations of the black American's reality.¹⁷⁹ Though the conversation in *Lawd Today* is purely transcribed, Farrell seems to be saying, it does not actually *do* enough. The aim of dialogue, he claims, is to be used as "poetry, in the broadest sense of the word ... [as] a literary medium, carrying feeling, subtleties and the like. To use it as a means of compression of such things as the philosophy, the estimations which the characters make of life."¹⁸⁰ The mailroom conversation of *Lawd Today*'s "Squirrel Cage" section may be a faithful, quasi-photographic depiction of such life, as my first chapter demonstrates, but it existed in a vacuum. Its utter honesty in attaching no frills, omniscient descriptions, or editorials achieves something noteworthy in and of itself, but for a novel whose grasp on concrete narrative is frequently tenuous, it ultimately failed to make it

¹⁷⁹ In *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, Wright claims that generally, "Negro writing [has] assumed two general aspects: 1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of 'achievement'. 2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice." While I am mostly unaware of Farrell's familiarity with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, I suspect that Wright, rather than being simply ignorant of his own tradition, would admit the likes of Jean Toomer and his friend Langston Hughes as exceptions to his reasonable if nonetheless hyperbolic assertion.

¹⁸⁰ Farrell to Wright, Wright Papers.

more compelling to a contemporary reader. What Farrell's criticism really says is that the technique, while well-executed, only undermined the novel's greater purpose.

"The purpose of the novel," Farrell writes in *Reflections at Fifty*, "is not that of a being a literally true record of life. It is a recreation, a concentrated image of what life is or may be like."¹⁸¹ The statement is rather obvious (fiction and history are, literally, not the same thing), but in light of the most common criticism of Farrell's work, it is a reasonable point to dwell on. What *is* the purpose of the novel, then? As he would have it, while the novel is not meant to represent "facts" in the empirical sense of the word, it functions as a means to demonstrate to a reader "a deeper human sense" of the social processes that lead to a historical or sociological "fact."¹⁸² It is not to say that history and sociology do not treat with abstract notions of humanity. We have previously seen how incorporating that sense of humanity makes *Black Metropolis*, for example such an exceptional work. It is the element of narrative, of being able to display to a reader how a hypothetical person thinks and processes reality, that allows literature to inspire and influence an individual in a way that others might not. In *recreating* life through fiction, a writer can extensively treat in his own kind of quasi-scientific case study (as Emile Zola's landmark treatise on realism would have it) with the immaterial societal principles, the unconscious social stimuli that drive human behavior as much as any sensory need. Once again, Farrell stresses the illustration of "values" within literature, "values which are not subsumable under one system, or one given set of hypotheses."¹⁸³ He highlights the fact that while the general categories history and sociology must eventually at some level reduce themselves to are highly useful, the closer one looks at any facet of an individual, the more one will discover the diverse set of qualities that defy categorization and give a person their inherent individuality. Fiction by definition cannot be

¹⁸¹ Farrell, "Literature and Sociology" in *Reflections at Fifty*, 187.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 186.

history or sociology, literally speaking. That does not mean they can not differently use the same materials of reality to achieve similar purposes.

Naturalism and the “Success” or “Failure” of Literary Technique

In Farrell’s mind, there was an intrinsic relationship in the novel between technique and purpose. As has just been discussed, he held a belief that certain literary techniques were simply more effective in enacting that stated purpose. He did not only express this sentiment to Wright in the form of criticism. In July of 1945, he wrote to Wright of a few things. He suggested they get together once they were back in New York (where they both resided by the end of the 1930s), and updated him on the slow progress of his new book. He described a recent trip to Chicago, walking through “old streets, old neighborhoods,” remarking on the endless well of memory and feeling the city has given to him. He concludes with a poignant stylistic remark.

“It occurred to me in these reflections and efforts that naturalism is the best discipline for a writer with rebellion, unhappy memories, the need to escape for spiritual privation and so on. Without it, how difficult it would be to discipline one’s own rebellion, how much more than otherwise, one would be the victim of one’s own lost and forgotten infantile past. One gets through objective and realistic attempts to write, here, a better way of gauging, of attaining perspective, of controlling oneself against too much indulgence in one’s own attitudes as against those of playmates, parents, relatives and so on.”¹⁸⁴

This is a fascinating, multi-tiered thought, and it deserves considerable space for unpacking. The first thing that must be understood is Farrell’s own conception of “naturalism.” The spirit of my project’s argument within this chapter, that there is a material history to be found expressed within this literature, may be embodied in what he found to be the purposes of naturalism. As he expanded upon in his article *Some Observations on Naturalism, so Called, in Fiction*, Farrell’s consideration of naturalism was more complex than the criteria the critical community usually

¹⁸⁴ Farrell, Letter to Wright, Wright Papers

defined it by. “I have always used the worlds naturalism and materialism as synonymous...” he explained. “By naturalism, I mean that whatever happens in this world must ultimately be explainable in terms of events in this world.”¹⁸⁵ Naturalism, to Farrell, constituted more than a style or a genre, but a literary and metaphysical philosophy by whose terms the nature of the world and reality could be displayed, and, at least in part, explained. The oft-criticized devotion with which Farrell recreated the mundane fits squarely within this logic. He wrote his novels “in order to reveal what life [seemed to him] to be like.”¹⁸⁶ His explanation implies more than its surface-level tautology. He is not defining naturalism solely against a kind of supernaturalism that would otherwise explain human behavior (as some critics have argued¹⁸⁷), but against the hard-line philosophical determinism that is often critically associated with naturalist literature. Through Studs Lonigan, he was able to explain the world he knew “in terms of the events” of that world.

The neutral, rigid tone comprising the stylistic naturalism of the *Lonigan* books is appropriate for it *not* because it clarifies the elements that consign Studs to his fate, but because it lays bare the reality of the choices and possibilities Studs by his own nature is unable to overcome to avoid that fate. While most will admit that completely refraining from editorializing in fiction is nearly impossible, “objective and realistic attempts to write” serves to place that editorializing in the world created by the novel, rather than explicitly in the words on the page themselves and the manner they are conveyed. In particular for those with “rebellion,” “unhappy memories,” and the “need to escape,” this applied sense of objectivity is necessary to prevent the

¹⁸⁵ James T. Farrell, “Some Observations on Naturalism, so Called, in Fiction.” *The Antioch Review* vol. 10 no. 2, 1950, 258.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 256.

¹⁸⁷ See Jules Chametzky, “Farrell’s Literary Criticism” in *Twentieth Century Literature* (February 1996), 86. “[Farrell’s] 1950 essay on ‘naturalism in fiction’ enlarges our conception of his own naturalism (affirming only that it is the opposite, philosophically, to supernaturalism).”

writer from falling back too hard on the emotional attitudes that while instructive to the writer themselves would fail to attain the perspective necessary for effective writing. Finally, writing with true to life detail and a simultaneous ability to shift the burden of the work's emphasized values from the author to the characters by avoiding conspicuous sermonizing was the most efficient way of capturing the devices present in reality that lie at the root of those troubles.

Politics Within Style

It is important to make the distinction that we are engaging with this relationship on two planes: the literary, and the political. That Wright was strongly influenced by Farrell, particularly in his early attempts at novel-writing, is beyond doubt.¹⁸⁸ To expend a great amount of time and space on a lateral analysis of their writing, however, is extraneous to the discussion of literature and history. The best evidence of their relationship's strength is in how the shared elements of their politics and tastes in writing are informative of Wright's evolution as a writer.

It is not difficult to imagine why Wright was quickly drawn to Farrell. Farrell's paper at the Writers Congress was concerned broadly with the short story, but its first half devoted considerable attention to the underdevelopment of both black writers and characters.¹⁸⁹ He was not the only speaker to address the issue of black writers and writing, but as biographers of both men note, he clearly struck a chord with Wright. In an era where many of the country's literary superstars, the Hemingways, Fitzgeralds, Eliots and Steinbecks of the world, wrote with what seemed to be an almost willing reluctance to engage with racial issues,¹⁹⁰ Farrell's fiction attacked the problem of racism and xenophobia in Chicago in all of its vicious obscenity. As a

¹⁸⁸ Fabre goes so far as to suggest, reasonably in my opinion, that sections in *Lawd Today* methodically instructing the reader on the rules and structures of policy stations and games of bridge were directly influenced by Farrell's description of a football game in *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*.

¹⁸⁹ James T. Farrell, "The Short Story" in *American Writers Congress*, 102-109.

¹⁹⁰ See Ralph Ellison, "20th Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity. (1953)" In *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John C. Callahan, (New York: Modern Library, 2003.), 88-93.

young adult and University of Chicago student, Farrell spent his nights clerking at a Bronzeville gas station, an experience that heavily influenced his startlingly lucid portrayal of the whole of South Side life.¹⁹¹ As early as 1937, Farrell appeared to have an intimate understanding of not only of what Wright strove to accomplish through his literature, but of the monumental nature of what that tasked entailed. In February of that year, Farrell wrote that the world needed literature to

[Create an] understanding of how the Negro really feels, of the way which life, in both the south, and in the north, hammers patterns of feelings, way of seeing, language, hopes, despairs, aspirations, hatreds, etc etc, into the very consciousness of the Negro. There are many misconceptions, false patterns concerning the Negro that are accepted. The destruction of these through fiction would in itself be wonderful. Factors in American life militate against the young Negro writer, and he has to swim a strong current if he will uncompromisingly and honestly tell the way his people live, feel, think, suffer.¹⁹²

Surely none of this was new news to Wright, and he certainly was not in the business of soliciting sympathy from the white literati of the world, no matter how well-intentioned. Yet this encouragement reflects the process that developed Wright's technique from the disheveled formal experimentation and commercial rejection of *Lawd Today* to the steady tightness and corresponding impact of *Native Son*. Wright's relation of literary purpose to the development of narrative and style is most clearly evident in the expository third section of *Native Son*. The result of *Lawd Today*'s formal engagement with experience and perspective is its lack of ideological pontification. Jake Jackson's rejection of Communism stems from the fact that his only engagement with it is through vague newspaper articles and a young, naive, unemployed street agitator.

¹⁹¹ Dennis Flynn, Jack Salzman, and James T. Farrell. "An Interview with James T. Farrell." *Twentieth Century Literature* 22, no. 1 (1976), 6.

¹⁹² Farrell, Letter to Wright, Wright Papers.

Apparently, this was not edifying enough; as will be discussed shortly, *Lawd Today's* construction did not allow the reader to easily understand the counterpoint to Jake's ignorance. It should not be lost that in *Native Son*, the burden of delineating the Communist worldview is shifted from a young black man's barbershop argument to a long-winded history lesson from a card-carrying white lawyer. Even as Wright tightened the language and expression of his protagonist's understanding of his surroundings, he felt that he could not successfully accomplish the goal reiterated by Farrell of "uncompromisingly and honestly" depicting black life without the aid what amounts to a would-be Communist savior. That third section of *Native Son* encompassing the lawyer Max's speech to Bigger Thomas's jury is its most oft-criticized section, and reception to it substantiated Farrell's belief, espoused in a 1937 letter, that "it is bad for writers, I feel, to belong to political parties, particularly to the CP... You get tied up defending one line after another, in politics, and in literature... and you stand the risk of having yourself as a writer put on a rack and exacted as a penalty to one or the other of the party line."¹⁹³ The debate surrounding *Native Son* within the party makes clear the frustration felt by Farrell and Wright at their semantic inability to decide on the qualities of revolutionary literature. "As for Max's speech," Ellison would write to Wright as he made the New York literary rounds following *Native Son's* release, "I have little hope now that it will be understood for some time, these people don't think in such terms. They do not see that in the speech the whole ethic of moral justification is swept aside in the realm of ideas as Bigger has swept it away in the realm of action. It is not a matter of 'justice' but of necessity."¹⁹⁴ This echoes the frustration Ellison expressed in a letter the week prior, reporting to Wright (then on a well-deserved vacation to Mexico) that the shock of the book's blunt violence was distracting from the more important

¹⁹³ Farrell, Letter to Wright, Wright Papers.

¹⁹⁴ Ralph Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 97 Folder 1314.

discussion of how the book's Marxist elements serve to make the reader understand Bigger's actions in the sphere of human agency. The more subtle implications of Max's speech, Wright's attempt "to create a new terminology... to state in terms of human values certain ideas, concepts, implicit in Marxist philosophy,"¹⁹⁵ were lost by a critical audience preoccupied with measuring Bigger against their own antiquated ethics and "bourgeois taboos."¹⁹⁶ While it still functioned well for Farrell's purposes, the emphatic belligerence of Wright's naturalism in *Native Son* seems to have in many cases in its shock value, distracted and detracted from his more understated critical viewpoints.

Still, returning momentarily to literary theory, naturalism in the vein of *Native Son* was not quite constituted of the same material that Farrell mused on in 1945. Where Farrell's escape from the toxicity of his own personal background afforded him a flexible perspective on the matter of determinism, the precise point of Wright's engagement with determinism in his literature was the impossibility of escape from the toxicity of the broader American background. The cold detachment of naturalistic realism did well to illustrate Bigger Thomas's brutal environs, yet as Chapter One illustrates, it is not necessarily more effective than *Lawd Today's* stylistic medley in purely showing an image of a place and time recognizable to a typical inhabitant of that place and time. Naturalism was not doctrinal for Wright as it was for Farrell. I tend to agree with critic Donald Gibson's observation that "Wright did not *simply* emerge from the naturalistic school of Dreiser, Dos Passos and Farrell... [he] is not an author whose major novel reflects the final phases of a dying tradition, but he is instead one who out of the thought, techniques and general orientation of the naturalistic writers developed beyond their scope."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Donald P. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son" in *Twentieth Century Views: Richard Wright*, ed. Richard Mackset and Frank E. Moorner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984), 104.

For Farrell, the naturalistic style of writing largely agreed with his conception of how his own place in reality could be explained. Wright's route to naturalism was not so cut and dried.

Wright's adoption of naturalism has at times been explained as a function of his rejection of the black literary tradition that preceded him.¹⁹⁸ While this may partly be true, I believe the coincidence of the naturalistic form with Wright's sociopolitical intentions to be considerably more important. In introducing *Black Metropolis*, Wright precedes the book's often ugly reality with a pronouncement no doubt informed by his own saga of literary rejection. "American whites and blacks," he says, "both possess deep-seated resistances against the Negro problem being presented even verbally, in all of its hideous fullness, in all of the totality of its meaning."¹⁹⁹ Here resided the fundamental flaw in *Lawd Today*'s construction and presentation. The impressionistic, internalized picture of Jake Jackson's segregated Chicago, while speaking deeply to the experience of Wright and many Bronzeville residents, fails to impart the fullness and totality Wright felt he needed to communicate to a greater audience. At heart, this is what Farrell touched on in his criticism. To at least some degree, he understood the willful ignorance of the American masses, and subsequently pushed him to do *more*. Like Studs Lonigan and his cohort, Jake Jackson and his friends utterly fail to comprehend the ulterior social forces that lead to their self-destruction. This lack of comprehension is equally present in Bigger Thomas, but just as Wright's poetry found success because of the stirring evocativeness of its language, the hard, unembellished, and in Wright's case often abrasive "vocabulary of naturalism" was simply better suited to making crystal clear the cruel powers that made the action of the novel possible.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ See Lawrence P. Jackson, "The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright," *American Literature* 72, no. 2 (June 2000); and Margaret Walker, "Richard Wright" in *Twentieth Century Views*.

¹⁹⁹ Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxviii.

²⁰⁰ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), 372.

This is by no means an indictment of *Lawd Today*'s validity as a compelling work of literature. It simply signifies that in that time and place, it was not quite sufficient for Wright and Farrell's purposes of attempting to effect social change through their chosen discipline. Even as Wright sought publishers for *Lawd Today* in 1937, the subtle shift in literary philosophy that would lead to *Native Son* was already evident. In the *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, he admits that "if the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is submerged."²⁰¹ By then, he seems to have calculated that the sensory experimentation of *Lawd Today* had not allowed him to be explicit enough. This would not be the case in *Native Son*: Max's speech had been considered by readers to be the book's weakest link even before its publication, but it was born and included specifically from Wright's determination to comprehensively articulate his conception of America's racial problem.²⁰² More importantly, he also echoes the sentiment that Farrell would express years later, saying "the imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality,"²⁰³ embodying succinctly perhaps the most pointed difference between *Lawd Today* and *Native Son*. Wright was not universally correct in this principle; a large portion of this project is dedicated to exploring how Farrell was able to fictitiously recreate a historical time and place with photographic detail bordering on the pathological. Yet it must be acknowledged that in spite of all the similarities between the two writers, we are nonetheless treating with fundamentally different kinds of history. In capturing his moment of reality, Farrell did not have to engage with the formidable task of interpreting it to an audience intrinsically prejudiced against the basic

²⁰¹ It seems plausible that this cautioning could have been somewhat partially precipitated by three causes. Wright's sharp pivot away from experimentation in what text is available of *Tarbaby's Dawn* indicates that he could have learned quickly from *Lawd Today*'s failures. His turbulent rise and fall from the Communist Party could have had a significant impact on his literary outlook. Finally, at the same time *Blueprint for Negro Writing* was being conceived, Wright initiated the prolific South Side Writers Group, who had a significant amount of critical input on the piece (Rowley 117).

²⁰² Bone, *Muse in Bronzeville*, 194.

²⁰³ Wright, *Blueprint for Negro Writing* in *Double-Take*, 59.

humanity of his characters. For Wright, accounting for this was a precondition of producing any effective work at all.

Sweet Home Chicago: Literature and Left Politics at the Crossroads of the Midwest

In spite of the different ways Wright and Farrell put into practice their ideas of capturing moments of reality and historical processes, they are still linked by their shared conceptual foundations in political philosophy. Constructing their literature as a demonstration of history required an understanding of the two writers' identification as Marxists against the sociopolitical backdrop of the 1930s. As my first two chapters have hopefully illustrated, the American interwar period was a turbulent, complex time, defined by extreme economic fluctuation and rapid sociocultural change. At the American Writers Congress of 1935, that pivotal moment in the careers of both men, the dominant topic of discussion was what, exactly, constituted "revolutionary" literature. The implications of such a discussion cannot be understated. Living in a United States five and a half years into the throes of the Great Depression, as Italy and Germany sank deep into fascism and Spain hovered on the brink of civil war, these writers and activists who gathered in New York saw themselves as the heirs to the tradition of the French of 1789 and the Russians of 1917: actors in the interests of an oppressed proletariat, hoping to spur the radical change that would begin to settle the deep inequality seated at the roots of their society.²⁰⁴ The literati needed only to decide on a program to activate their role in this great movement.

This is the context in which Wright and Farrell found themselves as they fought for racial and economic justice. In terms of the historical processes they considered as they wrote, their fiction is broadly explainable through its relationship with Marxist materialism. In *Lawd Today*

²⁰⁴ Klehr et al, *Secret World*, 4.

and *Native Son*, Wright attempts to bring to a cross-axis his sociologically inspired understanding of American racial constructions with explicit demonstrations of the dissonance between capitalist institutions and the lives of the classes who power it. Farrell was skeptical of economics as an end-all be-all explanation for the mechanisms of society—it is precisely this that his 1936 attack on Granville Hicks was based²⁰⁵—but even as in his later years he appeared intent on divesting himself from incorporating any “intent” into *Studs Lonigan*,²⁰⁶ his implicit linking throughout *Lonigan* of racial and social perceptions (and all the ills that come of such perceptions) with the inconsistencies of American economic institutions show he was in at least some capacity caught up in the era’s revolutionary spirit. In the Depression-wracked 1930s, it is not difficult to imagine how the widespread failure of these institutions could have been seen as portending a fulfillment of Marx’s determinist conclusions of historical development. While it is less ideological than other literature in its vein, this notion of their place in history as a moving process was central to their literary approach.

To make these conceptions digestible, they needed to reflect reality in a state as fully developed as possible. They recorded invented narratives with composites of the real human attributes, values, and institutions that implicitly or explicitly defined the spaces they knew and chose to write of. In one of the early characterizations of the naturalists as a literary generation, Malcolm Cowley judged that that these writers were particularly sensitive to the “ugliness and injustice” in the world,²⁰⁷ and is no doubt that Wright and Farrell were highly perceptive towards such matters. Wright’s genesis in the Jim Crow South and Farrell’s ideological aloofness from his peers allowed them a broadened perspective of society in early 20th century Chicago, where this was certainly enough ugliness and injustice to go around. As a result, the outer aspects of

²⁰⁵ Farrell, “On Left Wing Dualism” in *Note on Literary Criticism*, 31.

²⁰⁶ Flynn et al, “Interview with James T. Farrell” 6.

²⁰⁷ Cowley in *Documents of 20th Century Realism*, 442.

their characters frequently embodied the bleakest facets of their societies, and the sympathetic features that gave them their humanity given only momentary glimpses. When this is the case, whether Studs Lonigan, Jake Jackson, or Bigger Thomas, the consequences are always the same.

Even if it did not necessarily reflect the authors' broader philosophies, this schematic of ugly circumstances leading to ugly outcomes exemplifies the common association of naturalism and determinism. They thought this formula was necessary in order to truly break through to an audience. Their belief in the simple power of literature called upon them to write so that both writer and reader could attain an "enlargement of our attitude toward the world, the enlargement of our sympathy, [and] our sense of others... we can expand our image, our sense of ourselves."²⁰⁸

The circumstances of the interwar period had only made the country's injustices all the more visible; the gap in freedom between white and black, rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged was becoming harder and harder to remove from America's field of vision. The ugliness of exclusionary American institutions was continuing to force itself into the consciousness of its people. Whether it concerned the abused underclasses in general or specifically towards the unique systematic subjugation of black Americans, the basic aim of Wright and Farrell's work was that recognizably portraying the worst consequences of these institutions could deliver a greater awareness of the forces producing that suffering. Following, as Wright says, "at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed."²⁰⁹ An idealistic statement, certainly, but a potent one reflective of Wright and Farrell's belief that words could change other lives in the same way they had changed theirs.

²⁰⁸ Farrell, "On the Function of the Novel" in *Reflections at Fifty*, 21.

²⁰⁹ Wright, *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, 406.

As we now know, the Second World War came before there could be a Second American Revolution. While their literature had tremendous impact in many rights, its engagement with the political movements and frameworks was too often fraught with frustratingly extraneous argument to concretely achieve their desired goals. Farrell eventually moved himself even farther from the Communist Party, with whom he had always been uneasy. He repeatedly came under heavy fire from the Party during the 30s for his Trotskyism, even after they had repeatedly criticized his fiction for not being sufficiently didactic in its Marxism,²¹⁰ the same criticisms that lay at the root of his philosophical feud with the Communist literary establishment. As the years went by, he increasingly distanced the substance of his work from any kind of appreciable Marxist ideology, although the charged content of his paper on the “revolutionary” short story at the 1935 Writers Congress throws his retrospective claims into serious doubt. Meanwhile, Wright had several fallings out with the Party before leaving permanently in the early 1940s. By the time of *Native Son*’s publication, Wright’s reputation in the Party was preceding him. He had originally believed that the Communists’ art did not have a grasp on the “meaning” of the masses’ suffering, but in try to realize his stated goal of sufficiently articulating that meaning, he found the Party’s priorities to ultimately be catastrophically misplaced. The critical reception and frenzied discussion over *Native Son* within the party led Ellison to wonder whether “the writer who accepts Marxism [has] the freedom to expound a personalized philosophy.”²¹¹ Everyone, it seemed, had to some degree missed the point.

All of that is an admittedly pessimistic take on the political goals of their literature. In the moment, Farrell and Wright’s greater hopes and ideas may have been lost, but that does not mean they failed at their immediate task. Their works still paint an extraordinary picture of the

²¹⁰ Landers, *An Honest Writer*, 174.

²¹¹ Ellison, Letter to Wright, Wright papers.

world in miniature of Chicago in the early 20th Century. Even when the political movements and philosophical dates of the era have long been submerged and forgotten beneath all of the evolutions and processes that followed, these pictures themselves remain intact, a fact of tremendous value in its own right, and finally, a simple testament to their ability to apply the eye of a keen social observer to their many qualities as artists.

For us, Bard College may be “a place to think,” but for Wright and Farrell, that place could not have been anywhere but Chicago. Wright may have been awakened to the world of literature by a perusal of H.L. Mencken in a Memphis, Tennessee library, but it was through his discovery of Chicago sociology that he perceived the enlightening power of the written word.²¹² Had Farrell not grown up a walk through Washington Park away from the University of Chicago, perhaps he would have instead found work as a teamster, like his father, and become someone approximating one of this characters, rather than the one conceiving of them. In discussing the relationship between setting and substance in their literature, it must be asked: what would have come of *Native Son*'s Dalton family, had Wright not experienced the Chicago life in which one only had to walk a few blocks east of Bronzeville's ghettoized squalor to visit Hyde Park's elaborate mansions? Would Farrell have adequately captured the unconscious inhumanity of his characters had the confined space of Chicago not afforded him the opportunity to recognize the incontrovertible humanity of the people and groups that his peers would not acknowledge?

It is not to say that Chicago is the only place that could produce significant, thoughtful literature in a similar vein. William Faulkner eloquently engaged with racial issues from rural Mississippi,²¹³ and in spite of Wright's obstinance, the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance

²¹² Wright, “Introduction” in *Black Metropolis*, xviii.

²¹³ Ralph Ellison argues that while Faulkner sometimes was overly ideological in constructing his black characters, he was much more successful in addressing “the negro problem” than his contemporaries Hemingway, etc. (See his essay *20th Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity*). Wright's papers show evidence of a correspondence

opened up unprecedented avenues for the development of American literature. But not only is Chicago's stamp in Wright and Farrell's work indelible, it is inextricable from the work itself. An entirely new chapter could be written on the debt these two might have owed to Upton Sinclair, who found in Chicago the cross-section of xenophobia and industrial labor abuse to create an early example of the indubitably political protest novel. They certainly owe a debt to Robert Park, Louis Wirth, Ernest Burgess, E. Franklin Frazier, who settled in what was among the most starkly racially and ethnically segregated cities in the North and mapped and theorized an understanding of that city unlike any other in the nation. They owe a debt to the midwest and the country's Western migration pattern allowed Chicago to become a cultural and industrial crossroads, creating an imitable case study of ethnic, cultural, and racial dynamism.

James T. Farrell was a Chicagoan by blood. He possessed the inexplicable pull one has to the place they are born and in which they experience those brief but clinging memories of infancy and adolescence. Though he never moved back to Chicago after the early 30s, he continued to visit frequently until his death. As he expresses in the 1945 letter quoted on page 90, it still held something unexplored and unexplained for him. Wright, on the other hand, was a Southern migrant turned American expatriate. In his eulogy for Wright, Ralph Ellison captured eloquently how he perceived Wright seemed to have internalized Chicago.

[Wright] gave himself over to the complex reality of late 1927 Chicago and made it his own. Chicago, the city where after years of Southern Negro migration great jazz was being played and reinvented, where the stockyards and railroads, and the steel mills of Gary, Indiana were transforming a group of rural, agricultural Americans into city people and into a *lumpenproletariat*, a class over whom we now despair.²¹⁴

with Faulkner, though only two letters are archived. Interestingly, Faulkner's letter to Wright after reading *Black Boy* confirms Farrell's opinion expressed to Wright in 1937: "it needed to be said." I am not aware of their relationship in any other aspect, but I imagine their shared Mississippi roots would result in something captivating.
²¹⁴ Ellison, "Remembering Richard Wright" in *Complete Essays*, 670-671.

From the bright detail of *Lawd Today* to the dark landscape of *Native Son* to the briefer, toned-down backdrop of *The Outsider* and *A Father's Law*,²¹⁵ Wright's literary use of Chicago functions as a kind of history because it achieves the same goal as history. He doesn't rely on documents, interviews, statistics, maps, or photographic descriptions, but he portrays the "complex reality" of Chicago as only someone who had, as Ellison says, completely given themselves to it could. This, I believe, is as valuable a contribution to the historical consciousness of society as any other.

²¹⁵ *A Father's Law*, the unfinished manuscript Wright was working on at the time of his death, was published in 2008 under the eye of his daughter, Julia.

Conclusion

As I conclude, let us return to contemporary literature for a moment. Consider for a moment Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2015 quasi-memoir *Between the World and Me*. It has been hailed as a masterpiece, poignantly contextualizing the highs and lows of his life as a black man in the modern United States with a colloquial history of the country's institutional racial abuse. Coates excels not just at documenting his life, but investing it with a living sense of his evolving perceptions and understandings of both the particular space he occupied and the world surrounding it. Coates walks the fine line between recording the individuality of his own experience and the characteristics that simultaneously make that experience typical of those who emerge from the same historical circumstances as he did. In short, though it is neither a work of fiction like *Studs Lonigan* nor an academic work of history, like *Black Metropolis*, it strives to create something similar: to communicate an *understanding* of experience in a time and place, to situate a reader in the shoes of somebody who was actually there.

Coates's framework in *Between the World and Me* echoes that of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. It is written as a letter to Coates's teenage son; Coates writes to a general audience, of course, but the intent is specifically to give his son his own experiential understanding so that he may *learn* from it. This is what we as a critical readership have to gain from contemplating the novel next to or as a kind of history. Yet despite owing a considerable debt to Baldwin, I find it significant that Coates's title instead pays homage to Richard Wright. Coates may be acclaimed for "filling the intellectual void"²¹⁶ left by Baldwin, but the tradition he claims is Wright's at heart. *Between the World and Me* the poem, and therefore the title and the

²¹⁶Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "The Hard Truths of Ta-Nehisi Coates," *New York Magazine*, July 12, 2015, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/07/ta-nehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me.html>.

book, implies a sense of experience that cannot be captured in any work of history in which the author at least attempts to work towards the complex idea of objectivity.. It is a state of being and a state of self-conception that, perhaps, might only be understood through the realm of the literary, the realm of the imaginative, and, to harken back to the hypotheticals posed by my introduction, the realm of the “unreal.”

It is not to say that before Wright or James T. Farrell and before the development of the realist and naturalist movements, literature and the novel simply existed for its own sake; the art form has never been didactic in the same way that even the earliest, undisciplined histories were meant to be. There are a thousand cases throughout the history of literature in which the author wrote with *intent*, that there was a deeper message that could be expressed through an art form. By internalizing academic forms of history within their fiction, as Wright and Farrell did, they allow us to use their works alongside those academic forms of history to create a bigger-picture understanding of how the world works. Thus, we do not need to read the bleak substance of their work and ask *why*, but can instead interpret *how*. In the city of Chicago, where life moves at the speed of an L train, it is rare enough to be able to pause and consider the incredible confluence of circumstances that make the life of the city possible. Wright and Farrell just went and did us the courtesy of writing it all down.

In 1937, University of Chicago sociologist Ernest W. Burgess reviewed Farrell’s *A World I Never Made*, claiming that “it was the genius of Farrell to discover and to portray to literate America an unknown ‘social world’ with mores and attitudes widely at variance with our Puritan tradition.”²¹⁷ “Mores and attitudes”—another way of calling the “values” of a people or population—can be described broadly, can be extrapolated through interviews and case studies,

²¹⁷Ernest W. Burgess, review of *A World I Never Made*, *American Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 5 (March 1937): 752.

and can be articulated explicitly. Wright and Farrell strove for more than simply to have their readers know those values, but to visualize the processes and consequences that display them in a particular setting. When a reader achieves that kind of comprehension they can truly strive to better know the world we all live in. With that understanding, we can then learn something about ourselves and each other. That, I think, is what both novelist and historian strive for, and ultimately falls in line with the vision Richard Wright and James T. Farrell had for Chicago, the United States, and the world as a whole.

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