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## ”Exceeding boundaries”: from subservience to subversion in ’Uncle Tom’s children’

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► **To cite this version:**

Florian Bousquet. ”Exceeding boundaries”: from subservience to subversion in ’Uncle Tom’s children’. Literature. 2010. dumas-00706560

**HAL Id: dumas-00706560**

**<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00706560>**

Submitted on 11 Jun 2012

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**“EXCEEDING BOUNDARIES”: FROM SUBSERVIENCE TO  
SUBVERSION IN *UNCLE TOM’S CHILDREN***

**BOUSQUET  
Florian**

UFR D’ETUDES ANGLOPHONES

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Mémoire de Master 1 Recherche – 18 crédits – Mention Très Bien

Spécialité : Littérature Américaine

Sous la direction de M. LUDOT-VLASAK

Membres du Jury : Mme MANIEZ et M. LUDOT-VLASAK

Année universitaire 2009-2010

### *Acknowledgements*

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Ludot-Vlasak whose supervision and guidance have been exceptionally helpful in my research.

## *Abbreviations*

The following abbreviations are used to refer to Stowe's and Wright's texts:

*UTC*     *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

*UTCh*    *Uncle Tom's Children*

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*Introduction: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom: "A Ghost To Be Reckoned With"*

In a fairly recent article published in the collection *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Richard Yarborough re-assesses the impact and influence of black characterization in *UTC*.

With its extraordinary synthesizing power, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presented Afro-American characters, however derivative and distorted, who leaped with incredible speed to the status of literary paradigms and even cultural archetypes with which subsequent writers – black and white – have had to reckon. (47)

In a similar fashion, Sarah Robbins argues that *UTC*, ever since its publication in 1852, has carried out a “persistent haunting of black literature,” and has left a “set of ghosts to be reckoned with” (113); hence the desire for many generations of authors, most particularly those of the African American community, to pursue, chase and finally discard these ghosts. Almost a hundred years after the first appearance of the book, Richard Wright published *UTCh* or what seems to be the most evident case of response to Stowe's novel up to this day (June 2010). The title itself bore an essential question: who are the descendants of Uncle Tom? Thus the book is involved in a double process: it seeks to respond to *UTC*, and rewrite it within a pressing new context.

Many critics argue that Harriet Beecher Stowe, though full of good intentions, unconsciously set a rigid and one-dimensional frame for the African American character in literature through her portrayal of Tom. As Leslie Fiedler wrote, “for better or worse, it was Mrs. Stowe who invented American Blacks for the imagination of the whole world” (26). In this research paper, we hope to show that Stowe's novel and Wright's short stories are engaged in a dialogic exchange, where Wright operates a systematic and repeated deconstruction of the image of Uncle Tom and of its legacy. This study will therefore be informed both by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and by the resulting works by Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette on the notion of intertextuality. Finding its origins in Russian Formalism, intertextuality considers literature as a corpus of texts interacting together and influencing each other: “tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte” (Kristeva 146). The idea of repetition and transformation was also addressed by Harold Bloom in his theoretical study of poetry *The Anxiety of Influence*. Befitting the subject of our study, Henry Louis Gates draws from Bloom's ideas the notion of Signifyin(g), or the “trope of revision” characterizing African American literature. Thus, in *The*

*Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Claire Parfait points to the need for Wright to rewrite the novel. Wright's short stories can very well be seen as reactions against a certain model of subservience and as acts of a necessary enfranchisement and transformation. Therefore, subservience and subversion are two poles of a dynamic duality that will help us to confront the two books in a comparative study. Such progression is first and foremost signaled by an indispensable departure from accepted conventions.

Seen as a burden or even as a prison, the image of Uncle Tom became a metaphor that "leaked" right onto the lives of African Americans, thus structuring and ordering the African American psyche in the segregated States of the South. Robert Bone thus fathoms the social fact of being "black" and its manifest, if not necessary, resurgence in Wright's literature:

What we discover from [Wright's] harrowing perspective is that the entire society is mobilized to keep the Negro in his place: to restrict his freedom of movement, discourage his ambition, and banish him forever to the nether regions of subordination and inferiority. (14)

This is in many ways expressed in the "Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," prefacing *UTCh*, when Wright anecdotally recalls a warning given to him: "they told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries" (8). "Exceeding boundaries" and the role set for African Americans is precisely what is at stake in Wright's prose. Indeed, the author deliberately chooses to establish rebellious characters whose qualities and flaws are in stark contrast with those of the character imagined by Stowe. Abandoning the solemnity and the tranquil Christian resignation of Uncle Tom, Wright's characters fear for their lives; they feel anger and hatred for the white man, but are still ashamed of themselves and of their condition. The obedient and servile slave gives way to daring and vengeful men and women who seek to protect their lives and those of their family. Such is Brother Mann's plight who kills the white mailman of his town out of necessity, to save his wife and child during a Bible-like deluge. All of Wright's protagonists, at one point or another, cross the line, step out of the mould, transgress the limit set by the oppressive segregated society of the South. This is felt in the events and actions, but also in the symbolic issues of space informing the book. While Uncle Tom's cabin provides for a reassuring and closed domestic environment, the open scenes and blurry contours in *UTCh* reflect a diminished, yet all-too-present sense of limits. Wright's new version of 'Uncle Tom' (and its disappearance



immediately after) thus involves processes of subversion, diversion, conversion and invasion. Seen as an invasion of *UTC*, *UTCh* as a whole is also a matter of rearranging stories, rearranging characterizations and voices, rearranging words and ideologies.

Through the analysis of the different motifs, themes and symbols prevailing in Richard Wright's imagery, we will be able to connect and contrast *UTC* and *UTCh* in order to determine the stance of Wright's response. For instance, Reverend Taylor in "Fire and Cloud" shares many similarities with Uncle Tom. He is a pious, submissive man committed to the Scripture only: "God had called him to preach His word, to spread it to the four corners of the earth" (131). When asked to be the leader of a demonstration asking for relief, he is torn between the desire to help his own people and the fear of reprisal. But when subjected to the cruelty and violence of white men, almost beaten to death, he stands up and chooses collective action (i.e. communism): "Ah now know what t do! Wes gotta git close t one ernother!" (178). Wright offers then a radical alternative: a political black man conscious of his social condition of 'underdog' in opposition with the passive Christ-like image of the martyr embodied by Uncle Tom. Some characters, like Big Boy, must flee to the North to escape the ordeal of the South, while others, like Silas of "Long Black Song," decide to stay and fight, casting out the persistent image of Tom in the meantime. Those are few examples of transformation that we find in the different short stories collected in *UTCh*, the study of which will form the content of this analysis.

Within the lines of the short stories, one clearly identifies a historical and ideological gap, a break away from the ideas supporting *UTC*. As we shall see, this gap or the "trope of revision" is expressed thematically, ideologically or even aesthetically. Following the latter progression in three distinct, but complementary chapters, this study aims at defining the different instances of this gap in a set of binary oppositions: South vs. North, Christianity vs. communism, essentialism vs. existentialism, and novel vs. short stories to name but a few. With this gap also comes the notion of different perspectives which have to be taken into consideration while studying the texts: a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century white Christian woman versus a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century black atheist Communist man. Furthermore, the former writes against a precise institution: slavery. The other writes against another institution: segregation. Wright's siege on one of the pillars of American literature questions Stowe's legitimacy of characterization and allows for the

constitution of an African American corpus in a time of enduring oppression and racism. Thanks to various narrative choices and techniques debated in this analysis, Wright aims at restoring an authoritative and legitimate voice for the African American character in literature. *UTCh* also translates a desire for re-appropriation. In “Bright and Morning Star,” An Sue’s words thus resonate in a profane litany: “*Yuh didnt git yuh didnt yuh didnt...*” (215).

## I. Symbols, Motifs and Dilemmas

### 1) How Uncle Tom's Children Grew

Bearing in mind the title of Richard Wright's book, it seems hardly possible to avoid the overwhelming filial connotation behind each one of these short stories. Quite obviously, this filiation is not to be reckoned within a strictly biological or genealogical sense, but rather literarily. The title, if isolated from the rest of the book, summarizes the overall project. In his paratext, the writer implicitly asserts that each character is closely or distantly related to an imagined father or ancestor embodied by Stowe's Uncle Tom. This also means that they belong to the same lineage of characters. Therefore the short stories aim at depicting how the descendants have changed attitudes and behaviors. The collective father that Tom represents could never be physically present nor mentioned, but nonetheless appears hazily in the contours of the different characters. The book reviews collected at the time of publication in 1938 unanimously established the idea of an underlying generation gap in the lines of *UTCh*. Harry Hansen's review, in *The New York World Telegram* of March 26, 1938, is one example out of many. He says that the "title comes from the expression of the Negroes indicating that they are no longer 'Uncle Toms,' that is, cringing servants." The spectral presence of Tom's legacy always casts its shadow in the background of actions and dialogues, in a discrete or pressing manner, as in Reverend Taylor's case. The purpose of this section is to determine how much of this ancestor is rejected or, on the contrary, inherited in Wright's characters. In order to continue our previous introduction, the question lies in Wright's treatment of the theme of inheritance so as to generate new emblematic figures.

In many aspects, Uncle Tom embodies characteristics similar to those of a child. He is illiterate, holds his Bible close to his chest and is repeatedly referred to as being "childlike." To exculpate Harriet Beecher Stowe, this was the common view society held towards African-Americans for many centuries (Franklin & Moss 129). Hence, slavery provided for a solid framework since black people couldn't take care of themselves. Some slave-owners, such as the Shelbys in *UTC*, hypocritically entertained philanthropic intentions towards their slaves:

O, Mr. Shelby, I have tried – tried most faithfully, as a Christian woman should – to do my duty to these poor, simple, dependent creatures. I have cared for them, instructed them, watched over them, and known all their little cares and joys, for years [...] I have taught them the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife; and how can I bear to have this open acknowledgement that we care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money? (39).

It seems accurate to add that such educative pretensions and attitudes did as much harm as a standard way of managing slaves. Black people were still regarded as being inferior, “poor, simple, dependent creatures” (38). “Creatures” is a word often used by Stowe to refer to black people. An exhaustive listing would even seem impossible. If its use in context is always affectively connoted, it tends to deny human qualities to whomever it is directed, placing him or her in the lowest ranks of humanity. We foresee a process of reification at work; characters are turned into objects, incapable of choosing for themselves and always needing patronage. In his *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin dismissed Tom as a mere stereotype, he “has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex” (23). Uncle Tom is, throughout the book, infantilized and belittled. Tom has never “learned to generalize, and to take enlarged views,” he is an “ignorant fellow, whose reading ha[s] been confined entirely to the New Testament” (UTC 136). Although he is a “patriarch” and an “old negro,” he is never presented as a grown-up man or as an adult. To a certain extent, his devotion to Christianity is another way to keep him in an inferior position, devoid of free will, with God acting as yet another master. Slavery – and later on segregation – could not allow or afford its subjects to think themselves as responsible and mature adults. That would have meant that they had a say and an opinion on the conditions in which they were kept.

Richard Wright was well aware of this, since himself had grown self-conscious and had been able to recognize himself as an individual. In *Black Boy*, he explains his reasoning:

I had to feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience in the light of the whole race problem, and to each item I brought the whole of my life. (215)

Each short story introduces a character, male or female, whose actions emphasize a certain will to question the established order. Big Boy ignores the “no trespassing” sign, Brother Mann steals a boat to save his pregnant wife, Reverend Taylor takes the lead of a demonstration and An Sue stands up verbally to the sheriff of her town. In a word, they seek to defy what is prohibited, much like adolescents do. They all subvert the prescriptive role that is assigned for them by the white majority of their community.

Transgressing the limits means asserting oneself and affirming one's *self*. Robert Bone sees a link between Wright's relations with his mother – who frequently beat him – and the infringing stance of Wright's characters. He claims this relationship is the source of violence that we find in his fiction. "To rebel against maternal authority is to establish a sense of self" (Bone 45). Psychoanalysis would argue that rebellion in the infancy is an essential step in the development of an individual, from object to subject. Indeed, for Dominique P  rard, "*la transgression est le geste, le mouvement m  me de l'exp  rience int  rieure qui conduit    la souverainet  *" (28). Thus, the protagonists, acting outwardly insubordinate, lay the foundations of their selves. Rejecting the laws of white men also means scorning those who follow them, like Uncle Tom. An interesting case could be built on Bigger, Wright's anti-hero in *Native Son*. He is ashamed of his mother who has always acted deferentially towards the whites. Baldwin says that "Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh", but "exactly opposite a portrait" (27).

Similarly, *UTCh* operates a work of disaffiliation or *de-filiation*. This breaking off of familial bonds often relates to naming and identity. When the white sheriff enters An Sue's house, in search of her son involved in the Communist party, he addresses her as "Aunty," the pet form of "aunt," often qualifying older black women.<sup>1</sup> To this, she audaciously replies: "Don't you *Anty* me!" (*UTCh*, "Bright and Morning Star," 194). This line is heavily significant and deserves our careful attention. Indeed, this astounding defiance highlights An Sue's refusal of being named something she is not. "Aunty," much like Uncle Tom, falls in the category of stereotypical figures in the African American community. Her being cast as an "Aunty" would be yet another submissive bow. Historically, it goes back to a long tradition of losing one's name and bearing someone else's identity. Ever since the transatlantic trade began, African captives, upon their arrival in America, were given "slave names." Those names were usually given according to their master's name or according to the jobs they were to perform. Human rights activist Malcolm X provides for perhaps the most famous example of self-renaming and refusing Anglo-Saxon names. In her biography of the political figure, Beatrice Gormley explains Malcolm X's militant choice:

These English names were not their black ancestors' real names, but the names of slave owners. X is the letter of the alphabet that stands for the unknown, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that in *UTC*, Uncle Tom's wife is Aunt Chloe. In popular culture, we find the example of "Aunt Jemima" syrups and pancakes of the Quaker Oats Company. Its logo displays a black woman with a headband. Sophia Cantave discusses this stereotype in her essay "Who Gets to Create the Lasting Images?"

therefore it was fitting to have it stand for the lost names of the Africans who were kidnapped and forced into slavery in America (64).

Times were changing in Wright's time as well. A quick look at the epigraph to the collection of short stories leaves no ambiguity: "The post Civil War household word among Negroes – "He's an Uncle Tom!" [...] has been supplanted by a new word from another generation which says – "Uncle Tom is dead!" The emphasis is brought on "another generation," remote in time from the Civil War, and on the need for the descendants to get rid of their puny ancestor. In the names Wright gives to his characters, we find humanity and no modifier protruding to family ties: Big Boy, Mann, Johnny-Boy. They also hint at growth and maturity. The author's wish to expurgate notions of the past and of preceding generations is manifest. While Mann rows his boat on the turbulent waters, he tries to recognize the lights afar, but "the past would tell him nothing" (*UTCh*, "Down by the Riverside," 67). The new generation of black characters contemplates the present only to realize their condition has remained somewhat unchanged since the time of slavery.

We have previously noted that Stowe's black hero could never be an adult. Paradoxically, the characters in *UTCh* cannot be children anymore. They have done an awful wrong. This wrong is precisely what allows them to enter the realm of adulthood, lose their innocence and their "childlike" complaisance, further away from Uncle Tom. What is lost is gained in status and posture. A white man challenges Silas: "Yuh think yuhre white now, nigger?" (*UTCh*, "Long Black Song," 127). Silas has tried to make a life for himself and his wife Sarah. He has bought a farm and grows his own crops. But trouble comes when Sarah accepts a graphophone from a white salesman while Silas is in town selling his cotton. The white man and the black woman sleep together, though the reader is never really sure they are mutually consenting. Upon his return, Silas discovers Sarah's doings and shoots the salesman. He bursts in anger: "Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git mah farm free [...] The white folks ain never give no black man a chance! ... They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N they take yo life! ... Ahm gonna be hard like they is" (*UTCh* 125). Silas, formerly enslaved (as he puts it) as his "grandfather" or "great grandfather" was, means to stand up and fight. It corresponds for Silas to the end of years of bending and to his fall from innocence. In a way, Uncle Tom's children cease to be children and become adults. The first short story is the most significant of all in this respect. It is evocatively entitled "Big Boy Leaves Home." Big Boy is only a young teenager and critics have hypothesized that he was

probably fourteen or fifteen at the most. The reader never knows his real name, but his nickname emphasizes that, despite his young age, he is already a “big boy.” When white children of his age go to school and play endlessly in the neighborhood, Big Boy finds himself having to leave the parental “home,” after having killed a white man. In other words, he evades from the nest to step into a strange and unsafe land. Richard Wright does not tell us about Big Boy’s life; *UTCh* is not a *Bildungsroman*, it rather contains evocative and didactic short stories. But we can imagine that the young boy will find a job in Chicago, get on with his life and perhaps get himself an education. As the truck leaves town, Big Boy leans back and dozes off: “The blades of daylight had turned brightly golden. The sun had risen” (*UTCh* 53). Big Boy, through his malevolent act, has broken free from a bondage that had been set by the whites, but also by the members of his family and community. The “blades of daylight” seem to represent the vast array of possibilities now offered to Big Boy.

Not all short stories end happily though. That would be far from realistic for the period, and more importantly, it would suggest a certain optimistic view of the situation. The writer recalls cunningly what happens to the ones who behave *Uncle-Tom-ly*. Mann, An Sue and Reverend Taylor face situations similar to Uncle Tom’s. Let us remember that Stowe’s hero is beaten to death for he refuses to betray Cassy and Emmeline on their whereabouts. His cause is noble, only bathed with the aura of martyrdom. He dies diligently, obediently, already forgiving his executioners. But as one can read, “Tom was not quite gone” (*UTC* 422). Brother Mann, the main character of “Down by the Riverside,” in the midst of a devastating flood, finds himself having to rescue the Heartfield family and get them out of their house. A few hours before, he had shot the father, Henry Heartfield, in self-defense. While Brinkley stands afar on the boat, he spots Henry’s son who starts screaming when he recognizes his father’s murderer. The issue is clear.

Yes, now, if he could swing that axe they would never tell on him and the black waters of the flood would cover them forever and he could tell Brinkley he had not been able to find them and the whites would never know he had killed a white man... His body grew taut with indecision. (*UTCh* 92).

But Mann cannot kill. The outcome is also clear, he has to die. The dilemma is: to kill or to be killed. In his review for the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert Van Gelder says of Mann that he is an “Uncle Tom at a crucial moment,” and therefore, “he pays for his weakness with his life.” The parallelism with *UTC* is much more obvious in

“Bright and Morning Start” when An Sue is asked by Booker to give out the names of the men involved with Johnny-Boy in the Communist party. Will she remain silent or will she give up and trust Booker, pleading he will thus be able to protect the other comrades as a pretext? Sue, helpless and unsure of Booker’s ties with the sheriff, reluctantly complies, unlike Tom. But she realizes her mistake. Quite rightly, Booker is an informer.

[S]he had trapped herself with her own hunger; to water the long, dry thirst of her faith; her pride had made a bargain which her flesh could not keep. Her having told the names of Johnny-Boy’s comrades was but an incident in a deeper horror. She stood up and looked at the floor while call and counter-call, loyalty and counter-loyalty struggled in her soul. Mired she was between two abandoned worlds, living, but dying without the strength of the grace that either gave. (*UTCh* 206).

She runs through the wood and finds her son attached to a tree among a crowd of white faces. In a most unbearable passage, she is made to witness the torturing of her son, but kills him with a gun before the sheriff does. In the same swift move, she kills Booker, the black Judas, before militantly dying herself. Finally, Reverend Taylor of “Fire and Cloud” utters the same words that made Tom a martyr: “Awright, kill me! Tie me n kill me! Yuh white trash cowards, kill me!” (*UTCh* 164) The difference is that Taylor gets out alive and embraces the Communist cause hoping this will help him save his community. In these three previous instances, the relationship to Stowe’s famous figure is undeniable and serves as a starting point for something new. Death awaits those who behave submissively, felicity for those who dare affront the white man. Wright takes Stowe’s outline – collaboration, betrayal and resignation – and transforms it into a meaningful and inspiring discourse, destined to uplift morally and politically rather than religiously.

In the April 1938 edition of *The African*, Countee Cullen offered his insight on the collection of short stories. His views coincide with our previous statements:

Uncle Tom's Children are still cabin-bound in many ways, but they are not satisfied; they are not chips off the old block, and barely recognizable as the offspring of their famous, but hardly admirable forebear. These children are after what belongs to men; they want happiness, better homes, better economic conditions. They still find the getting hard, but (here the blood is different) they are willing to fight. (2)

Cullen’s point comes in rather nicely as he discusses the literary father-children relationship while drawing our attention to social issues contemporary to Wright. This section, devoted strictly to the idea of inheritance and filiation, helped us to underline Wright’s dealing with the literary canon authored by Stowe with regards to the



patriarchal emblem of an older generation of African-American characters. Thus, Wright departs from an original founding text to reach a new understanding and vision. Interestingly, departure is another element of Wright's fiction, found notably in the motif of the flight to the North.

## 2) "Boun fer up Noth": Acts of Diversion

In the 1850s, runaway slaves, breaking free from the domination of their masters, had but little choice as far as what the destination would be. Fleeing to the North of the United States or to Canada was self-evident and was undoubtedly seen as a promise for freedom. Up to 1850, corresponding to the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, slaves who had left the estate or the plantation had little chance of being recaptured and brought back to their masters. This had been the case of the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass who fled from Baltimore where he had been kept in bondage to reach the city of New York.<sup>2</sup> The Ohio River represented the natural border and division between the states of the South and those of the North. This fact is made perfectly clear in *UTC* when Eliza escapes the Shelbys with her young son Harry:

Her first glance was at the river, which lay like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side. (57)

Inevitably, the North was idealized in the minds of many African-Americans. Quite obviously, it should be compared to what the Promised Land is for the Israelites according to the Genesis in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> In *UTC*, references to the land of Canaan are numerous. They take the form of spirituals sung by the slaves:

O' I'm going to glory, — won't you come along with me?  
Don't you see the angels beck'ning, and a calling me away?  
Don't you see the golden city and the everlasting day? (34)

Even more striking is the image of a train heading north, carrying along the hopes and desires of many for a place rid of slavery rule:

[S]ometimes, in the night, I think I hear the wheels a rattlin', and I'm lookin' out all the time; now you jest be ready too. (35)

---

<sup>2</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:18-21: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

The train, more than an object of departure, figuratively recalls the Underground Railroad set up by abolitionists for slaves in order to get to the non-slave states or to Canada. *UTC* offers several mentions or allusions to this unofficial and concealed network operating secretly. The Quaker community in which Eliza takes refuge acts as adjuvants in her escape. They help her and George to do away with slave catchers Tom Loker and Marks. In between the lines, the train becomes an allegory for freedom and happiness, the former being a creation of the industrious North opposed to the deeply rural South relying on agriculture. Several characters in Stowe's novel long to go north, even though they live in Kentucky where it is thought that a milder form of slavery subsists in comparison with the other Southern states. George, after having reunited with his wife and child, manages to cross Lake Erie and sets foot on Canadian soil to lead a free and better life. Similarly, Cassy and Emmeline, two servants at Simon Legree's plantation, make a successful leave to journey "upward" (*UTC* 433).

This attitude prevailed during slavery, but also during segregation. Ironically, it is one of the rare instances where *UTC* and *UTCh* adjoin. If the motives for the escape differ, the process however remains the same. The Great Migration started in the 1910s and brought millions of African-Americans in exodus leaving the cotton fields of the South and invading the cramped ghettos of the cities in the North. The shortage of jobs and housing along with poor living conditions prompted disillusion and despair. Still, to escape the South in Wright's time is to escape the daily humiliations, the fear of lynching and the harsh Jim Crow laws. Comparatively, yet in an entirely different geopolitical context, Tahar Ben Jelloun or Laurent Gaudé's characters stand as the North African counterparts of Wright's characters, striving to gain the shores of Europe.<sup>4</sup> In "Big Boy Leaves Home," the four young protagonists start a song after hearing the far-away whistle of a train. Côme Ndongo Onono identifies this particular song as a "*compendium du rêve de tout Nègre*" (129). Here again, the train is suggestive of a freedom yet to be obtained:

*Dis train bound fo Glory*  
*Dis train, Oh Hallelujah*  
*Dis train bound fo Glory*  
*Ef yuh ride no need fer fret er worry (UTCh, 19)*

Several lines down, as the whistle echoes again:

---

<sup>4</sup> Those characters are Azel in *Partir* by Tahar Ben Jelloun and Soleiman in *Eldorado* by Laurent Gaudé.

“There goes number seven!”  
“Headin fer up Noth!”...  
“Lawd, Ahm goin Noth some day.”  
“Me too, man.”  
“They say colored folks uip Noth is got ekual rights.” (*UTCh*, 26)

The allusion to Stowe’s book is substantially obvious and therefore worth noticing. In both books, the prospect of running away to the North looms behind the story. It is an uplifting contemplation and the only remedy for the characters’ oppressed existence. Eliza in *UTC* flees north to prevent her son Harry from being sold and taken to another slave-owner. In *UTCh*, Big Boy does so to save his life after having killed a white man. They are all acts of diversion, acts of passive disobedience, a matter of fleeing from the enemy. They make for dramatic and eventful passages. Taking leave is rarely thought out and planned. It is a mere reaction to the characters’ survival instinct which emphasizes the realism of the characters’ psychological traits. After his murder of Jim Harvey, displayed as a case of self-defense, Big Boy goes to hide under the railway tracks. This seemingly trivial point contains a highly symbolic connotation. From his secret vantage point, he is able to witness the savage lynching of his friend Bobo who has been caught by a white mob. That the “tracks” should be presented as a temporary haven, from which Big Boy can see but cannot be seen, underlines their positive role. But before being completely safe, Big Boy has to kill successively a snake and a bloodhound, thus testing his bravery and strength. In the collection of short stories, Big Boy is factually the only character who initiates a departure. Nonetheless, the other characters nourish the belief that life must be better in the North. In “Fire and Cloud,” Reverend Taylor, after having been subjected to an unconditionally brutal beating, follows the direction of a fluttering small bird:

He walked northward, not going anywhere in particular, but walked northward because the bird had darted in that direction. (*UTCh* 166)

While issuing consciously or unconsciously the desire to take flight “northward,” the characters realize the extent of their affliction and the scourge of segregation. In the process, they reject the social rules by which they must abide. As a young man, Richard Wright also entertained the feeling that somehow a black man was happier in cities like Chicago. He too made the journey from South to North.

An hour later I was sitting in a Jim Crow coach, speeding northward, making the first lap of my journey to a land where I could live with a little less fear. Slowly the burden I had carried for many months lifted somewhat. (*Black Boy* 227)

If there is a way north, there is also a way south, thus forming a vertical axis with two possible directions. The main protagonist in *UTC*, and the subject of our interest, never even considers dodging Mr. Shelby's decision in spite of Aunt Chloe's exhortation:

If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold. I s'pose I can b'ar it as well as any on'em [...] Mas'r always found me on the spot—he always will. I never have broke trust. (44)

Tom asserts his faithful compliance. Unlike Eliza, George or Cassy, he accepts dutifully his fate, always placing it in the hands of God. As we have seen, going north means, in theory at least, more freedom and the acquisition of new liberties. On the contrary, the slave being sold “down river” sees a degradation of his condition subjected there to hard work and harsher punishments. The depiction of Uncle Tom's life on Simon Legree's plantation, somewhere in Louisiana, reveals this dominant impression. The Mississippi river acts as the main channel from which the slave trade takes place. Thus, the means of transportation characterizing the journey south is altered: it is not a train that takes the “deportees,” but a boat on the river.

Object of a dread, the river is hardly ever viewed positively. When Eliza escapes with her son Harry in her arms and finally reaches the village of T—, she faces a “swollen and turbulent” flow; “great cakes of floating ice” make her crossing of the river an improbable performance (*UTC* 57). In *UTCh*, the water element is even more tragically denoted, meaning that death is lurking in the backwater. We can surely ponder over Sue's brooding over the rain: “it kin make seeds bus up the ground, er it kin bog things down lika watah-soaked coffin” (“Bright and Morning Star” 181). In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the young adolescent and his acolytes transgress the “no trespassing” warning sign to swim in the neighbor's pond. The consequences of their infringement prove to be fatal. Similarly, Brother Mann, the focalizer in “Down by the Riverside,” finds himself having to fight the rapid rise of the water level with a squadron of black people supervised by white soldiers. Earlier in the chain of events, he killed the white postman of his town in order to get his pregnant wife to a hospital. His crime does not remain unpunished and he is executed by two soldiers:

One of the soldiers stooped and pushed the butt of his rifle under the body and lifted it over. It rolled heavily down the wet slope and stopped about a foot from the water's edge: one black palm sprawled limply outward and upward trailing in the brown current. (*UTCh* 102)

A corpse on the riverbank is the last image of “Down by the Riverside.” The underlying message may need to be made more explicit and clarified. It becomes apparent that “up” suggests metaphorically and religiously an elevation and the prospect of a providential salvation. Diametrically opposite, “down” alludes to annihilation and figuratively points to the grave. Uncle Tom and Brother Mann go down river. Death therefore awaits both characters. The polarity between North and South therefore yields a strong connotation; life or death stand at each extremity of the axis. This leads to an adapted and rather simplified scheme of Greimas’ semiotic square.<sup>5</sup> Within a structuralist approach, the latter attempts to explain “the social fact of narrative discourse” and this helps us to highlight the issues at stake in both texts according to the cardinal directions. When Big Boy comes home after having unintentionally killed Jim Harvey and the whole family has been assembled, the choice as far as what to do is clear: “ef yuh don let [Big Boy] go n git erway from here hes gonna be caught shos theres a Gawd in Heaven!” (“Big Boy Leaves Home” 39). The solution is “a truck o goods t Chicawgo.” In this particular instance, the main protagonist, with his parents’ blessing, chooses to escape, namely life over death. This seems rather logical and humanly. The attention should now be brought back to Uncle Tom who adopts a very different stance as our previous quotation indicates. Never questioning his being sold “down river,” Tom goes south. Thus Big Boy and Uncle Tom are two individuals who take two opposite directions. They diverge from each other along a geographical line, thus informing the outcome of each story. Geography and space are of paramount importance in *UTCh*, and therefore, the next section furthers this thematic approach.

### 3) Trespassing

The intrusion of a specific space constitutes in Wright’s short stories both a motif and an issue. It is a motif insofar as characters, like Big Boy, often try to transgress the geographical limits known to them; and it becomes an issue as the obstacles are numerous. But the protagonists do not trespass forbidden places for the sheer merriment it induces. The underlying aim is to question the boundaries of the black experience as imposed by the Jim Crow laws, and in the meantime to explore what one is made of. Thus, for the “space” entry in the dictionary, one can find such acceptance: “the opportunity to assert or experience one’s identity or needs freely.” We

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<sup>5</sup> Schleifer, Ronald. *A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning: Linguistics, Semiotics and Discourse*. London; Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987: 138.

contend that the geographical limits in *UTCh* parallel the literary limits set by Stowe. In the context of Wright's work, it is relatively easy to conceive *UTC* as representing a "closed," narrow and perhaps claustrophobic space. Therefore, how does *UTCh* attempt to demolish, if not enlarge, this space? In a general way, we can safely assume that for Richard Wright, as for many African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin or later on Toni Morrison, writing corresponds to the conquest of a certain space, the written space of America. They seek to enter the literary landscape of the country in order to gain public acknowledgement of their existence as a people. Formerly enslaved, Wright's characters long to break the chains to step into the open land, much like the first pioneers did as they settled in the "New World." A comparative study of spatial elements between *UTC* and *UTCh* is particularly befitting in our attempt to justify Wright's departure from an original. As Richard Macksey and Frank Moorer point out:

One of the dominant concerns in the American experience has been the abundant space – cultural as well as geographic – that Americans have had in which to move and shape their destiny. [...] Black Americans did not however, share in this sense of the unlimited horizon. And Wright has an especially acute awareness of the "spatial" limitations of the black quest for fulfilment in the American landscape.  
(6)

Therefore, the characters' relationships to their environment and to the space surrounding them provides for an excellent way to study characterization and tackle one of most important dilemmas or issues in African American literature, the restoration of a certain presence or what Maurice Blanchot calls "*entente*" in *L'espace littéraire*:

*Parler, c'est s'établir en ce point où la parole a besoin de l'espace pour retentir et être entendue et où l'espace, devenant le mouvement même de la parole, devient la profondeur et la vibration de l'entente.* (183)

To start our examination of spatiality in both works, we only need to look at the title of Stowe's novel to find a first element of answer. The emphasis is brought on Uncle Tom's cabin, a rather small enclosed and definite space usually made of wood, a dwelling more than a full-size house. The reader is given a detailed and colorful description of it at the beginning of Chapter IV: "The cabin of Uncle Tom was a small log building, close adjoining to the 'the house,' as the negro *par excellence* designates his mater's dwelling" (*UTC* 25). The cabin is assailed by many different kinds of plants and flowers which leave "scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen" (25). Immediately after, we find Aunt Chloe conscientiously busy with cooking preparations.

The description then turns itself to the interior of the house. Aunt Chloe is, between these architectural depictions of the place, crystallized in a two-dimensional picture that gives no hint at or sense of perspective. Even though she is not the main protagonist of the book – she is rapidly dismissed of only to be found weeping at the news of Tom’s death at the very end – her place always remains grounded to this idyllic view of domesticity so many critics vilified. Except for a brief analepsis telling she has gone to work in Louisville to pay for Tom’s freedom, Aunt Chloe never leaves her home. A woman herself, Stowe perhaps wrote about what she knew well, that is the domestic space. Belonging to it are the slaves through their very function. A careful reader may wonder why this title was chosen. The book does not tell the story of a cabin since much of the events take place outside of it, but it dwells on one of its inhabitants’ life. Quite rightly, it pertains to the African American culture of cabin-living during slavery. Still, it denotes a certain confinement. In her article “Fathering and Blackface in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” Christina Zwarg gives her own commentary on the novel:

The cabin in the book’s title is identified with Tom’s slave appellation “Uncle”; with this, Stowe shifts his function within the home away from a familiar patriarchal role (he does not have a “right” to the cabin because he is a father) by supplanting it with a relational role: to be an “Uncle” in the slave culture was to become a bondsman in a nonpossessive sense. (276)

Tom does not willingly leave his cabin, unlike Eliza, George, Cassy or Emmeline. He does so only because he has been forced out of it, sold by Mr. Shelby. When the time has come for him to go, Stowe gives one of her notorious authorial notes on Tom’s skin color, which – it must be added – is “darker” than any of the other characters’ in the book.

In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong. Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate. (*UTC* 100)

The geographical environment in which Tom is set consists of the plantation or the estate mostly. Whenever, his character is found outside of it, during his journey south for example, he is kept in fetters. Precisely because he is, in Stowe’s mind, of the obedient type, he does not aim for escape and his actions are always predictable. At St. Clare’s estate, Tom does not have much reason for running away. But never does he stand up to ignoble Simon Legree after he has been sold once again in the chapter called “The Middle Passage.” Through rapid sketches of his traits, using scientific racism discourse, Stowe does not allow space for Tom’s complexity even though his story

takes up more than half of the novel. These limitations – and overtly racist statements as quoted above – on the page reflect in many ways the shackles that bound slaves to their masters.

Space is dealt with pressingly in *UTCh*, so much so that it becomes a critical issue. In Wright's context, the whites still determined space, either geographical or behavioral, for African Americans. Segregation, as an institution, concerned spatial limitations almost entirely. Public spaces (schools, parks, buses, public restrooms, bars and restaurants...) were separated and strictly codified, bearing signs "for colored." Photographer Elliott Erwitt documented segregation in the 1950s and his picture of the "Segregated Water Fountains" of North Carolina illustrates and formalizes very well the invisible, yet all-too-present, boundary between the world of whites and the world of colored (appendix 1). Accordingly, space has its limits in Wright's prose, reflected in the characters' vision and self-containment. In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," the preface to *UTCh*, the author insists on the role and position assigned to black people. The social codes affected many aspects of their lives – from the regulation of their speech, eye contacts and gestures to personal ambitions – as we can read from Wright's numerous anecdotes, what he calls his "Jim Crow education." The communicative space is not exempt of boundaries either, caught in the "web of a system," "we said what we thought the whites wanted us to say" (*Twelve Million Black Voices* 41). While working for an optical company, he tries to "work his way up" and wants to be taught the trade. The employees do not seem to like the idea very much and use a stratagem to get him fired by his employer.

When I told the folks at home what had happened, they called me a fool. They told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to "stay in your place" if you want to keep working. (*UTCh* 8)

Therefore, in Wright's fiction, space needs to be conquered as in Big Boy's case. Virtually excluded from many sections of America ranging from social life to the political stage, expansion represents a vital measure. In *UTCh*, the reader is always reminded that it is always at the expense of something else: exile or death. Nonetheless, what preoccupies us in this section is the "climbing over the fence" or trespassing. Wright plays with the narrative and introduces suspense behind the characters' actions. This suspense is, according to Pierre Brunel "*le sens de l'interdit que semble avoir la littérature, quand se faisant récit, elle raconte l'effort d'un héros ou d'un groupe de*



*personnages pour pénétrer dans un lieu interdit*" (12). This forbidden place is dominated by the white man and cannot be crossed with impunity.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" begins with a peaceful scene of four black boys coming "out of the woods into clear pasture" (*UTCh* 17). This blissful playground, a sort of Garden of Eden into which Lester, Bobo, Buck and Big Boy penetrate, hides the fruit of temptation, namely a water pond to cool them from the shining sun. To get there, they have to go through Harvey's land and hereby ignore the capitalized "no trespassing" sign. Big Boy does not want to go at first, but follows his friends, feeling the pressure weighing on him. We already have a sense of impending doom as they "climbed over a barbed-wire fence and entered a stretch of thick woods" (22). Their infringement constitutes a capital offense, even more so since it is a white woman who discovers them naked.<sup>6</sup> The four sinners face Jim Harvey's gun, representative of the power of white men over black men. But Big Boy seizes the rifle and kills Jim. From then on, the landscape ceases to be a familiar place, "vines and leaves switched their faces" (30) and in his escape, "fearing every clump of shrubbery, every tree" (40). It is nature untamed for a young black boy. "The whole landscape is fraught with danger (real as well as symbolic snakes), and because of the simple impulse to enjoy nature two of his friends lose their lives... He has to make his own escape, as the lone individual on the road north, seeking another place to grow" (Macksey & Moorer 7). Big Boy nevertheless shows some courage as he hides in the kiln by the railway tracks. He kills a vindictive snake which bars him from getting in. Later on, he strangles with bare hands one of the bloodhounds unleashed by the gathered white mob. Through his escape and these two resolute killings, Big Boy appropriates and marks his own territory, staging that he too can be a predator. Perhaps we can find here an instance of deterritorialization as theorized by Gilles Deleuze. For the French philosopher, "[f]uir, c'est tracer une ligne, des lignes, toute une cartographie" (48). And even though Deleuze never dealt with African American literature, his vision of American literature in general, as operating according to geographical lines, East and West, North and South, tallies with

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<sup>6</sup> In Wright's fiction, the white woman constitutes the ultimate prohibition, object of dread and temptation at the same time. This idea is rendered in Big Boy's father asking him: "Did yuh-all bother her?" (35) This motif recurs often, for example in *Native Son*. It is because of Mary Dalton, the young white woman, that Bigger commits his crime. In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, essayist Frantz Fanon, whose works have inspired numerous movements and scholars, reflects on this ancestral fear of miscegenation in a part entitled "*L'homme de couleur et la Blanche*." Historically, he explains, "*le nègre coupable d'avoir couché avec une Blanche est castré. Le nègre qui a possédé une Blanche est fait tabou par ses congénères*" (58). In the South of Richard Wright, castration seems a small price to pay if we take the savage lynching of Emmett Till (1955) as an example who had only wolf-whistled a white woman.

our analysis of “Big Boy Leaves Home.” “*Le sens des frontières comme quelque chose à franchir, à repousser, à dépasser*” is very much apropos in Big Boy’s case. Deterritorialization is twofold in Wright’s short stories. Intradiegetic transgression leads to new forms of identity or experiences for the characters, but also for their author. Big Boy is thus able to make a life of his own in the North.

Thus geographical limits expand in *UTCh*, and as Reverend Taylor lifts his head, he sees “the wide fields plunging before him, down the hillside” (“Fire and Cloud” 131). He is, with Big Boy, another uninvited intruder. In Wright’s words, he is like Moses, “leading his people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land” (131). After his brutal beating, he crosses a white neighborhood in which houses are guarded by “fences along the sides of the road” (166). But Taylor’s intrusion does not only concern the geography of the land. Even more significantly, as a black leader, he steps into the political scene of his town. While Uncle Tom’s role of patriarch is limited to religious matters only, Taylor’s is added another dimension, less personal and more susceptible to awaken the white man’s anger. This should not be surprising since Richard Wright himself was able to find a tribune and an outlet for his political fervor in the Communist party at the beginning of his career. Taylor’s relationship with the political leaders (Mayor Bolton and his two acolytes Bruden and Lowe) is sane as long as he does not overstep certain limits. For a long time, he has behaved like an Uncle Tom, “a responsible man to keep order among the blacks” (151). But when they hear about a demonstration protesting against a food shortage, and that Dan Taylor is acquainted with Hadley and Green, tensions rise up: “You think you can run this whole Goddam town, don’t you? You think a nigger can run over white folks and get away with it?” (159). The preacher, involved with the communist party, has violated an all-white sphere of supremacy. Under a picture by Edwin Rosskam showing a black couple at the bar and two white jury men sitting behind an imposing desk, Richard Wright inscribes “the law is white” (appendix 2, *Twelve Million Black Voices* 44). He adds:

There are no black policemen, black justices of the peace, black judges, black juries, black jailors, black mayors, or black anywhere in the government of the South. (43)

But Reverend Taylor who refuses past obedience, takes the lead of the march the following morning. The story follows the same narrative structure in “Bright and Morning Star” where Johnny-Boy is wanted for his involvement with the “reds.” But this short story proves less optimistic than “Fire and Cloud.” In his essay “The Reds are

in the Bible Room,” Timothy Carson concludes that Taylor “succeeds in his role of deliverer, leading his people in a successful march that takes them to the Promised Land of political participation” (47). Here again, as Carson metaphorically notes, Wright draws attention to the occupation of an area hitherto unknown to African Americans.<sup>7</sup> It just goes to show how important this point of contention is and how society and literature are intimately linked in the pages of *UTCh*.

In our introduction to this section, we mentioned Maurice Blanchot’s research work on the space of literature. A recent symposium devoted to Blanchot’s theories stressed that “*interroger l’espace littéraire, c’est chercher à comprendre la manière dont il s’articule avec les canons qui consacrent les œuvres fondamentales pour une époque et une culture données*” (*Qu’est-ce qu’un espace littéraire ?* for the Presses Universitaires de Vincennes). If we take *UTCh* as it claims to be – a distant yet avowed re-writing – it tends to use or rather encroach on a pre-existing literary space created by Stowe’s *UTC*. The book contains implicit or explicit intertextual elements as we postulated in our general introduction. After dealing with geographical and political limits in the stories themselves, it is interesting to consider *UTCh* at another level. We intend to delineate its position vis-à-vis the whole of literature and the literary space. In an essay collected in *Qu’est-ce qu’un espace littéraire ?*, Pascale Hellégouarc’h dwells on the interaction of memory and culture in the elaboration of a literary text. She notes that “*l’intertextualité construit un espace littéraire dont elle se joue en étirant à l’extrême ses frontières*” (65). In making a subversive use of a previous canon of American literature, the author seeks to reduce the space it occupies on the shelves of our libraries and as a result, wishes to implement those very same shelves with his brand. It is yet another act of trespassing which does not take place in the narration, but in the creative act of writing. Wright’s authoritative endeavor can be traced back in the speeches he gave: “The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms. [...] The Negro is America’s metaphor” (*White Man, Listen!* 72). Toni Morrison, some forty years later, holds the same views suggesting that space should be given to another section of America: “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness” (65). Occupying and redefining space (in the narration, and also in the corpus of American literature) naturally comes with its share of

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<sup>7</sup> In 1938, the year *UTCh* was published, the road to the civil rights movement was not yet under way as it only gathered momentum in the 1950s.

ideological endorsement. If Stowe uses Christian virtue to ground the political message of her novel, Wright means to rewrite it.

## II. Politics, Religion and Ideology: Rewriting Conversion

### 1) The Religious Feeling in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

In a biography by Charles Edward Stowe, one of Stowe's children, one finds this rather bewildering declaration attributed to the writer herself when talking about *UTC*: "The Lord Himself wrote it, and I was but the humblest of instruments in his hand" (156). Charles Stowe rightly casts *UTC* as a "work of religion" (154). The former statement sets the tone and the spiritual fervor of a book "thoroughly grounded in evangelical religion" (Hill). Indeed, through several characters, especially Uncle Tom and little Eva, Harriet Beecher Stowe was able to spread an abolitionist message informed by and strongly linked with religious preaching and Christian ideals. Thus, Sarah Robbins points out that she repeatedly addresses a well-defined readership ranging from politicians to middle-class Christian mothers (23). In her "Concluding Remarks," the author delivers her moral message: "Northern men, northern mothers, northern Christians, have something more to do than denounce their brethren at the South; they have to look to the evil among themselves" (*UTC* 452). Later in the analysis, we will see how this rhetorical device pertains to protest fiction and how it is used both in Stowe's and Wright's figures of the addressee. But our present concern is directed to Stowe's use of biblical texts and arguments since they profoundly articulate and structure Uncle Tom's character. His role as martyr illustrates to a great extent Stowe's dominant discourse on religion. To confront this thorny subject is to identify the duality of religion, a rhetoric used both for justifying and undermining slavery at the same time. For us, it also means looking at Stowe's own theological vision and examining the apparent instances of conversion found in the narrative. It is an essential step in the demonstration insofar as Richard Wright takes this very motif to transform it in his own narrative, operating a shift from piety to political activism. This section initiates a discussion on the political and – intrinsically – ideological message informing both *UTC* and *UTCh*. We notice that Wright's address is starkly at odds with Stowe's; therefore the aim of the following arguments is to establish the bases of Stowe's ideological stance.

Coming from a family of New England practitioner Protestants, Stowe could not avoid using religion in *UTC*: her father Lyman Beecher was a leading Congregationalist

clergyman, and all of her brothers entered the ministry, with several achieving national leadership positions (Robbins 22). That she should use the Bible as a subtext for her novel is therefore not astonishing. As a matter of fact, she believed America committed a “sin” that would bring “the wrath of Almighty God” (*UTC* 456) in maintaining what is often referred to as “that peculiar institution.” In this respect, the writer resembles very much the Senator’s wife, Mrs. Bird, who welcomes Eliza and her son Harry under her roof. Like Stowe, she is appalled by the passing of a law “forbidding people to help off the slaves that come over from Kentucky” (83), that is to say the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 against which Stowe is said to have written her novel. And we can easily perceive Stowe behind Mrs. Bird when she says: “I don’t know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible” (85), meaning that such law appears amoral from a Christian point of view. Therefore, and as quoted in the introduction, the middle class Christian female writer feels invested of a holy endeavor, fighting against slavery and its abuses. Mrs. Bird is a valuable character since she epitomizes Stowe’s dualistic tendencies of prompting a political change while remaining in the sentimental, religious and domestic sphere of the “home.” This is both subversive and conservative since each participant remains in his or her place. Christina Zwarg accounts for the feminist criticism of *UTC*: “the “home” has become the “place” where white women in the nineteenth century found their strength and used it to effect change in the larger political and masculine sphere” (274). Naturally, *UTC* triggered a series of reactions and attacks from those who sought to protect the institution. John Franklin and Alfred Moss speak of a rationalization of Christian thought to befit slavery as an economic system:

This view was that slavery was good in that it brought heathens into contact with Christianity and led to the salvation of their souls. Masters, far from discouraging the salvation of their souls, should cooperate with the agents of the church and the result would be the creation of a more obedient servile class. (85)

Some, using Stowe’s religious arguments, invoked the Bible and the supposed curse of Ham in the Book of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> Others assured that slaves were not that worse off. As Sarah Robbins points out:

The close relationship between Christianity and advanced civilization was another shared assumption among nineteenth-century American Protestants. Southerners actually drew on this concept to justify slavery; being a Christianized slave in the US was often touted as being far better than living free but heathen in Africa. (22)

Therefore, Stowe had to find meaningful, telling and profitable uses of Christian virtue.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9: 25: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”

Surprisingly religious conversion is scarcely addressed in *UTC* and is a subject of analysis that is overlooked despite the numerous scholarly works we can find on the novel. But it undeniably sketches a pattern in the narrative that translates the writer's ideological conceptions on the character of black people. She takes it from the "missionaries" that "of all races of the earth, none have received the Gospel with such eager docility as the African" (*UTC* 403). Thus, the few characters that are presented as non-Christian or as non-believers systematically come to embrace Christianity, as if Stowe could not bear the image of an impious character as she stood at her writing desk. George Harris, Cassy, Tom's torturers Sambo and Quimbo and young Topsy are all converted and become fiery Christians. Accordingly, a study case on these characters shows how and why conversion is enacted.

George Harris, the assertive ingenuous mulatto and Eliza's husband, embodies in many ways the author's idealistic vision of the accomplished "black man." Paradoxically, he is dismissed in the last sections of the novel and heading to Liberia, he leaves the United States. Nonetheless, he is a significant protagonist, whose story takes up a great part of the narrative, and even concludes the novel. Of the belligerent type, he runs away from his master when he is taken from the factory, where he had showed such a "mechanical genius" so as to invent a machine (17), to be placed as a field-worker. During his escape, he encounters his previous employer, the kind Mr. Wilson. The latter summons him to "[t]rust in the Lord." To this, George replies: "I've seen things all my life that have made me feel that there can't be a God. You Christians don't know how these things look to us" (121). Rhetorically, he asks Mr. Wilson: "There's a God for you, but is there any for us?" (121) This passage shows a pragmatic character that dares to question the existence of God. In this respect, he is Uncle Tom's exact opposite. He goes as far as to proclaim his own "declaration of independence" (204). It must be said that George's ardor comes from his being of "mixed race." The fact that he has "white blood" considerably determines his character. Thus in his authoritative *Goodbye to Uncle Tom*, Joseph Furnas notes that according to Stowe "a freedom-seeking Negro, must, by definition, have a great deal of 'white blood'" (283). But in the chain of events, his character knows a great reversal. As he gains the shores of Canada on Lake Erie, he is able to find a spiritual meaning to his life. In the mean time, he has been influenced by his wife, Eliza, and by the Quaker community that helped them in

their flight to the North. In her controversial ending,<sup>2</sup> Stowe makes him a “teacher of Christianity” (*UTC* 442) seeking to participate in the formation of Liberia whose motto “the love of liberty brought us here” signifies the return of freed American slaves on the African continent:

“I trust that the development of Africa is to be essentially a Christian one. [...] Having been called in the furnace of injustice and oppression, they have need to bind closer to their hearts that sublime doctrine of love and forgiveness, through which alone they are to conquer, which it is to be their mission to spread over the continent of Africa”. (*UTC* 442)

This sudden shift, almost like an illumination, brings forth Stowe’s evangelical ambitions concerning a post-slavery situation. Her solution as to what to do with the liberated slaves is later explained in the writer’s own words.

To fill up Liberia with an ignorant, inexperienced, half-barbarized race, just escaped from the chains of slavery, would be only to prolong, for ages, the period of struggle and conflict which attends the inception of new enterprises. Let the church of the north receive these poor sufferers in the spirit of Christ, receive them to the educating advantages of Christian republican society and schools, until they have attained to somewhat of a moral and intellectual maturity. (454)

Subsequently, she perpetuates a colonialist discourse while trying to point at the evils of slavery.

As for Topsy, the little black girl St. Clare purchases for his cousin Miss Ophelia to raise and educate, she seems to stand for the quintessential savage child brought up to civilization. In the description of her character, she bears strong resemblance to the mythical feral child, Victor of Aveyron<sup>3</sup> being one example out of several in popular culture. St. Clare considers her a “funny specimen in the Jim Crow line” (246) and sometimes calls her – affectionately but not without ambiguity – a “monkey” (288). Indeed, she acts as the buffoon or clownish character of St. Clare’s mansion, and is often referred to in terms that suggest evilness and wickedness. This is made perfectly clear especially when Topsy and Eva are set side by side:

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, whit her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow,

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<sup>2</sup> Stowe later rebuffed her ending of *UTC*. In the introduction to the 2000 edition of *Dred* by Stowe, Robert Levine alludes to the book as Stowe’s own “mediated” response to *UTC*: “Particularly attentive to what African American readers had to say about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe in *Dred* revises her racist representations, attempts new strategies of point of view that would allow for a fuller development of black revolutionary perspectives, and implicitly rejects African colonizationism – endorsed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* – as a solution to the nation’s racial problems.” However laudable this move may be, *UTC* remains, by far, Stowe’s most read piece of fiction.

<sup>3</sup> See the adaptation of Victor of Aveyron’s story to the cinema in *The Wild Child* (1969) by François Truffaut.



and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice! (*UTC* 254)

Therefore her education and enculturation pose great difficulties for Miss Ophelia to surmount. The Christian cousin from New England does it out of “self-sacrifice” (250), thus reflecting an axiomatic colonialist idea that was expressed half a century later in Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “The White Man’s Burden.” In the first stanza, we find Miss Ophelia’s mission ostensible:

Take up the White Man’s burden—  
Send forth the best ye breed—  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives’ need;  
To wait in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild—  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Miss Ophelia’s best efforts, Topsy remains unruly. Her conversion to Christian principles of morality and behavior is enacted by Eva, the “Little Evangelist.”<sup>5</sup> In this angel-like, saintly figure, Stowe finds the “missionary” that is able to extirpate Topsy from her evil tendencies and bring her to live and love as a Christian: “the life and death of Eva did work a marked change in her” (315). The relationship between converter and converted forms a didactic pattern that is to be found elsewhere whenever conversion occurs. The converter spurs and fosters the religious feeling in the mind of the converted. Later, as St. Clare’s mansion falls apart, Miss Ophelia takes on Eva’s evangelical upbringing of Topsy, teaching her mainly from the Bible. Thus, in Stowe’s text, religion provides for the utmost form of education directed towards “uncivilized” black people. It is an effective tool to turn them into obedient men and women. Topsy’s conversion helps us to confront Stowe’s factual opinion on black people since Topsy’s primary condition in the book is not that of a slave. That Stowe despised slavery and saw it as a moral wrong is not to be argued, but her words nonetheless betray the idea that religion was necessary to keep black people orderly if they were to evolve in Western societies. In this respect, religion is but another form of subjugation, a sort of disguised spiritual control.

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<sup>4</sup> Kipling, Rudyard. “The White Man’s Burden.” *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Ed. Francis O’Gorman. Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 653.

<sup>5</sup> Title of Chapter XXV, Volume II, *UTC*.

Of the least probable conversions belong Simon Legree's overseers Sambo and Quimbo. They act like Paul the Apostle, "*il[s] commence[nt] par persécuter les chrétiens, mais se converti[ssent] à la suite d'une vision du Christ*" (Eliade 107). A few moments after their brutal lynching of Tom, they realize the extent of their barbaric deed. The passage embeds a familiar line stipulating that they did not know what they were doing:<sup>6</sup>

[Tom's] wondrous words and pious prayers has struck upon the hearts of the imbruted blacks, who had been the instruments of cruelty upon him; and, the instant Legree withdrew, they took him down, and, in their ignorance, sought to call him back to life, – as if that were any favor to him. [...]  
They wept, – both the two savage men.  
"Why didn't I never hear this before?" said Sambo; "but I do believe! – I can't help it! Lord Jesus, have mercy on us!" (*UTC* 422)

Tom is for Sambo and Quimbo what Eva is for Topsy. The pattern repeats. The dialogue between converter and converted operates each time in a similar fashion. This specific event is a way for Stowe to emphasize that repentance is never too late. Once again, we may explain this last-minute reversal as necessary on an evangelical point of view; it would have left the two barbarized dark-skinned Sambo and Quimbo in an uncivilized state, more animalistic than human. In conclusion, Stowe's motive behind the turn – or return – to religiosity corresponds to the desire to remodel her characters along Christian lines in the colonialist traditional ideology. Yet Uncle Tom's relationship to religion is of a different order, perhaps less simplistic than what we just saw. Since he is the hero of *UTC* and the figure against whom Uncle Tom's children rebels, his function as a martyr is of paramount importance in our discussion.

When the loathsome Simon Legree orders Uncle Tom to confess on Cassy's and Emmeline's whereabouts, the latter refuses to say a word: "I can't tell anything. *I can die!*" (Stowe's emphasis, *UTC* 420) The narrator informs us: "he felt strong in God to meet death, rather than betray the helpless" (419), thus manifesting the admirable thoughts of a praiseworthy character. From a twenty-first century point of view, Uncle Tom's attitude should still be regarded as remarkable. If so, how come then Uncle Tom was the subject of harsh criticism in the 1930–1960 period (when Richard Wright published his short stories)? Joseph Furnas says "to use 'Uncle Tom' is unfair to the figure that Mrs. Stowe created." Indeed, "[g]iven the basic Christian virtues, her Uncle

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Luke 23: 34, King James Version: "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment and cast lots."

Tom would be a credit to any race in any context” (9). An element of answer to our previous question can be drawn from the fact that because Tom adopts the posture of a resigned Christian he falls into the subservient role of the martyr.<sup>7</sup> Patricia Hill, in her essay “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a Religious Text,” says the book is, in many ways, his “spiritual biography.” His sufferings and his resignation turn him into a Christ-like figure, a sort of black Jesus, literally applying the Scriptures onto himself and embodying the words of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> The problem with Christian resignation, we see it clearly, points to the acceptance of one’s fate or condition. One must suffer since Christ Himself has suffered. Some critics argue that, on the contrary, Uncle Tom is able to find freedom in martyrdom and thus achieve greater power. In an essay found in the journal *Spiritus*, Irene Visser conveys the idea that in dying, Tom “is entirely liberated from the black man’s socially imposed and fully internalized awareness of inferiority” (18). This is virtually true, however, by this time, Tom is an irrevocable decaying corpse. Moreover, unlike Jesus, he does not resuscitate.

The use of Christian rhetoric on African Americans proved to be useful for whites seeking to annihilate the black people’s rights and civil status. As in Uncle Tom’s case, religion teaches them *self*-annihilation. In political matters, this means that the status quo is preserved since the established order cannot be challenged. Therefore, as we have shown, Stowe bases her subversive argumentation against slavery on religious concepts: it is a national sin and it engenders many losses (Uncle Tom’s and Eva’s being the most important of all losses). In this respect, *UTC* finds its foundation on the sentimental novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and on what is labeled now as domestic fiction. Patricia Hill concludes her essay saying that “Mrs. Stowe’s novel is a public display of private, religious feeling designed to change both feelings and policy.” As for what is to become of the slaves, her solution is defined in the same terms: conversion to Christianity will keep black people orderly and make them apt for living in society. The novel’s use of evangelical discourse promises black people immortality in heaven, as it reduces black people to accepting their sufferings in the meantime. Some ninety years later, Richard Wright found that religion, precisely because it was imposed by the white man, was of no use.

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<sup>7</sup> Title of Chapter XL, Volume II, *UTC*.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 10: 37-39: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

## 2) From Christianity to Communism

In 1932<sup>9</sup> – that is five years before *UTCh* was published – a singular poem by an already famous African American poet appeared in the *Negro Worker*. Under the title “Goodbye Christ,” Langston Hughes’s poem bids farewell to the deity and welcomes a new army of men, made of peasants and workers, animated by a common ideology:

You ain’t no good no more.  
They’ve pawned you  
Till you’ve done wore out.

Goodbye,  
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,  
Beat it on away from here now.  
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all –  
A real guy named  
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME –

I said, ME! (160)

In these few lines, Hughes illustrates a radical and assertive change that takes hold of at least some of the characters in Wright’s *UTCh*. Like Wright, Hughes points at the inefficiency of the Christian gospel to fight off – read between the lines – segregation, lynching, racial discrimination and racism. The choice of Langston Hughes to introduce our next discussion is not arbitrary. Belonging to what is referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, the black poet became a good friend of Wright’s since they had “left-wing politics in common” (Rowley 111). Furthermore, the fact that the above poem echoes the short stories encourages us to think of literature, and especially African American literature, as involved in a “dialogic exchange taking place on several different levels at the same time” (Holquist 68).

Here again, the subject of our interest is oriented towards the notion of conversion characterizing the process of changing from one belief to another. But as we often speak of this notion in religious terms,<sup>10</sup> we find it of another kind in *UTCh*, marking a shift from religious to political ideology. It seems pertinent to consider conversion as an intertextual element taken from Stowe, and as being reshaped and reconfigured to fit Wright’s ideological perspective, thus materializing an author engaged in rewriting. In *Richard Wright: la phase naturaliste*, Côme Ndongo Onono imagines Uncle Tom’s children as embarked on a “literary vessel,” “*souvent chrétiens*

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<sup>9</sup> That same year, Richard Wright joined the communist party (Bone 8).

<sup>10</sup> See our previous section “The Religious Feeling in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

*au début de l'excursion, ils s'allient en fin de compte à l'action sociale*" (243). On a textual point of view, we can invest the French critic's metaphor of a literary vessel: Wright's seems to be comprised of, among other texts, the Bible – which he rejects – and the Communist Manifesto – which he illustrates. In the light of Onono's quote, it becomes clear that Christianity is replaced in its immediacy by a more salient and pragmatic solution, in tune with the twentieth century state of the world. Therefore, this section also aims at delineating the subtle yet explicit emergence and presence of the communist rhetoric in two of the five short stories, "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star."

As we saw in the previous section, Christian belief and especially the evangelical branch from which Stowe sprung sought to incriminate slavery while trying to reinforce its firm hold on black people. Quite naturally, we find traces of this discourse in *UTCh*, especially in "Bright and Morning Star" where the "white folks and their laws" take the shape of a "cold white mountain" (*UTCh* 184). An Sue, the protagonist, is a pious and devoted Christian: "long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word" (184). Whether Richard Wright meant the allusion to the infamous Uncle Tom we cannot ascertain. But it is interesting to note that the author begins his story where *UTC* ended. Indeed, "Bright and Morning Star" follows the logic of repetition and continuation. In *Palimpsestes*, Gérard Genette thoroughly classifies the different types of continuations. He comments: "*respectueuses ou non, [elles] n'ajoutent à leur hypotexte que la prolongation et l'achèvement que le continueur croit devoir (ou trouve profit à) leur apporter*" (197). Genette points at the transformative power of literature and its ability to subvert preceding texts. In practice, "for a few cents a day," Sue is still a slave. She has tried to preach the gospel to her two sons, Sug and Johnny-Boy. Taking into account these common traits, we could safely argue that she is Tom's feminine counterpart anchored in another time and place. But she is overcome by "a new terrible vision" (*UTCh* 184), i.e. communism. While she does not completely reject her religious faith, we still need to answer what propels An Sue into change. According to Abdul JanMohamed, Sug and Johnny-Boy play the part of the converters: "out of love for them she too changes allegiance and finds that her

new beliefs are even more adamant” (226).<sup>11</sup> We learn that Sug has been imprisoned because of his ties with the communist party and Johnny-Boy “cant see white” and “cant see black,” he sees “rich men” and “po men” (*UTCh* 192). Indeed, her two sons serve as an example for Sue and she suddenly decides to face the white sheriff of Memphis, where she lives. Sue has also her weaknesses as she unwillingly gives out the names of the party members to Booker. But her successful attempt to reach the white mob that has surrounded Johnny-Boy before Booker does is her redemptive act. We see for instance that the protagonist leaves at once the confined, secluded and reassuring space of her home to step into the “atheist” open land, looking for Johnny-Boy. However, this shift in beliefs is far from being simple and effortless. A description of the environment, as she walks in the rain, gives us clues on the difficulty for her to confront her newly-found “religion”:

“[S]he walked with her eyes half shut, her lips tightly compressed, leaning her body against the wind and the driving rain [...] Already she was getting wet; it seemed that her feet found every puddle of water that stood between the corn rows. [...] The water grew cold as it came up to her knees; she gasped when it reached her waist. Lawd, this creeks high! [...] She came out of the water, climbed a grassy hill.” (207-208)

But Sue is determined. Thus, “from a passive, old-fashioned Negro, with misgivings about her son’s union activities, she has learned from error, and now, instead of wailing and submitting, she turns to action” (Burgum 47). One should not forget that Sue, like Big Boy, Mann and Silas, kills a man. Here she shoots Booker who has infiltrated the party. This act, the most violent of all, could not have been committed had she been another Uncle Tom. Murder, prohibited in the Bible in the sixth commandment,<sup>12</sup> emphasizes Sue’s recent distance from Christian faith and therefore her relative Godlessness. Let us remember that communism, and especially Marxism, remains highly critical of religion. In *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx issued his now famous observation:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. [...] The critique of religion disillusion man so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason, so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself. (131)

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<sup>11</sup> In “Models of History in *Uncle Tom’s Children*,” Eugene McCarthy agrees with JanMohamed’s interpretation. He says: “[T]he heroine again struggles with her lifelong Christianity and, unable to forget or deny it, merges it with the new faith in communism her son has taught her” (740).

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 20: 13: “You shall not murder.”

In spite of this reversal, it is interesting to note that her death, like Tom's, presents an enormous amount of self-sacrifice: "She gave up as much of her life as she could before they took it from her" (*UTCh* 214). Therefore, one could argue that her conversion to communism has not helped much since, like Stowe's Tom, she dies. But a shrewd observer will notice that Wright erases the religious component of death to add a new one, "her self-sacrifice is simultaneously personal and political" (JanMohamed 227). Edward Margolies often quoted – along with Michel Fabre – as an authoritative voice on Wright's criticism commented on the aspect of death in "Bright and Morning Star." According to him, this short story is "the most classical of Wright's tragedies inasmuch as Wright's scapegoats die not in vain, but for an orderly, healthy, and progressive society that will flourish as a result of their death" (136). What Margolies suggests is that conversion to a subversive political ideology and death for a political cause lead to a revolutionary road, fostering real change in status and mentalities, hence the short story ends upon these words: "the dead that never dies" (*UTCh* 215). Thus, martyrdom is not envisaged religiously, which is enacted perhaps too personally in *UTC*. As we have seen previously, Tom's death concerns him and his individual relationship with God. With its emphasis on constructive social action, "Bright and Morning Star" "displays Wright's model or representation of past structures in the light of modern currents of history by which one can grasp the present and anticipate the future" (McCarthy 740). Undeniably, the author adopts a responsive attitude to pre-existing systems of thoughts he thinks outdated, ineffective, worse annihilating.

Similarly, "Fire and Cloud" stages a reverend, Dan Taylor, the ultimate representative of the religious order, facing his hungry fellow parishioners. The reverend has time and again acted deferentially in front of the white leaders of his town, as the mayor recalls: "you and I have worked together in the past" (*UTCh* 148). But he cannot ignore the numerous voices of his people, begging him in unison to do something and a wind of change overcomes him. Here again, the character's beliefs give way to another movement of ideas for the help of God is, to say the least, insufficient to provide food for his people. Many critics agree therefore that Wright's use of Biblical references is only sheer irony. Margolies points out: "The floods, the songs, the sermons, the hymns reinforce the Biblical analogies and serve, ironically, to highlight the uselessness and inadequacy of Christianity as a means of coping with the depression-ridden, racist South" (129). Taylor faces this spiritual – and consequently

ontological – doubt in his inner debates which interior monologues provide: “Lawd, Ah don know whut t do!” (*UTCh* 132) The hero is at the heart of a crisis that disrupts the status quo and the initial situation. On one side, his starving people beg him for something to be done, and on the other side stand the white mayor and his brutish assistants ready to raid on the black neighborhood if anything should happen. Furthermore, the mayor is keen on reminding him that he owes him his status: “I helped you to get that influence by doing your people a lot of favors through you when you came into my office a number of times” (151). The protagonist finds himself in total isolation. Hadley and Green, Taylor’s converters to a certain extent, come with a concrete answer, that of uniting in a peaceful yet militant march on the town. But before stepping ahead with the communist leaders of his town, JanMohamed argues, Taylor needs to suffer a symbolic death (his being lynched) to be followed by his rebirth. Only then does he realize “God has abandoned him,” “the function of God as the sacred center of secular life is replaced by his people” (JanMohamed 224). In the text, this is manifested in what we could call Taylor’s communist epiphany: “Ah now know what t do! Wes gotta git close t one ernother!” (*UTCh* 178) JanMohamed’s analysis deals with Taylor’s conversion or ideological transfiguration in terms that obviously make us think of the change of “sun about which man revolves” Marx advocates. It also goes back to Hughes’ rallying cry: “I said ME!”<sup>13</sup> “Fire and Cloud” thus tells the story of a budding black leader, who used to be an Uncle Tom, but who finally decides to protest and march. In terms of space, Taylor leaves his church, a sacred place of worship, to demonstrate in the secular streets, a collective public space. As we mentioned earlier for Sue, this change of scenery materializes quite clearly her conversion from Christianity to communism. From an architecturally defined space (Sue’s home or Taylor’s church), the characters are displaced out into an open structure-less environment. The final words of the short story, “*Freedom belongs ‘t the strong*” (*UTCh* 180), work in opposition to Tom’s “unremitting diligence” (*UTC* 359).

In the final lines of this section, it is essential to address the question of race as linked to the motive for conversion. As we previously saw, the Bible was regularly used to justify slavery and the inferiority of black people. It concerns the United States as well as colonization on the whole. But while the preceding generations blindly accepted Christianity, the descendants cannot help but feel suspicious about it. Wright’s

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<sup>13</sup> op. cit.



characters at least show that their relationship to religion is compromised. In his essay “The Reds are in the Bible Room,” Timothy Caron is eager to show the latter point:

Taylor and, by extension, the black church have turned tables on Southern whites who appeal to the Bible in attempts to characterize the African-Americans as somehow subhuman; in this cosmogony, these racist interpretive communities have clearly violated God’s promises. (56)

One finds traces of this impossibility to believe in an alienating ideology in Wright’s fiction, but also in the speeches he gave throughout his career of public speaker. Some of them are encompassed in his pamphlet *White Man, Listen!* In the section “Tradition and Industrialization,” the writer goes back in the history of Calvinism and Lutheranism, and casts them as doctrines which allowed imperialism, colonization, industrialization and Western civilization to expand. Insightful, they help us to support our preceding conjectures. As is often the case, Wright draws on his personal experiences to initiate debate.<sup>14</sup>

I lived my childhood under a racial code, brutal and bloody, that white men proclaimed was ordained of God, said was made mandatory by the nature of their religion. Naturally, I rejected that religion and would reject any religion which prescribes for me an inferior position in life. [...] I became passionately curious as to why Christians felt it imperative to practice such wholesale denials of humanity. (54)

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas throws out of his cell the wooden cross the preacher has given him. On the one hand, Christian rhetoric fails to be unequivocal on the racial issue since, as we saw, it was used both by abolitionists and by whites seeking to preserve slavery. The so-called Jim Crow laws in the states of the South are also reminiscent of this discourse. On the other hand, communism is not *a priori* interested in racial prejudices; thus we find no allusion to race in the Communist Manifesto. It denounces social injustice among classes. What matters is not whether someone is “black” or “white,” but whether someone belongs to the “exploited” or to the “exploiters,” as Johnny-Boy in “Bright and Morning Star” puts it. Wright was naturally accused, by Zora Neale Hurston and others, of writing communist propaganda.<sup>15</sup> Bigger, on trial for his murder of Mary Dalton, is defended by Jan Erlone and Max Boris, two members of the communist party. They appear as two saviors coming to Bigger’s rescue. In comparison, the scheme is relatively the same in “Fire and Cloud” where Hadley and Green play the role of “saviors.” Does Wright hereby suggest that it is communism that

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<sup>14</sup> In a similar fashion, *Uncle Tom’s Children* is preceded by “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch.”

<sup>15</sup> See Hurston’s review of *Uncle Tom’s Children* in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 2, 1938, 32.

will liberate the black man? We are far from Stowe's religiously-infatuated arguments. Wright certainly was not the only African American writer who resorted to communism, thus suggesting that it had more to offer than the much too docile Christian faith in which black people had believed so diligently for years. In *The New Red Negro*, James Smethurst explores the sphere of the leftist African American poets that evolved between 1930 and 1946. Along with Richard Wright, we find Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker and Countee Cullen. Hazel Rowley, in her biography of Wright, says that he "admired the emphasis [the communists] placed on action" (64). Despite all this, Wright knew that communism had its flaws, Rowley adds. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that the fight against capitalism could effect in drowning the race issue in the overall class struggle. This admiration veiled by a certain skepticism might explain the sinister ending of "Bright and Morning Star" and the inexorable execution of Bigger in *Native Son*. It also hints at a subdued feeling of fatality in the characters' minds. As Sarah lyrically thinks to herself in "Long Black Song":

Killing of white men by black men and killing of black men by white men went on in spite of the hope of white bright days and the desire of dark black nights and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer and the deep dream of sleepy grey skies in winter. (*UTCh* 126)

This fatality often results in violence, as in Silas' case. Waylaying in his house, he waits for the white men to come and take him, but not before fighting all his might. The next section looks at the politics of violence in *UTCh* in the light of René Girard's theories, but also as the expression of Wright's naturalistic tendencies.

### 3) "Its mah life ergin theirs": the Politics of Violence

*Sur la littérature* is a comprehending conversation, rather than a stormy debate, between literary critics Roland Barthes and Maurice Nadeau. In a desire to circumscribe the fairly recent concept of literature – Barthes traces the origins of the word at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – both initially address the question of its birth or genesis. Nadeau then volunteers an observation: "*La littérature naît chaque fois avec chaque individu qui écrit et dans la volonté d'abolir toute littérature antérieure*" (14). In the context of our study, we can hereby conceive that Richard Wright's first and foremost assault is textual insofar as it seeks to violate a preceding piece of literature *a priori* and abolish it *a posteriori*. Before comparing in a detailed analysis Stowe's and Wright's politics of violence, it is worth noticing that violence breaks out even outside the narrative. In his

effort to formalize the terms in which poetry comes to existence, Harold Bloom calls *kenosis* the process of revising a precursor's work. The concept of *kenosis* is readily applicable in the context of our research since Bloom defines it as "revisionary act in which an "emptying" or "ebbing" takes place *in relation to the precursor*" (Bloom's emphasis 87). Even though *The Anxiety of Influence* offers a "Theory of Poetry," as its subtitle indicates, it seems that we can at once expand it to the overall topic of intertextuality. For James Baldwin, "the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses" (27). Thus, Baldwin's comment reinforces the idea of an "intertextual violence" and invites us to further this theme in the narrative itself; this section therefore acts as a magnifying glass exploring the different levels of violence, from inter and extratextual references to its intratextual expressions. First, we will briefly see how the regional setting and historical context of both *UTC* and *UTCh* dramatically determines the establishment of a violent environment. Stowe's and Wright's treatments of violence are by no means similar. Indeed, they differ in their depiction, motive and aim. Subsequently and in the continuing lines of our analysis, it is necessary to confront all of those to get an informed grasp of the authors' diverging intentions. While Stowe seems to be torn between showing and hiding acts of cruelty, Wright, on the contrary, strives to unveil and dissect the realities of the South, thus shedding light on discordant politics of violence. In the introduction to their critical anthology on Wright, Richard Macksey and Frank Moorhead suggest that René Girard's theories as developed in *La Violence et le sacré* and *Le Bouc émissaire* "offer for an innovative approach to Richard Wright," yet to be explored (18). Indeed, Girard's views on the "sacrificial victim" staggeringly help to account for Wright's heroes' violent imperative.

In the course of this research dissertation, we have repeatedly – never without reason – antagonized the two texts of our corpus. But despite the numerous divergences, *UTC* and *UTCh* show some concomitant similarities. The geographic environment in which the characters evolve is the same for both books. Even though Uncle Tom lives in Kentucky, he is quickly sold and sent to Louisiana for it is this event that propels the novel forward. Tom and Big Boy both live in the South of the United States, at different periods of history, but both have to confront a brutal system that institutionalizes violence. Undeniably, slavery, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, was

made feasible and effective only through the necessary use of violence. In the same way, segregation was enacted and put into effect through an oppressive and violent armada of laws and vendettas. Historically, the South galvanized violence to sustain its economic power. John Franklin and Alfred Moss remark that southern whites saw “manifestations of violence as an inherent part of the industrial imperialism to which America was committed, in the ideology of which the subjection of the black man to caste control and wage slavery was an integral part” (431). Thus, we hear of “whippings” and “beatings” in *UTC* and of “lynchings” and “torture” in *UTCh*. In *UTC*, violence takes place in the South and seldom in the North, mostly on Legree’s plantation and in the slave warehouse. In the same way, Wright’s *UTCh* depicts the Jim Crow South. The lynching of Bobo by the railway tracks is at once gruesome and paradigmatic. Therefore both authors are anxious to set, with more or less exactitude, their characters within a precise socio-cultural environment that profoundly affects them. After all, for both writers, the aim is to denounce the unjust and tyrannical workings of the South, be it slavery or segregation. In *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, Louise Gossett analyzes the impact of historical events in the works of Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers and William Faulkner among others. Even though Gossett’s scholarly work is of limited interest for us – paradoxically, she chooses to focus on texts written by white men and women only – she nonetheless traces tangible reasons for the emergence of a fiction marked by violence.

Having suffered military defeat and occupation, the region holds a bitter memory of violence. Furthermore, the despair which accompanied failure, the collapse of responsible leadership, the glorification of the military, and the private assumption of force to restore an order based on white supremacy seeded the future for acts of violence [...] By demonstrating that violence in characters and incidents had structural, symbolic, and thematic importance, [the writers above cited] prepared a climate of violence for their successors. (4)

Simultaneously for Stowe’s novel and for Wright’s short stories, Edward Said’s vision of literary texts never seemed so apt: “[they] are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (4). Violence is the common denominator of these “historical moments,” in other words, a thematic intersection or extratextual reference. However, one central difference between the two works of fiction stems from the more or less realistic and manifest portrayal the authors draw of violence.

In 1851, when she was writing *UTC*, Stowe must have faced a deontological debate regarding the descriptions she was going to provide for her – mostly – Northern Christian readers. The objective was to render unequivocally the horrors of slavery so as to provoke empathy, while adopting a mediated language in order to avoid ghastly depictions that would shock her readers. Therefore, her take on the subject was somewhat “biased” from the start and consisted of a compromise. One could argue that Stowe’s intention was not to document slavery with an objective point of view, but rather condemn it in the parabolical form of the novel. However, after *UTC* was published, she produced factual evidence that her novel found its roots in reality in *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). In her introduction to *The Key*, Stowe certifies that *UTC* “has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents, – of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered” (5). Still, at a climatic confrontation between Tom and Simon Legree, Stowe evades and entrenches herself. Right after “Legree, foaming with rage, [smites] his victim to the ground” (421), the author brutally interrupts the narrative with a somewhat peculiar interlude:<sup>16</sup>

Scenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart. What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul! And yet, oh my country! These things are done under the shadow of thy laws! O, Christ! Thy church sees them, almost in silence! (*UTC* 421)

The rest of the above scene is not shown, nor reported in indirect speech, even if this moment corresponds to the death of the hero. Therefore, does Stowe suffer from an avoidant personality disorder? We seem to notice the absence of physical violence, i.e. its factual traces in the narrative. To complete Stowe’s comment, what man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear, nor see. A careful study of descriptive violence on Tom at Legree’s plantation, thus covering approximately eight chapters, leaves us with a poor account: Legree is giving Tom “a heavy blow across the cheek” and “a violent kick with his heavy boot” (365-366), “striking him with his riding-whip” (388) and “seizing him grimly by the collar of his coat” (420). These quotes, being not only scarce, show a simplistic language and a stereotypical conception of violence. Facing this void, we have to look for indirect or “in between the lines” signs of violence elsewhere. Looking closely at the dialogues at decisive moments greatly informs the character of violence. Indeed, Legree’s language, made of imperatives, emphases and insults, is able to render in speech what is done in action only partially and in an oblique

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<sup>16</sup> Other scenes of Tom being beaten up are considerably abridged.

manner: “There! . . . What! Ye blasted black beast!” (365), “Get up, you beast! . . . Down you dog!” (388). Violence is primarily conveyed by and contained in the verb, instead of being *de visu*. Balancing such passages, outbursts of emotions and appeals to sentiments are here to make up for the overall dramatization of those scenes, thus subduing brutal talk and archetypical “kicks and blows” with sentimentalism; Sambo and Quimbo are found “weeping” after they have beaten Tom (422).

Therefore, many critics agree to catalogue *UTC* as “sentimental fiction”; it is perhaps the only consensus reached between the different scholars, feminists and postmodernists alike. Thus the episode of Eva dying is considered by Jane Tompkins as “the epitome of Victorian sentimentalism” (127). The precepts of “sentimental fiction” were formerly borrowed from French philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau who believed in the inherent goodness of man and were later dictated by writers like Laurence Sterne.<sup>17</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe was also influenced by her Puritanical background, which we discussed earlier. Her small vignettes of the life in the American South, are reminiscent of these several trends and ideologies; those insidiously impose limits on what the woman writer is able to say (or write). Strikingly, these “intertextual” limits are often conveyed in the narrative itself. Little Eva’s death provides for a good example of Stowe’s incapacity to make use of a realistic and truthful language. As the child lay dying, one can read: “it is impossible to describe the scene, as, with tears and sobs, they gathered round the little creature” (296). Furthermore, the way the funeral is handled, filled with a white aura, complete with all kinds of flowers and delicate drapes, “soft and poetic touches” curtails the tragic actuality (305). Her death appears then aestheticized and almost dispossessed of its grim meaning. In more than one way, there is a certain amount of self-censorship in the novel and the result is a suppressive politics of violence. Almost always unilateral, violence is directed on black characters by white characters. For example, Henrique, St. Clare’s brother’s tyrannical son, is seen striking and beating his “pet slave” Dodo with a riding-whip “till he was out of breath” (273). George, as a “light-skinned” and self-emancipated “negro,” is the only exception – or hardly if we consider the fact that he is sufficiently light so as to pass for a Spanish gentleman in Chapter XI – to this “white-on-black” principle. While he is fleeing to the North with Eliza, Harry and Phineas, George deliberately shoots Tom Locker, the slave-

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<sup>17</sup> “sentimental novel.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. Web. 6 May 2010 <<http://search.eb.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/eb/article-9066787>>.

hunter pursuing him. But as we expect it in *UTC*, despite the color of the persecutor, these acts of violence are always redeemed afterwards. Thus, Eva lectures Henrique on his “cruel and wicked” behavior. And Tom Locker does not die since he is taken care of by the Quaker Community; George feels relieved when Phineas tells him the wound can be treated: “It would always be a heavy thought to me, if I’d caused his death, even in a just cause” (209). Therefore, if violence comes into play, it is always atoned and meliorated, often linked to religious principles and Puritan values. As Eliza points out, “after death comes the judgment” (207). The implicit message behind these few examples is of course an indictment of violence, as being the instrument of evil slave-owners. A more radical school of criticism stemming from psychoanalytical interpretations of literary texts argues that violence in *UTC* is purely masochistic and derives from what Erica Galioto calls “jealous racism” in her essay “Female (Mis)Identifications.” According to Peter Stoneley, “Whether [Stowe] refers to the individual body or to the body of the nation, it is the blackedness of desire – as much as slavery itself – that must be abolished, and via these acts of purgation, the Christian order of the family can be established in America” (63). However advanced and thorough these studies can be, our analysis targets Stowe’s text as it is “consciously” and linearly formulated. In a final conclusion, Uncle Tom remains true to himself as he refuses to flog Cassy when he is asked to by Legree: “as to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall” (*UTC* 365). Through Tom, Stowe celebrates non-violence. The author seeks to condemn bloodshed and accordingly adopts a careful and negotiated “grammar” to depict it. For Richard Wright, as we can imagine, non-violence equates submission. Moral suitability does not seem to be a burden anymore and Wright’s take on violence consists of an uncontrollable outburst.

While he is crouched in a hole waiting for the morning to come, Big Boy overhears a song sung by the white mob that gathered around his friend Bobo: “*We’ll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree. . .*” (*UTCh* 47). In 1939, Billie Holiday sung Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit” for the first time at Café Society in New York City.<sup>18</sup> In her mournful melody, we find the same dreadful image:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,

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<sup>18</sup> In her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday recalls: “It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest – “Strange Fruit.” (84)

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Thus in fiction or on stage, Wright and Billie Holiday epitomize white hatred for the black man and the politics of terror enforced in the South. Therefore, in many of Wright's works of fiction, the theme of racial violence holds an important place: a burning cross in reference to the Ku Klux Klan in *Native Son*, a severe beating in *Black Boy* and a black man shooting white men in *UTCh*. Unlike Stowe, Wright does not conceal, pale down or negotiate the representation of violence to make it somewhat bearable and appropriate. Incontestably, the author's will is to show the realities of the South as they are without resorting to a mediated language.

“LES GIT SOURVNINEERS!”

He saw the mob close in around the fire. Their faces were hard and sharp in the light of the flames. [...]

“Look!Hes gotta finger!” . . .

“He’s got one of his ears, see?” . . .

Then, for the first time, he had a full glimpse of Bobo. A black body flashed in the light. Bobo was struggling, twisting; they were binding his arms and legs [...] He knew the tar was on Bobo [...] Then he saw a writhing white mass cradled in yellow flame and heard screams, one on top of the other, each shriller and shorter than the last. (*UTCh* 49)

In this example, the immolation of Bobo in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” stands for the quintessential lynching of a young black man by a white mob. Just like Big Boy who witnesses the scene from above, the reader gets a “full glimpse” of the savage cruelty perpetrated by men in the South in a synthetic and exemplifying passage. The adoption of Big Boy's point of view allows for a vividly real and haunting picture of the scene rid of the sentimental veil or shield one can find in *UTC*. It is, for the most part, a succession of actions denoting Wright's cold realism. Lexically, the abundance of verbs of perception (sight and hearing mainly) present harsh and bleak facts; eyes that see the complete dehumanization of Bobo, becoming a “writhing white mass.” We perceive Wright's writing as devoid of any emotions or sentiments; Big Boy is caught in the imperative to make his escape leaving no time for scenes of collective weeping such as we find so frequently in *UTC*. In “Long Black Song,” Sarah airs the somber reality: “White men killed the black men because they could” (120). Here, Wright breaks the southern “omerta” by giving shape and words to what is licentiously done to black men. Responsively, the characters in *UTCh* turn violence against themselves onto their oppressors. As we saw in “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star,” they turn to political action when they are given the chance, but when no other means are found, they reduplicate violence, mainly in self-defense. In her essay “Bitches, Whores and



Woman Haters,” Maria Kootry argues that “there is a space in Wright’s fiction where love should be, and that space is filled with violence.” For Kootry there is a difference between Wright’s heroes and the other American heroes, “Wright’s men ostensibly turn to violence out of a sense of having been violated by the racial-economic injustices of America” (in Macksey & Moorer 118). In *UTCh*, Silas of “Long Black Song” seems to be the most extreme embodiment of this violent rebellion. When he comes back from selling his crops in town, Silas finds out a white salesman selling graphophones has entered his house and slept with his wife Sarah. This throws him in utter despair: “They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!” (125) When the salesman comes back to get the money for the graphophone, Silas is determined. Reversing the traditional “whipping” of slaves by masters, he whips the salesman, makes for his gun and kills him. The white man’s colleague breaks free and evades in their car, thus assuring the black man that vengeance will be tenfold. And indeed, “the long line of cars came speeding in clouds of dust,” (126) here to take Silas’s life. The latter retires in his house with his gun, sniper-like: “Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah’m gonna be *hard!* When they come fer me Ahm gonna *be here!*” (125) Before dying in his house set on fire by the white men, he shoots as many as he can. Silas thus incarnates a radical position that advocates the use of arms and violence when needed. Later, this was to become the stand of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s whose “Ten Point Program” detailed the political line:

*7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.*

We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.<sup>19</sup>

But to call Wright a visionary or Silas an inspiration for a political movement would seem a hasty conclusion. What it denotes nonetheless is Wright’s desire to break free from previous self-containment in fiction and to portray assertive and subversive black characters in their socio-political environment. Edwin Burgum therefore sees Silas’s death as a militant act:

[H]e is doing more than protecting his property to the bitter end. His principal motive, I believe, is to withhold from the posse the satisfaction of their sadism in killing him. When dying must be, he wishes to control his own dying and make it

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<sup>19</sup> Bobby Seale in *Seize the Time: the story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991: 67.

an assertion of his new sense of values. To have fought against the posse until the degrading end of their final overpowering him would have been to have continued on another level the old bourgeois fallacy of free competition. [...] The conviction is, of course, that men ought to defend themselves when frustrated of their legitimate expectations from life by continual repression. (45-46)

Burgum's view provides for a political reading of Wright's character, but Wright also belongs to a naturalist trend in literature, heavily influenced by Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis among others. "[Wright] wanted to apply . . . seemingly impartial naturalistic techniques to depict the daily lives of black people" (Rowley 60). Caught in these intertextual influences, Wright's characters are, to use Françoise Grellet's definition of naturalism, "animals in the natural jungle of the world" (273). They come from a working-class background, live in shacks or small houses and struggle to make a living. Silas claims that he has been slaving for ten years "lika dog" (118), and now loathing the "white ape" who slept with his wife. In the first short story, Big Boy has to kill a snake and a dog – or a bloodhound to be more precise – if he wants to stay crouched in his hole. Big Boy is "pounding blows home, one on top of the other," fighting "viciously, his eyes red, his teeth bared in a snarl" (41), thus materializing his fight against the white world he lives in. Morning comes and Big Boy is "staring at the stiff body of a dog" (51). Quite surely, he is looking at himself. These singular fights reinforce the vision of an animalistic world in which one has to struggle for survival. Ndongo Onono also remarks "*la victoire sur ces deux animaux symbolise celle, à venir, sur la race blanche*" (118). Contrary to Stowe's sentimentalism, Wright's naturalism is concerned with the "true" representation of the racial antagonism and racist animosity in the South as it is, the author himself being an offspring of this environment. For Michel Fabre, Wright "churns up reality in a melodramatic but effective way because he is authentic, close to nature, true to life" (38). Accordingly, animal-like, Silas reacts more on impulse than on carefully-thought political grounds. What Silas's violence furthermore highlights is the impossibility to communicate and to find some kind of mediation. Often in Wright's works, violence is a desperate cry for lack of any other solution. Thus Timothy Caron associates *Native Son's* Bigger with Silas, "both grapple with a language inadequate to express their anger and achieve their greatest eloquence in their violent refusal to tolerate America's color prejudices" (53). And since the author uses a naturalistic perspective that emphasizes social determinism, it is strongly suggested that both Bigger and Silas are, despite themselves, victims of the environment they live in. Consequently, we realize that Wright's politics of violence greatly differs from Stowe's. We showed that Stowe's representation of violence was suppressive, not

to say elliptic. The black writer's consists, on the contrary, of an uncontrollable outburst of anger; it is excessive. Characters "exceed their boundaries." Silas's statement only needs to prove this: "Gawd, Ah wish all them white folks wuz dead! *Dead*, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em *all!*" (124)

Yet another way of analyzing violence in "Long Black Song" and in *UTCh* in general would be to take René Girard's theories as explained in *La Violence et le sacré*. Richard Macksey and Frank Moorer first introduced this critical connection: "In the Girardian model, violence and the ensuing disorder are contagious and always threatening to escape their bounds" (18). Wright's characters, mainly because they are black in a segregationist society, fall into the category of "sacrificial victims" or scapegoats society needs to prosper. Girard makes it clear that "*les victimes rituelles sont toujours empruntées des catégories non pas franchement extérieures, mais marginales, esclaves, enfants, bétail, etc.*" (404). Indeed, segregation institutionalized the idea that black people, ostracized and barred from the community of white people, were to lead a separate life within the United States. Therefore, the lynching of Bobo can very well be read as a sacrifice performed with the sole intention to unite the white community and make up for the murder of Jim Harvey's son by Big Boy. As the French philosopher says: "*Un seul être meurt et la solidarité de tous les vivants se trouve renforcée*" (381). Similarly in the historical period of the segregation, the regular and numerous lynchings allowed for the white society of the South to bind its members together. "They done got their nigger for this week" Royal cynically declares, in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (142). In Silas's case, violence finds its origins in the character's distant relationship to God who normally acts as an inhibitor. In our previous quote, Silas interestingly calls upon God to get rid of the white man; he has already forgotten his religious education and misinterprets the influence of God. Silas's first offense or transgression is to kill the white salesman. For Girard, "[d]ès qu'on franchit les limites de la communauté, on entre dans le sacré sauvage qui ne connaît ni bornes ni frontières" (369). Limits and boundaries are therefore abolished in Silas's perspective, he has "nothing to lose": "Ef Ah run erway, Ah aint got nothin. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah aint got nothing. It dont make no difference which way Ah go" (*UTCh* 124). Hence Girard concludes:

*Le religieux dit vraiment aux hommes ce qu'il faut faire et ne pas faire pour éviter le retour de la violence destructive. Quand les hommes négligent les rites et transgressent les interdits, ils provoquent, littéralement, la violence transcendante*

*à redescendre parmi eux, à redevenir la tentatrice démoniaque, l'enjeu formidable et nul autour duquel ils vont s'entre-détruire, physiquement et spirituellement, jusqu'à l'anéantissement total. (359)*

Again, the solution for an end to this spiral of violence is not to be found immediately in “Long Black Song,” but rather in the following short stories, “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star.” As we discussed it in our previous section, Wright finds efficiency in the communist gospel. To a certain extent, capitalism encourages the ritual sacrificing of a certain class of people for the fulfillment of another. Communism, on the other hand, puts an end to this system by placing every individual on equal grounds. Therefore, communism should liberate men from these rituals performed in ignorance. Such as the communists’ Ten Point Program<sup>20</sup> advocates, force is only a transitory state; a departure from more than an arrival at. In conclusion, Wright does not overtly recommend the use of violence and never has in his public speeches. While it is true that *UTCh* can be read as cathartic stories, Wright does not seem to enact in his fiction his darkest and gloomiest fantasies. It seems rather that Wright hopes to find what Roland Barthes calls in *Le Plaisir du texte*, “le lieu d’une perte, [d’une] faille, [d’une] coupure.” For the French critic, “le bord subversif peut paraître privilégié parce qu’il est celui de la violence ; mais ce n’est pas la violence qui impressionne le plaisir ; la destruction ne l’intéresse pas” (14). Perhaps Wright tries to find – if we further our reading of Barthes’s text – a certain space of *jouissance* created for the interaction between reader and writer. A “text of bliss” (*texte de jouissance*) is defined by Barthes as “celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte . . . fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur” (23); and indeed, violence is not gratuitous here. As a naturalist writer, Wright leaves in his narrative traces accounting for the origins of violence and there are suggestions as to what propels his characters to act subversively and sometimes nihilistically. Through violence, Mann, Big Boy or Silas seek to regain control over their existence. Sometimes, they go as far as to orchestrate their own death. Strikingly, this pleads for a philosophical idea that men are responsible for their own lives, and that man exists before he truly is. The following section identifies the essentialist background of *UTC* in relation to race and what Wright seems to implement instead, i.e. a perspective that flirts with existentialist thinking.

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Max and Friedrich Engels (1848).

#### 4) Race, Essentialism and Existentialism

The publication of *UTC* accidentally coincides with the publication, across the Atlantic, of Arthur de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, which is said to be one of the most important prompters of racial ideology in the mid-nineteenth century and therefore characterizes the heyday of scientific racism.<sup>21</sup> In his book *La Condition noire*, Pap Ndiaye re-establishes the influence of Gobineau's essay: "[Il] représenta un paroxysme du discours raciste, préoccupé qu'il était par le déclin des races supérieures" (235). The ideology of the time based itself on a hierarchical conception of race and attributed characteristic traits inherently and biologically-founded for each race. In his recent study, Ndiaye draws attention to the role of texts and documents in the elaboration of such views, thus suggesting that "intertextual collaboration" greatly helped to spread a racialist message.

*Ces stéréotypes ont longtemps placé les Noirs tout en bas de l'échelle humaine, dans un voisinage et un cousinage avec les espèces animales. Cette proximité a été exploitée de manière répétée par les descriptions des voyageurs, par l'imagerie coloniale, qui déformait les traits et les manières d'être pour les assimiler à ceux des bêtes, par les zoos humains de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, renvoyant encore les Noirs à un état infrahumain, bref, par un système considérable de racialisation faisant du Noir l'Autre par excellence, l'opposé absolu du Blanc. (Ndiaye 239)*

Harriet Beecher Stowe is no exception and her best-seller is a tragic product of her time that betrays at least some of the content of the *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, many critics, with Joseph Furnas being perhaps the most virulent of all, pointed at the racism contained in *UTC*: "her books are the only racist propaganda known to have been read favorably by very many at that time, and their effect must always have been to instill or to strengthen racist ideas" (Furnas 50). However, after a twentieth century marked by harsh criticism and bitter attacks, modern critics have reassessed the favorable impact of *UTC* despite the author's convictions. The subject of this section is not to reopen a case for vilifying the novel on its ideological foundations, but rather aims at exploring the points of discordance Wright may have used to engage himself in rewriting.

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<sup>21</sup> "Hereditarian ideology and European constructions of race: Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. Web. 13 May 2010 <<http://search.eb.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/eb/article-234683>>.

<sup>22</sup> We are not hereby hypothesizing on Stowe's potential reading of Gobineau's essay, but suggesting that both texts are reminiscent of a larger ideological framework.

In his essay “On the Functional Origins of Essentialism,” anthropologist Clark Barrett gives a clear and updated definition of what essentialism is: “To be essentialist is to treat objects as if they have essences or underlying natures that make them the thing they are, and to treat them as if they have properties that result from these essences” (3). After reading *UTC*, even an uninformed reader would find a close relationship between some of the comments the author makes and the terms of the definition above. Stowe’s racial essentialism comes in regularly in the narrative, notably when she is involved in the characterization of her black characters. The hero of her book is introduced as such:

He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. (*UTC* 27)

A close analysis of this description clearly synthesizes Stowe’s views on race. Tom’s physical attributes “large” and “glossy black” on the one hand, and facial expression said to be “truly African” on the other hand, determine his “kind” and “benevolent” disposition. Such comment insidiously helps to connect one’s skin color (“glossy black” in this particular instance) with a certain number of characteristics. Yet again introducing St. Clare’s cook, Dinah, Stowe writes: “She was a native and *essential* cook, as much as Aunt Chloe, – cooking *being* an indigenous talent of the African race” (my emphasis 213). Furthermore, we have already noted how Stowe repeatedly – almost *ad nauseam* – used the idea that blacks, docile and dependent, made for fervent Christians, and if not, that they ought to convert to Christianity. In “Racial Essentialism and Family Values,” Arthur Riss argues that Stowe’s racism is precisely what helped her abolitionist message to gain public attention. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to add that “One cannot forget that the most effective way Stowe elicits sympathy for Negroes is by giving them an essentially Christian character” (517). Indeed, as Sarah Robbins argues:

Stowe’s depictions of Tom sometimes echo a tendency among whites of her day to vacillate between attributing exotically alluring features to blacks and seeking to contain those very traits with complex rhetorical counter-moves, which in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* generally emphasize the purportedly essential humility of negroes as drawing them to Christianity and away from the kind of earthly “passion” invoked in the description of her hero. (44)

For Richard Yarborough, Topsy, whom Stowe describes as “one of the blackest of her race” (*UTC* 245), “embodies in particular detail the traits the author felt to be endemic

to the undomesticated African” (48). Therefore, after identifying Stowe’s pattern of characterization, it becomes clear that in *UTC*, “black” is first and foremost a “being.”

Further evidence of the ambivalence of *UTC* regarding biological principles and race can be found in the author’s treatment of her mixed-blood or half-bred characters such as Eliza, George Harris or Cassy:

Eliza had been brought up by her mistress, from girlhood, as a petted and indulged favorite. The traveler in the south must often have remarked that peculiar air of refinement, that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto women. [...] She had been married to a bright and talented young mulatto man . . . and [who] bore the name of George Harris. (*UTC* 17)

In this quote, one notices how human qualities, “refinement,” “bright” and “talented” sit side by side with the characters’ being labeled a quadroon or a mulatto. On the grounds that white blood flows in their veins, they are more daring, enterprising and foresighted. Eliza crosses the Ohio River on ice chunks, George fights off Hadley and Tom Locke and Cassy defies Simon Legree until she herself runs away. For Jean Fagan Yellin who introduces the 1998 Oxford edition of *UTC*, “[Stowe’s] colour scheme is rigid.” “Black people are inevitably subservient; ‘mixed race’ characters combine the sensitivity of their black mothers with the strength of their white fathers” (xix). The numerous examples at hand illustrate very well the notion that for the author, certain traits for certain “species” along a chromatic scale are universal and cannot be altered, since context and environment do not come into play. Only some years later after the publication of *UTC* did Charles Darwin’s *On the Origins of Species* (1859) introduce the concept of evolutionism and bring forth the idea that characteristics for species do vary. Therefore, essentialist views circumscribe Stowe’s black characters and determine their behaviors as predictable, leaving no possibility for depth, for complexity or for choice. Contrastively, Wright’s short stories disclose a radically new apprehension and disrupts with racialist thinking. Moreover, they reflect Wright’s metaphysical preoccupations and an ideological conversion of another kind. For the author, to be black is mainly to act out a role which has been written by the white man and which has been therefore socially constructed.

In his preface to *UTCh*, the black writer talks of his “Jim Crow education” (8) as a set of “lessons” to be learned and affecting his every move and utterance: “I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live” (13).

Interestingly, the “dual role” Wright mentions seems to emerge from W. E. B. Du Bois’s now famous notion of “double consciousness.” In his essay *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explained that a black person always has “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). What both Wright and Du Bois emphasize is the displacement of one’s identity and the conflicting partition into two selves. One of these two selves has to be rehearsed, thought out and performed, as we saw, according to situations. Clearly, this assertion is fundamentally different since it claims that behaviors are not innate – another word for essential – but acquired, thus being the result of a formation, what Wright calls his “education.” In this autobiographical prelude, the author is eager, and careful, to establish a precise ideological and ontological background that will give sense and shape to his characters in the following stories. In “Down by the Riverside,” during a raging storm, Mann rows a stolen boat to get his pregnant wife to the nearest hospital. But as soon as he hears about his wife being dead, he is summoned by white soldiers to go and work on the levee with the other black men, given no time to ponder over the tragic news: “Mann stared at the blurred boots and raincoats. Naw, Lawd! Ah cant break down now! Theyll know somethings wrong ef Ah keep acting like this . . . Ah cant cry bout Lulu now” (*UTCh* 80). First, we contend that the adoption of internal focalization helps for an individual and personified characterization of Mann, which greatly differs from Stowe’s ethnocentric and falsely-objective descriptions. His inner thoughts betray a great deal of self-censorship vis-à-vis the white men; an individual “Ah” “acting” according to a collective “they.” Then, we find the notion of “acting,” giving us hints at Mann’s ability to control his emotions and behaviors despite the emotional and literal – environmental – cataclysm he has to face. At the end of the short story, Mann plays yet another role, that of the “negro” who must die because he has killed. Thus, the idea of “role acting” is prevalent in Wright’s works, and if we are to believe his autobiography, he came to such realization at an early age:

I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them. Most of them were not conscious of living a special, separate, stunted way of life. Yet I knew that in some period of their growing up – a period that they had no doubt forgotten – there had been developed in them a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all that the white race had said was taboo. (*Black Boy* 216)

We hereby discern Wright’s understatement. “Blackness” is, before all, performative and the result of a social construction. Judith Butler’s concept of “performativity”



developed in *Gender Trouble* is particularly helpful all the more so since Gender and Black Studies often come hand in hand. Even if the analogy between gender and race has been criticized – because it bypasses the question of the “black woman” for example – crossing elements between the two is enlightening to a certain degree. In her essay, Butler argues that “gender is always a doing” (25). Further in her analysis, she draws on Joan Riviere’s concept of “womanly masquerade” to prove her point. Similarly, one might argue that race is always a doing, a black mask superimposed on an authentic face recalling the minstrel shows prevalent in Stowe’s time. The question of who wears the mask is of course the main and equivocal difference. It is the protagonists of *UTCh* who have to wear a mask and not the white actors of the minstrel shows. In his vocabulary, Wright scarcely uses the adjective “black.” We are chiefly aware of the characters’ “being” black since they are “Uncle Tom’s children.” But when he does use color terms to define a character’s skin, it strikingly relates to consciousness or perception. When Sarah sleeps with the white salesman, she forbids the thought to herself: “But hes a *white* man. A *white* man” (Wright’s emphasis, “Long Black Song” 112). And when Taylor comes back to his senses after he is beaten up, he is “conscious of every square inch of black skin” on his burning back (“Fire and Cloud” 162). In Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, which we have already quoted, Elizabeth is equally conscious when she is bordered by the two white policemen inquiring on her lover Richard: she “felt the skin settle over her bones as though she were wearing a mask” (171). Similarly, the color black is like a varnish on Taylor’s body that affects him and his behavior. As Richard Wright says in the closing pages of “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow”: “I had to exercise a great deal of ingenuity to keep out of trouble” (*UTCh* 14). The dual role black people play is notably voiced by Hadley in “Fire and Cloud” who provokes Taylor:

“Reverend, cant you see thats just the way the white folks *want* you to feel? Are you leading your folks just because the white folks *say* you should, or are you leading them because you *want* to? Dont you believe in what youre doing? What kind of leaders are black people to have if the white folks pick them and tell them what to do?” (Wright’s emphasis 144)

Effectively, this set of rhetorical questions allows the reader to perceive the author’s voice cleverly hidden in the narrative. Through Hadley’s exhortations, Wright is able to address a non-discriminated readership. Both his white and black audience should feel as if they are being spoken to. Moreover, the text emphasizes the verb expressing “will,” pointing at the lack or absence of such disposition (i.e. freedom) in the character

to whom the questions are addressed. Wright accurately points at the difficulty for Taylor, but also for the whole of the African American community, to be earnest and authentic. Therefore a crisis initiates most of the short stories and gives the plot its initial spark. This conflict or crisis represents a vital issue in *UTCh*, a matter of life or death. Thus in “Down by the Riverside,” should Mann let his wife Lulu die or should he break the white law and steal the postman’s boat? And in “Long Black Song,” should Silas submissively accept the fact that a white man slept with Sarah or should he take his revenge? Mann and Silas are so many allegories of this “double consciousness,” they are torn between two imperatives.

Taking into consideration our previous argument on performativity, relating *UTCh* with another influential – if not groundbreaking – study on gender (i.e. *The Second Sex*) is relatively called for. Thus could we also rephrase Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist axiom: “*on ne naît pas noir, on le devient.*”<sup>23</sup> Connecting Wright with Beauvoir is not as incongruous as it might seem. In her illuminating book *Simone de Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism*, Margaret Simons studies Wright’s actual influence on Beauvoir’s philosophical ideas on gender and sees it as yet another “intertextual collaboration.” The critic says Beauvoir extensively benefited from “[Wright’s] subjectivist approach, his critical analysis of the limitations of Marxist ideology in understanding racism and the black experience, his rejection of essentialism, and his militant engagement in the black struggle” (176). Moreover, Wright and Beauvoir had met in New York and quickly became close friends. When he later moved to Paris, Wright and Jean-Paul Sartre were able to meet thanks to the French feminist writer.<sup>24</sup> This also helps us to introduce the existentialist context to which Wright was ultimately drawn. Indeed, even though existentialism was clearly formalized a decade after *UTCh* was published, the short stories highlight some of the principles dear to existentialist thinkers.<sup>25</sup> Subversively supplanting and “emptying” – to take Bloom’s formula – Stowe’s racial essentialism, Wright argues

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<sup>23</sup> “*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*” (13) in *Le Deuxième sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir, originally published in 1949. In his essay “One is Not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” Awad Ibrahim explores social constructionism with regards to race. He argues that when a black man or woman enters a place, he or she is “already imagined, constructed, and thus treated as “Black” by hegemonic discourses and groups, respectively” (78)

<sup>24</sup> See Hazel Rowley’s biography: *Richard Wright, the Life and Times* (2001).

<sup>25</sup> Critics explain Wright’s early existentialist stance – that is before he could meet Sartre, Beauvoir or Camus – as being partly due to his reading Kafka and Nietzsche and his admiration of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*. Rowley says that Wright rated the Russian writer as “the greatest novelist who ever lived” (120).

that, on the contrary, the black man *becomes* after he *is*. Moreover, he becomes what the white man wants him to be. *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* by Jean-Paul Sartre somewhat contains the same postulate:

*Qu'est-ce que signifie ici que l'existence précède l'essence ? Cela signifie que l'homme existe d'abord, se rencontre, surgit dans le monde, et qu'il se définit après. L'homme, tel que le conçoit l'existentialiste, s'il n'est pas définissable, c'est qu'il n'est d'abord rien. Il ne sera qu'ensuite, et il sera tel qu'il se sera fait.* (29)

Sartre argues that one is free to define himself or herself. Margaret Simons suggests that this existential freedom is only “distorted by a situation of oppression” in Wright’s case (177). In other words, for the black man in the South, the choice of his “being” is taken away from him.

Respectively, the notion of choice is loosely conveyed and may not be apparent in all of Wright’s short stories, but the emphasis is nonetheless brought on action, whether it is productive as in “Fire and Cloud” or nihilistic as in “Big Boy Leaves Home” or “Long Black Song.” The fact that there is a conflict entails the idea of a possible choice between two options, thus uncovering another aspect of existentialism placing emphasis on responsibility, will, commitment and man’s abandonment in front of his freedom. Perhaps these issues are clearer in “Bright and Morning Star.” Sue has reluctantly given out the names of the party members to Booker. When she decides to go where the white mob has gathered in order to kill Booker, she assumes the responsibility of her act: “Yes; she was alone; she had done this awful thing alone; she must find some way out, alone” (*UTCh* 205). In the latter quote, the epistrophe emphasizes the word “alone” quite clearly, thus casting her in utter abandonment. Along the same lines, Sartre says “*Nous sommes seuls sans excuses [...] l'homme est condamné à être libre.*” “*Condamné, parce qu'il ne s'est pas créé lui-même, parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait*” (39-40). But as Sue comes to this realization, she remembers her violent brawl with the sheriff: “Like touching a festering sore, she put her finger upon that moment when she had shouted her defiance . . . when she had shouted to feel her strength” (*UTCh* 205). This fleshly or carnal moment, with its emphasis on sensations like “touch” and “feel” and body parts like “finger,” connects her to a certain strength, confidence and will to “shout.” Relying on her previous experience, she commits herself to killing Booker. Further in his pamphlet, Sartre claims that man, choosing for himself, chooses for the whole of humanity in the meantime. He is therefore responsible for himself, but also for society.

In “Fire and Cloud,” the dramatization of Reverend Taylor’s choice to march on the town as he solemnly addresses his congregation illustrates rather perfectly this idea of collective involvement: “Sistahs n Brothers, Ah *know* now!” (Wright’s emphasis 178) The repetition of Taylor’s “Ah” versus his addressees “Sistahs n Brothers” in his speech demonstrates the imbrication of the individual and the collective. His knowledge will engage not only himself, but his congregation as well. His character being a preacher, Wright comes close to what was labeled as “Christian existentialist” thinking.

Finally, the characters’ acts of killing, numerous as they are, underline what Michel Fabre calls “a prevalent feature of French existentialist fiction” (172). In the light of Wright’s *The Outsider*, Fabre sees a complex and portentous link in this particular philosophy between “the condition of freedom and the desire to kill.” In *UTCh*, Big Boy imagines himself on a killing spree:

Then he leveled it at an advancing white man. *Boooom!* [...] Then the whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away, getting as many as he could. They closed in; but, by Gawd, he had done his part, hadnt he? N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little.<sup>26</sup> (*UTCh* 44)

What is meant by Big Boy having “done his part” is rather vague; following whose order and why is Big Boy imaginarily killing? Even if those questions can only be hypothetically answered, the idea of involvement reappears. The fact that the young black man shows a contented pride – he is smiling – in his killing assault, mentally prefiguring newspapers’ headlines, betrays his newly-acquired confidence. Let us remember that he has just killed Jim Harvey’s son when he and his friends were leisurely playing by a pond. In this particular instance, Big Boy resembles Bigger in *Native Son* – the semantic proximity of their names also helps the connection. During the trial, Boris Max, Bigger’s lawyer, attempts to explain to the court the reasons for his killing Mary Dalton: “it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight” (*Native Son* 422). The same argument could be advanced to account for Big Boy’s day-dreaming and actual killing of a white man. In the previous section, we attempted to characterize violence as a means of self-defense, a pragmatic manner of terminating years of submission. Philosophically, it also discharges an existential freedom cry. To sum up, Wright’s characters are, indeed, actors if we segment the word ‘character.’ Like the young Wright

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<sup>26</sup> In “Long Black Song,” Silas enacts what Big Boy only imagines and lets out his murderous rage before dying in the fire of his house.

in *Black Boy*, they have to wear a mask and play a role in certain situations, a vindication that silences biologically-founded racist views. But inevitably, they cease to act out when they become actors in the first acceptance of the word, meaning that they turn to action and rebel. This, we saw, translates Wright's progression towards existentialism on the one hand and communism on the other hand.<sup>27</sup> Michel Fabre therefore notes in *The World of Richard Wright*: "His position oscillates between Marxism and humanistic Existentialism" (59). Putting aside the ideological importance behind *UTCh*, our final chapter is less concerned with ideas and doctrines, to tackle issues of voice, language and style, exploring first notions of intention and strategy.

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<sup>27</sup> See our previous section "From Christianity to Communism."

### III. *Uncle Tom's Children* as an Aesthetic Response

After devoting the first two chapters of this dissertation to the analysis of themes, motifs and ideas in *UTCh* as challenging those developed in *UTC*, it seems essential to consider the question of aesthetic subversion or the more pragmatic question of how does the *kenosis* – Bloom's concept introduced earlier – take place between *UTC* and *UTCh*. Indeed, trespassing or exceeding boundaries is not purely and simply geographic, spatial, political or ideological; thus our analysis would remain incomplete without reflecting on *UTCh*'s textual or stylistic transgressions. This chapter thus aims first at delineating and then comparing the authors' choices – their respective strategy – in terms of style, language, genre... This series of choices inextricably inform the type of message Stowe and Wright seem keen on delivering on the one hand, and the type of reader they are targeting on the other hand. In a few words, this amounts to deriving from the text a hypothetical intention or intended meaning. Following Sartre's dialectic in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?*, we will attempt to address – though not exhaustively – the questions of how, why and to whom do the authors of our corpus write. Answering these topical questions and noticing the certain divergence in points of view stress the conflicting presence of discordant voices. In our final section, informed by Bakhtin's theories among others, we will examine how through vocal and verbal devices, such as silencing and polyphony, Wright's voice emerges against Stowe's.

#### 1) Notions of Intention and Strategy

##### A – The Choice of Genre and Form

It is said that Harriet Beecher Stowe was urged by her sister-in-law, Isabella, to write something “that will make the whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is” (Yellin in *UTC*, xi). In his book *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, Thomas Gossett looks with a critical eye at what he calls “Anti-Uncle Tom Literature.” Judging by the great number of works written by Southern writers reacting to *UTC*, not everyone sympathized with Stowe. Her prose was nonetheless said to have started the Civil War (Yellin in *UTC*, vii). Thus many critics agree to classify *UTC* in the category of “protest

fiction.”<sup>1</sup> This genre has for axiomatic principle to consider words as weapons, “loaded guns” according to Jean-Paul Sartre in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature ?* (29) As a consequence, it is said that protest novels or *romans à thèse* are not essentially literary or at least, literarity is not their main concern. Besides, this is what critics and authors dislike about protest novels, to the point of discrediting the genre. Susan Suleiman raises this particular issue and points at the negative overtone when assessing *romans à thèse*: “le terme ...évoqu[e] des oeuvres trop proches de la propagande pour être artistiquement valables” (8). Again, our goal in this section is not to determine the validity of *UTC* or *UTCh* according to certain literary criteria, but rather observe the textual choices made by Richard Wright to issue his rewriting of or response to *UTC*.

Clearly, the avowed intention of protest novels is to denounce a moral wrong or a social injustice or any kind of discrimination for example.<sup>2</sup> Thus Susan Suleiman gives her definition of a *roman à thèse*:

[U]n roman “réaliste” (fondé sur une esthétique du vraisemblable et de la représentation) qui se signale . . . comme porteur d’un enseignement, tendant à démontrer la vérité d’une doctrine politique, philosophique, scientifique ou religieuse. [...] C’est le désir de faire voir. (14-29)

In her preface to *UTC*, Stowe declares what she believes to be the duty of “the artist,” hereby foreshadowing the precepts of the proletarian novel of the 1910s: “bringing to the knowledge and sympathies of the world the lowly, the oppressed, and the forgotten” (*UTC* 3). Stowe’s idea of “bringing knowledge” overtly tallies with Suleiman’s notion of “*faire voir*” above quoted and anchors Stowe’s ensuing novel in a desire to show. More explicitly, she delivers her intention: “The object of these sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us” (3). If anything, *UTC* is a rhetorical project; it outwardly seeks to condemn slavery, to “awaken sympathy” and to formalize a “moral response” to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (Robbins 33). Since this section deals with the complex relationship between author and message, we should insist on the fact that the “author’s disappearance”<sup>3</sup> suggested by Michel Foucault or the more radical “death of the author”<sup>4</sup> expressed by Roland Barthes

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin debunks protest novels choosing *UTC* as a prime example. He says that “they are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility” (24).

<sup>2</sup> See <[http://www.gale.cengage.com/free\\_resources/glossary/glossary\\_p.htm](http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/glossary/glossary_p.htm)> for a condensed definition of “protest fiction.”

<sup>3</sup> “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur ?” in *Dits et écrits*, 817.

<sup>4</sup> “La mort de l’auteur” in *Le bruissement de la langue*, 67.

are not particularly pertinent in the case of protest fiction. Indeed, the genre *per se* requires a close and even necessary bond between the author and his or her protesting text. Contrary to Barthes's idea that "the voice loses its origin" (1984, 61), the texts of our corpus come close to the Sartrean idea that "to talk is to act" and therefore engage their respective writer (27). Sartre says: "*l'écrivain "engagé" sait que la parole est action; il sait que dévoiler c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer*" (28). Therefore, we can assume that the author of *UTC* is not disconnected from her intention. Contrary to Flaubert's recommendation that the author should be "present everywhere and visible nowhere," Stowe is "everywhere" in *UTC*, betrayed by a monological "I" readily accessible: "A slave warehouse! Perhaps some of my readers conjure up horrible visions of such a place" (*UTC* 334). She unveils her choice – to simultaneously show and influence – as early as the paratext and this repeatedly translates itself in the narration. We have already discussed some of the arguments Stowe advanced to build her offensive on slavery, the Christian gospel and particularly Puritan morality to name just a part of this argumentation. Accordingly, Edwin Burgum says that Stowe "utilizes the methodological clichés of the Sunday School tracts of the period" (194). But until now, we have left out the rhetorical devices she uses to launch her protest. Those are idiosyncratic, but not limited, to the genre of protest fiction. Thus, time and again, Stowe addresses her reader in the narration: "But who, sir, makes the trader?" (*UTC* 138) or "Know, then, innocent eastern friend" (95). Thanks to those numerous apostrophes, Stowe is able to gain the attention of a wide range of readers, mothers, senators, abolitionists, Northerners, and tries to stir, indeed, "the whole nation." Then, through cataplexes – or threatening payback – she refers to the "day of vengeance" solemnly asking "is America safe?" at the end of her book (456). Involving her audience, especially women, in the form of a direct appeal to sentiments, is yet another effective figure of speech. When Eliza escapes with her son, she pleads "If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie . . . how fast could you walk?" (Stowe's emphasis 55). Finally, in choosing to have Alfred (St. Clare's brother) or Marie (St. Clare's wife) as supporters of the cause of slavery Stowe responds beforehand to counterarguments her adversaries might oppose. Thus goes the argument between Alfred and Augustine St. Clare:

"Never you fear for us; possession is our nine points. We've got the power. This subject race," said he, stamping firmly, "is down, and shall stay down! We have energy enough to manage our own powder."

"Sons trained like your Henrique will be grand guardians of your powder-magazines," said Augustine, – "so cool and self-possessed!" (277)



St. Clare, a witty character, sometimes bearing Stowe's message, is obviously being ironical in this exchange. Henrique, in a scene we have previously mentioned, has just beaten up Dodo to the point of exhaustion. These examples, figures of pathos borrowed from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, are just a few in a long list of other devices, but inform nonetheless the author's apparent choice to tackle the issue of slavery in an obviously didactic and rhetorical way, with the induction of extensive sentimentalism. "*Si je veux démontrer (ou enseigner, ou prouver) quelque chose à quelqu'un, c'est que je veux le convaincre ou le persuader de la vérité de cette chose,*" says Suleiman in her study of protest fiction. She adds, "*le lecteur d'un roman à thèse occupe une position analogue à celle du public vis-à-vis d'un orateur*" (37). However telling this analogy might be and despite her plausible qualities as such, Stowe is not a public speaker; essentially, Stowe is a novelist.

This previous comment allows us to introduce a discussion on the "form" Stowe chose for her indictment – what Claire Parfait calls Stowe's "serialized novel." In her study, *The Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the French scholar argues that "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in the congenial environment of the *Era*, which partly accounts for the final form of the novel and its ensuing popularity when it was published as a book" (30). The choice of serialization in *The National Era*, an "Antislavery, Literary and Political Newspaper," is both political and strategic. For Laurel Brake, Bill Bell and David Finkelstein, whom Parfait quotes, this type of publication produces "a multivalent text" (17). Once more, in several installments, the writer, inserting her message within an entertaining and parabolical narrative text, seeks to gain public attention. Moreover, the form of the novel *per se* allows for a prolonged narrative thread, for a lengthy list of characters – protagonists and antagonists alike – and for "thrilling" new developments.<sup>5</sup> With its *romanesque* quality, *UTC* was more likely to move its readership than a purely formal incrimination of slavery answering to a piece of legislature. With *UTCh*, Richard Wright radically changes perspective. Not only does the indictment differ in its object, but his stories are, nominally, short, and multiple.

Instead of "recycling" the novel form, Wright chooses to publish a series of five short stories as his response to *UTC*. Indeed, rather than recycling – a positive process–,

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<sup>5</sup> The 1998 Oxford World's Classics edition is 456-pages long.

the black writer wishes to empty Stowe's text, or to "signify" to use Henry Louis Gates's term. In his book *Figures in Black*, the African American critic calls "Signifyin(g)," "the trope of revision, of repetition and difference" which he takes from the Afro-American idiom (xxxix). Influenced by Harold Bloom and applying his theories to black criticism, Gates explains further that Signifyin(g) "is a uniquely black rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first" (49). Thus Gates's concept helps us to approach *UTC* textually or linguistically, leaving themes and ideas aside. Signifyin(g) *UTC*, Wright subverts the novel and submits short stories, each carrying or "hammering home" the same (or slightly altered) message. Furthermore, the multiplicity of the short stories, encompassed in a collection, challenges the unity of the novel in an antagonistic relation of "plurality" against "oneness."<sup>6</sup> However, plurality does not mean unrelated scattering. In his essay "Richard Wright's Successful Failure: A New Look at *Uncle Tom's Children*," James Giles praises the stories for their capacity to answer and prolong each other:

At any rate, the thematic progression of the book is now obvious – there is Big Boy the youth who runs, then Mann the adult who runs, then Silas who meets a heroic but lonely death, then Taylor the minister who will not openly endorse Marxism but who acts out its implications and finally there is Sue who dies a martyred convert to Communism and thus triumphs over all the forces which have limited the characters in the first four stories. (266)

Involved in a didactic aim of repetition, we find the narrative conflict clearly voiced and stated in a similar fashion in every short story: "He wuz gonna shoot im ef he didnt" (38) in "Big Boy Leaves Home" or "Its mah life ergin theirs" (89) in "Down by the Riverside" to quote only two. As a rhetorical or strategic device, a short story, because it can be read in one sitting, is more effective than the novel; it "gains by its compact and impact and nothing is lost," argues Thomas Gullason (30). Quickly and effectively issuing the message is the main concern of Wright's short stories. The choice of the short story therefore lies in its ability to move, to disturb, or even perhaps to shock. In this respect, A. L. Bader says that "Each scene, incident, and detail of the action not only must bear a direct relation to the conflict and its resolution but must also carry its share of significance" (108). Thus, Taylor's beating in "Fire and Cloud" consist not only of an allusion to *UTC* – Wright is issuing a rewriting – but they also correspond to the main character's moment of realization and his decision to act: "Well git yuh white

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<sup>6</sup> This relates to a plurality of points of view or focalizers, idea that will be developed in the following section.

trash some day!” (*UTCh* 164) The moment of tension is also the moment of resolution. “Big Boy Leaves Home” opens on a tranquil and idyllic scene with four young boys playing in open fields, idly “lauging” and “singing” (19). Progressively, elements come into play to disturb this pastoral theme: a “no trespassing” sign, an ominous train going North... until the sudden intrusion of a white woman, trigger of the tragedy. The ensuing deadly hand-to-hand fight between Big Boy and Jim Harvey’s son propels Big Boy’s flight and signals his banishment. Thus Wright’s technique as a short story writer is productive of tension and suspense, carefully blending dialogue and narration; the narrative structure always obeys an ascending progression reaching its apex at the very end of the story. Particularly interested in Wright’s short stories, Edwin Burgum analyzes plot and structure in “Long Black Song”: “Beginning with a comparatively simple situation, both action and characterization grow more complex as the narrative unfolds” (44). On the whole, this statement is applicable to all of the short stories. The result is a collection of gripping and exemplifying stories, accomplishing “more in less space” (Burgum 43).

Beside these narratological considerations on the form of writing (novel vs. short story), the question of genre arises – namely, to which genre does *UTCh* belong to? From the outset, to qualify the collection of short stories seems to pose more difficulty than in the case of *UTC*. The absence of a clearly stated project, such as the preface of *UTC*, suggests that elements should be drawn from the text itself. As a reminder, we saw that despite the complexity of the novel, Stowe adopted a blend of two genres at once, using the incriminatory stance of the *roman à thèse* on the one hand while drawing elements from the sentimental novel on the other hand. The title of the collection, which participates in the horizon of expectations of the reader, refers to Stowe’s literary canon and hereby indicates a rewriting. But *UTCh* is neither a parody nor a pastiche. In *Palimpsestes*, which we have already quoted, Gérard Genette seeks to give a clear definition for each: “*Le travestissement burlesque modifie donc le style sans modifier le sujet; inversement, la “parodie” modifie le sujet sans modifier le style*” (29). Following Genette’s categories, *UTCh* comes close to a depreciation, or what the French scholar calls in French, *dévalorisation*<sup>7</sup> (404). Another element of answer may

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<sup>7</sup> Genette takes the example of Fielding’s *Shamela* as a depreciation of Richardson’s *Pamela*: “officiellement une “réfutation”... et un “antidote à ce poison” (404). In the context of our study, Genette’s metaphor, illustrating what depreciation is, seems all the more salient; it encourages us to consider *UTCh* as an antidote for *UTC*.

spring from the paratext once again, particularly in the epigraph Wright takes from Elizabeth Corbett's title of her article in the *Theatre Guild Magazine* and which says: "Uncle Tom is dead!"<sup>8</sup> Taking this statement into consideration as well as the theme of Wright's short stories – black men rebel against white men, we may also be tempted to range *UTCh* in the category of protest fiction, a protest based this time on social and racial grounds, rather than on moral and Christian ones as is the case for *UTC*. In critical works as well, points of view diverge on the thorny question of genre. For instance, Robert Bone argues that the short stories "conform in essence to the pattern of the picaresque" (31). Others, like Michel Fabre, see a naturalist writer at work (38). And finally, numerous are those who, like Ralph Ellison, readily cast *UTCh* as purely "existentialist" fiction (in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* 84). We have discussed these aspects, peculiarities or influences in the preceding lines of this study. Quite obviously, one cannot reach at an ultimate and decisive conclusion. On the contrary, this pleads for an assumption stating that the text simply refuses categorization, thus echoing the writer's social self: "The white south said that I had a 'place' in life. Well, I had never felt my 'place'" (*Black Boy* 283). *UTCh*, then, exceeds the limitations of one given specific literary genre and blends characteristics of many, thus fostering a plurality of readings and spurring a variety of effects. These effects or the function of the texts – to elicit empathy and moral indignation in *UTC*; anger and revolt in *UTCh* – are also prompted by the style each writer adopts. We contend that a close reading of two relevant passages taken in each text of the corpus helps us to approach and ultimately differentiate Stowe's style from Wright's.

## B – Stylistic Comparison: Language and Writing

Studying an author's style allows to identify the type of reaction an author wishes to provoke in the reader. Therefore, our analysis bases itself on Michael Riffaterre's assumption that the intentions of the author stem, primarily but not only, from the text itself and requires a stylistic study of this text.

*[O]n serait tenté de partir [des] intentions [de l'auteur] et ensuite d'observer comment elles sont réalisées dans le texte [...] Or, il est souvent impossible de reconnaître ses intentions sans analyser le message [...] Quel que soit leur fondement, les jugements de valeur du lecteur sont causés par un stimulus qui est dans le texte. (41-42)*

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Corbett, "Uncle Tom is Dead," *Theatre Guild Magazine*, January 1931: 16-20.

The choice of these two passages (appendix 3 and 4), relatively close to one another from a narratological viewpoint, greatly informs our perception of the authors' stylistic specificities. In *UTC*, the passage corresponds to Simon Legree's ordering Tom to flog Cassy, hoping to promote him and make him "a driver" (364). This moment of confrontation in the narrative or "narreme" finds its echo in "Fire and Cloud" when Taylor is beaten up by the mayor's right-hand men (162). First, it seems that the connection between the two characters is strongly suggested (not to say obvious) since the former represents the epitome of Christian morality and the latter is a preacher in his forties or fifties.<sup>9</sup> Then, in addition to having similar characteristics, both protagonists, Taylor and Tom are, at this particular moment, placed under submission by one or several white men. This easily enables us to concentrate on the authors' styles and evaluate their respective treatment of this same narreme. This also answers to our previous question on how the writers write. Our attempt is not to exhaust, in the manner of a catalogue, their own particularities, but rather offer a compendium of their stylistic differences as relating to their respective intentions.

The first aspect of this stylistic comparison approaches Stowe's and Wright's lexicon and use of images in the text as pertaining to the representation of reality. While Stowe makes use of a great number of abstract nouns, often linked to sentiments, such as "passion," "joy," "triumph," "amazement" or moral adjectives like "right," "wrong," and abstractions like "heaven," Wright antithetically directs his narrative on concrete items, "grass," "rope," "tree," and "leather" and bodily parts: "arms," "back," "hands," "knees," "fingers," "wrists," "face," "ankles"... More evident is the use of a metaphoric language; at least four metaphors are to be found in this rather short passage of *UTC*. Such is the perhaps naïve simile of Legree presented as a "greenish" monster with whiskers, "a ferocious beast" about to "devour" Tom. Wright's short stories are almost entirely devoid of these devices (metaphors, similes, allegories...) made to enrich and amplify one's discourse. On the contrary, the black writer pays attention to sounds, for example, in order to convey an accurate perception of the situation. As the whip lashes Taylor's back, the recurrent onomatopoeia "*whick!*" attempts to give a sensory representation of the scene through hearing. Similarly, the repetition of letters in Taylor's speech, stuttering-like, parallels the regular hits and blows and the spasmodic

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<sup>9</sup> We may insist on the fact that the analogy works up to a certain point. In the first chapter, we saw how Taylor departed from Uncle Tom's "stranglehold."

jerks of Taylor's body: "Ooour Fffather. . . [...] wwwhich aaaaart in hheaven . . . hhhallowed bbe Tttthy nname. . ." (163).

Then, it is striking to notice the contrastive syntactic structure of sentences for each. On the one hand, Stowe uses long propositional polysyndetic and emphatic sentences, linking propositions with numerous conjunctions, "when," "as if," "but," "to" and "and," thus taking a great care to structure her discourse.

Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely, *and* his very whickers seemed to curl with passion; *but*, like some ferocious beast, that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse *to* proceed to immediate violence, *and* broke out into bitter raillery. (my emphasis 365)

On the other hand, Wright's structure consists of a succession of minimal asyndetic and juxtaposed sentences, thus characterizing a very factual and informative writing: "He rested his face against a cold tree-trunk. A rope cut into his wrists. They tied his feet together, drawing the rope tight about his ankles. He looked around; they stood watching" (162).

Dialogues and the treatment of direct speech in the narrative is yet another sign of antagonistic writing and style. Stowe's dialogues consist of long dramatic exchanges, such as one would see declaimed on a stage. The punctuation is rich and dense, mined with exclamation and interrogation marks: "What! Ye blasted black beast! Tell *me* ye don't think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? I'll put a stop to it!" (Stowe's emphasis 365). Moreover, emphasized words, as well as hand gestures such as "putting up his hand" or "clasped her hands," are of didascalical nature and recall the "drama" genre.<sup>10</sup> Poles apart, Wright's dialogues are economical; replies are quick and short with no indication of tone or manner of speaking.

"Well, nigger, what do you know?"  
"Nothin, suh."  
"Youre a preacher, aint you?"  
"Yessuh." (162)

Again, this pleads for a factual mode of writing.

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<sup>10</sup> This partly explains the quick transposition of the book on stage and the success of *UTC* as a play.

Finally, we need to address the issue of modalization or the relative degree of the narrator's involvement in both texts. One striking indicator is the use of adverbs. They are abundant in *UTC*: "remarkably," "habitually," "cowardly," "easily," "involuntarily," "fiercely"... (365) They are almost inexistent in *UTCh*. Adverbs, because they modify a verb or an adjective, betray the narrator's association with his or her utterance. It is the narrator who finds Tom's "smooth, soft voice" remarkable, and therefore enables the reader to fathom the implied author. Ultimately, the reader perceives the discourse as modalized or biased, in other words not entirely objective. Instead of a falsely omniscient or external narrator, Wright often reverts to streams of consciousness and chooses internal focalization as a better means to convey feelings and emotions: "A church steeple loomed in the starlight, slender and faint. Yeah, that's Houston's church. N Ah gotta go thru a white neighborhood" (166).

This latter point conclusively stresses two confrontational styles, two strategies of writing and of "story-telling." While Stowe's text seems to be imbued with *pathos*, where "blood and tears" come in a flow, Wright's words are steeped in *logos*; his realism and rationalism is as "cold" as the "tree-trunk" of the passage we focused on. Argumentation versus exposition is what this stylistic comparison highlights. It also denotes two different objectives: Stowe wants to move (*movere*) whereas Wright wants to teach (*dicere*). In "The Art of Richard Wright's Short Stories," Edwin Burgum also concludes:

From Hemingway doubtless came his objective attitude, his direct, unflinching vision, and the short, firm sentences, with their frequent change of grammatical subject, as the appropriate vehicle of expression. Wright's sentences are stripped bare of all but the necessary adjectives and connectives. Each is a vigorous self-sufficient unit, which expels its pent-up meaning and willingly gives way to the next line. But they all retire before the tense authority of dialogue. The dialogue itself is candid, the sort the character would have used in life, or the sort that aims to give such an effect. (38)

Though Burgum traces Ernest Hemingway's influence in Wright's short stories, he nonetheless sets them apart: "[Hemingway's] style has been assimilated into a quite different personality, and used to such different ends that the relationship is disguised" (38). Thus, the process of subversion characterizing *UTCh* does not only pertain to the form of writing, but also to its style; Wright does not "in the manner of," as Paul Reboix did in his pastiches and whom Genette quotes, but "contrary to." Interestingly, Gates's concept of Signifyin(g) revises the dual relationship between signifier and

signified (172). For Gates, the African-American writer needs to reinvent the signifier, thus reflecting Derek Walcott's views: "What would deliver [the New World Negro] from *servitude* was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own *mode of inflection*" (my emphasis 95). This reflection on Wright's style and language gives way to a discussion on the use of African-American vernacular as connected to the topic of "voice" in the closing pages of this third chapter. To a certain extent, Wright's and Stowe's styles determine a certain category or class of addressees, hence the following point made by Sarah Robbins:

American women writers [including Stowe] understood that having middle-class women situated within the domestic sphere guaranteed a large group of readers with an interest in female-oriented topics. And these women readers and writers also helped ensure the popularity of sentimentalism as a literary mode. (17)

Therefore, the following section is concerned with the question of the narratee, or to whom the authors of our corpus write.

#### C – Evacuation of the Narratee?

As we already mentioned several times in the course of this dissertation, Harriet Beecher Stowe frequently apostrophes and addresses her readership on several occasions. Thus having an origin, addressee and aim, *UTC* shares many characteristics of the open letter, including their original publication in a newspaper. In the *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Gérard Genette completes Gerald Prince's "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee" and distinguishes clearly the intradiegetic from the extradiegetic narratee, the latter equating the "implied or potential reader" (according to Genette). Unlike Marlowe's companions in *Heart of Darkness* or the caliph in *A Thousand and One Nights* whom Prince quotes (100), the narratee in *UTC* is extradiegetic, insofar as he or she does not participate in the diegesis. He is nonetheless made repeatedly explicit as in this beguiling and self-righteous address:

To you, generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South, – you, whose virtue, and magnanimity, and purity of character, are the greater for the severer trial it has encountered, – to you is her appeal. [...] And now, men and women of America, is this a thing to be trifled with, apologized for, and passed over in silence? Farmers of Massachusetts, of New Hampshire, of Vermont, of Connecticut, who read this book by the blaze of your winter-evening fire... (450-451)



Therefore, the figure of the narratee, though it fluctuates, is constructed and inevitably circumscribed by Stowe, hereby “restricting” the reading of her book to 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers whom she has carefully selected. Because of this discrimination, she neglects the potential reading of her novel by black readers as she never once addresses them, even though they are the primary subject of her book to a large extent. The black reader only has Stowe’s black characters – however stereotyped – to feel as if being “spoken to.” Undoubtedly, the identification of modern-day readers with these didactic appeals seems difficult, if not impossible. *UTC* is therefore deeply anchored in Stowe’s immediate “here and now,” a useful strategy, but a defect in the long run.

In an attempt to contrast the two works, we are allowed to ask ourselves: what kind of audience does Richard Wright target? Looking for a precise narratee in *UTCh* requires more scrutiny than in *UTC* where the question of the narratee, as we just saw, is almost handed over. This initial comment – the relative difficulty of the task – already provides an element of answer: in his refusal to invoke any particular reader, Wright wants to gain the attention of a larger public, black and white, contemporary to the publication of *UTCh* or remote in time. From the outset, Wright seems to evacuate the figure of the narratee. But as Gerald Prince highlights: “even though the narratee may be invisible in a narration, he nonetheless exists and is never entirely forgotten” (99). Comparisons, descriptions of characters, extra-textual experiences all signal the presence of a narratee to be read in between the lines. He explains that these common devices are only here to define “more precisely the type of universe known to the narratee” (99). This seems to be precisely the function of Wright’s autobiographical sketch, prefacing *UTCh*, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” In nine vignettes, using a first person narration, the author wishes to provide an empirical frame for the short stories to come, and in the meantime, seeks to explain to his narratee the constraints of being/living as a black man in the South.

For example, it was almost impossible to get a book to read. It was assumed that after a Negro had imbibed what scanty schooling the state furnished he had no further need for books. (13)

Manifestly, this remark can only be directed at a white reader. Obviously, black readers from the South at the time of segregation would not be startled at this revelation; they surely know they cannot borrow books from a public library. Apart from this introduction, which James Giles considers as “aesthetically” valid “because of its concentrated description of the brutality endured by Wright himself in the South and

because of the warning contained in [the] closing quotation” (258), nothing in the short stories themselves indicates that Wright addresses an all-white readership. Taking Wright’s example to illustrate his section “Pour qui écrit-on?” in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature ?*, Jean-Paul Sartre thus determines a narratee according to what he or she is not.

*Wright ne peut songer non plus à destiner ses livres aux racistes blancs de Virginie ou de Caroline, dont le siège est fait d’avance et qui ne les ouvriront pas. Ni aux paysans noirs des bayous, qui ne savent pas lire. [...] L’Europe est loin, ses indignations sont inefficaces et hypocrites. On ne peut pas attendre beaucoup des nations qui ont asservi les Indes, l’Indochine, l’Afrique noire. Il suffit de ces considérations pour définir ses lecteurs: il s’adresse aux Noirs cultivés du Nord et aux Américains de bonne volonté (intellectuels, démocrates de gauche, radicaux, ouvriers syndiqués de C.I.O). (86)*

This reasoning, though nicely orchestrated, is only tentative, and remains hypothetic. Wright’s collection of essays entitled *White Man, Listen!* is comparatively less ambiguous. However, Sartre’s next comment is significantly illuminating as he refers to Baudelaire’s notion of “double simultaneous postulation.”

*Pour Wright les lecteurs noirs représentent la subjectivité. [...] En cherchant à s’éclairer sur sa situation personnelle, il les éclaire sur eux-mêmes. [...] [C]haque mot renvoie à deux contextes; à chaque phrase deux forces s’appliquent à la fois, qui déterminent la tension incomparable de son récit. Eût-il parlé aux Blancs seuls, il se fût peut-être montré plus prolixe, plus didactique, plus injurieux aussi; aux Noirs, plus elliptique encore, plus complice, plus élégiaque. (88)*

Furthermore, and as we have noted in the section on “Race, Essentialism and Existentialism,” the black writer means to deliver a sort of “wake-up call” through the set of rhetorical questions found in “Fire and Cloud.” Those are inevitably addressed to a black readership, asking them if they can still afford “to do what the white people tell [them] to do” (*UTCh* 144). We contend that Wright’s strategy of address is principally more cautious, and more importantly “democratic,” than Stowe’s, since the short stories also seek the attention of a black readership. Thanks to Wright’s loose definition of who he sees as the narratee, the short stories may still rouse today’s readers, black and white alike. As Fred March encouragingly says in his review of *UTCh* for the *New York Herald Tribune*, “This book would be published by any publisher at any time; and it would make its way in the world as fiction in any year.” Thus closing this section on Stowe’s and Wright’s respective stylistic and aesthetic choices, we might now consider *UTCh* – Wright’s very first publication – as an emerging and discordant “voice,” seeking to silence “illegitimate” voices of the past and to restore authority through authorship.

## 2) Reappropriating One's Voice

### A – Dissonance and Bakhtin's Heteroglossia

Introducing the notion of “voice” in this concluding section is relatively called for since it relates to the Bakhtinian assumption that literature is just “another form of communication,” or what critics have come to label, “dialogic” (Holquist 68). In *Semeiotike*, Julia Kristeva draws on Bakhtin's ideas to inaugurate the notion of “intertextuality”:

*Pour Bakhtine, issu d'une Russie révolutionnaire préoccupée de problèmes sociaux, le dialogue n'est pas seulement le langage assumé par le sujet, c'est une écriture où on lit l'autre. Ainsi le dialogisme bakhtinien désigne l'écriture à la fois comme subjectivité et comme communicativité ou, pour mieux dire, comme intertextualité. (149)*

In the light of these complementary conceptions of literature (dialogism and intertextuality), we may assume that Stowe's *UTC* establishes – and then occupies – a certain communicative space within the corpus of literary texts. Prolonging this metaphoric vision of literature as dialogue, each text becomes a voice or utterance; and when put together, they form what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia”: “Heteroglossia is a way of conceiving the world as made up of a roiling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct markers” (Holquist 69). In this respect, Wright's *UTCh* “invades” Stowe's communicative space and (im)poses itself as a dissenting and dissonant voice. From then on, it seems that two voices compete to gain ascendancy within a same corpus, disregarding the respective dates of publication for each book. Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia is all the more appropriate to our study since it also relates to a long-standing tradition of “oral” storytelling characterizing African American folklore and influencing black literature particularly. As John Callahan says: “Because they are close to an oral culture, [...] black writers bring a dimension of immediacy to the struggle with the written word” (14). Of course, the “struggle with the written word” Callahan mentions refers to the difficult transcription of the oral into a written form. But a second reading seems to suggest that black writers have to wrestle with the already existing “written word,” *UTC* being a part of it. Indeed, as Sophia Cantave points out in her essay “Who Gets to Create the Lasting Images?,” “Despite her best intentions, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* betrays [Stowe's] overwhelming race and class privileges and the ways she herself helped to further limit African Americans' access to the dominant language

and their own literary portrayal of the slave experience” (196). Therefore, we need to consider the verbal, vocal and linguistic devices Wright uses in *UTCh* to make himself heard. As we shall see, Wright resorts to techniques such as silencing – or refusing to let someone speak – and incorporates also what he himself calls “negro folklore” in his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (100). Essentially, this section focuses on what is best conveyed in the figurative as well as literal meanings of the French expression “*avoir voix au chapitre*.”

### i) Silencing or the Absence of Quotations

Because *UTCh* is a response to and at times a rewriting of *UTC*, the text must show and use some of the materials contained in the hypotext.<sup>11</sup> A predisposed reader notices however that Richard Wright never actually quotes Stowe. As we saw in the course of this analysis and as Sarah Robbins points out, Wright is more interested in “original authorship with a bit of strategic allusiveness” (60). The apparent lack of quotations in the hypertext creates a certain gap that translates a desire to silence the author of the hypotext. As Antoine Compagnon notes in *La Seconde main*:

*Ce que les guillemets citent, c'est que la parole est donnée à un autre, que l'auteur se démet de l'énonciation au profit d'un autre: les guillemets désignent une ré-énonciation, ou une renonciation à un droit d'auteur.* (40)

On the contrary, Wright does not wish to withdraw himself from the enunciation. Quite clearly, this signals a refusal, not to say denial, of Stowe and a means of transcending her voice in the dialogic exchange between *UTC* and *UTCh*. In the same way that Stowe silences “the very people she claims to care most about” in having “her African American characters advocating their own exile,” Wright “exiles” Stowe from her own text and debunks *UTC* (Levinson xi). Finding traces of “silencing” in what is missing rather than in what the text actually says is one way of tackling the issue at stake. Yet another marker of Wright’s verbal responsive stance lies in his incorporation of elements strictly belonging to the African American folklore, thus restoring the authentic and legitimate voice of his people.

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Genette explains the terminology he uses in *Palimpsestes*: “*C'est donc lui que je rebaptise hypertextualité. J'entends par là toute relation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerai hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerai, bien sûr, hypotexte)*” (11).

## ii) Bible Verses vs. Negro Songs

As we saw in the second chapter, Stowe's "religious voice," in other words her spiritual disposition, is most notably heard in her countless insertions of biblical hymns, spirituals and verses. They anchor *UTC* in a patchwork of Christian writings, the Bible being the main source for these intertextual uses. In "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," Jane Tompkins catalogues the various strategies adopted by Stowe to ground her novel in evangelical culture:

[R]eminders are introduced at every possible opportunity, in the narrative, in dialogue, in epigraphs, in quotations from other authors; they are present in the Protestant hymns that thread their way through scene after scene, in asides to the reader, apostrophes to the characters, in quotations from religious poetry, sermons, and prayers, and in long stretches of dialogue and narrative devoted to the discussion of religious matters. (134)

Stowe's religious voice is thus heard when she addresses her character Legree, after he has satisfactorily killed Tom: "Yes, Legree; but who shall put up that *voice* in thy soul? That soul, past repentance, past prayer, past hope, in whom the fire that never shall be quenched is already burning!" (my emphasis, *UTC* 422). Like the religious paintings ornamenting a Protestant church, these numerous references and quotations remind the reader that he has "entered" a novel that "does not simply quote the Bible," but "rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave" (Tompkins 134). There is no denying that a part of this Christian subtext (the Scriptures, spirituals and hymns) makes up for a good part of the African American culture, as Richard Wright concedes: "it was through the portals of the church that the American negro entered the shrine of western culture" ("Blueprint for Negro Writing" 99). In this, Stowe is not too far from reality; as John Franklin and Alfred Moss point out: "Thanks to the religion of their masters, [slaves] could be philosophical about the whole thing [i.e. slavery] and escape through ritual and song" (130). But Stowe's text fails to convey the idea that the words in those songs "often seemed to embody "hidden" messages in their symbolism and thus served as a kind of secret communication" (Graves 278). Stowe's use of songs and hymns therefore ignores what the slaves made of them; in other words, it is a "rough" and unacculturated use of Biblical references.

Moreover, it is often striking to notice Stowe's overt contempt for black culture. One enlightening example is when the newly-bought slaves leave the warehouse.

One of the other men struck up one of those unmeaning songs, common among the slaves.

“Mas’r see’d me cotch a coon,  
High boys, high!  
He laughed to split, – d’ye see the moon,  
Ho! ho! ho! boys, ho!  
Ho! yo! hi – e! oh!”

The singer appeared to make up the song to his own pleasure, generally hitting on rhyme, without much attempt at reason; and all the party took up the chorus, at intervals. (352-353)

Because it does not relate or refer to the Bible, Stowe dismisses this song as being “unmeaning,” for “pleasure” purposes and on top of all, irrational. These egotistic and peremptory comments work in the way Sophia Cantave – quoted earlier – describes, i.e. they control and limit the African American language and voice, as well as its idioms. Without further ado, we might now turn to Wright’s use of spirituals and songs and see how it ironically responds to Stowe’s mannerism.

Perhaps with a sheer hint of provocation, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the first short story, begins with a rather obscene ditty that the four young boys, Big Boy, Lester, Buck and Bobo, recollect:

*Yo mama don wear no drawers . . .*  
Clearly the voice rose out of the woods, and died away. Like an echo another voice caught it up:  
*Ah seena when she pulled em off . . .*  
*N she washed ‘em in alcohol . . .*  
Then a quartet of voices, blending in harmony, floated high above the tree tops:  
*N she hung ‘em out in the hall . . .* (17)

That the very beginning of *UTCh* should open on a secular song and place emphasis on vocality is too bolstering to be overlooked. Indeed, the word “voice” is repeated three times and the harmonious “quartet” dominates the auditory environment, floating “high above the tree tops.” An authoritative and unanimous voice, springing from four young black boys, such is the incipit of the collection. This voice literally sets the “tone” of the stories to come and in the meantime wishes to rise above others. Studying the songs of *UTCh* in his essay “Wright’s Unheard Melodies,” Neil Graves says of this introductory ditty that:

[It] works efficiently for purposes of exposition and the establishment of tone and mood. It gives the boys a voice and idiom, suggests their adolescence and carefree attitude, establishes the fact of their harmony with each other, puts us in touch with

their rough good humor, and suggests Big Boy's dominance and capacity for one-upman-ship. (281)

Right away, Richard Wright projects the fact that his short stories are told by a "black" voice and that they have black characters as sole focalizers. Thus the author allegorically intends to "re-voice" the story of the African American people. The subject of the song, made up by the young boys in the form of what Wright calls *the Dirty Dozens*, discloses a turn from the sacred to the secular, devoid of upright Christian morality (*White Man, Listen!* 88). Undeniably, this incipit also stages the collision of two dissonant voices, and as a result, one "rises out" while the other one "dies away."

Though this first song may seem trivial in its literal expression, its significance is to be found elsewhere as we have just noted; Wright seems to signify that Negro songs are not what Stowe would call "unmeaning." Similarly, the religious song found at the beginning of "Down by the Riverside" has its share of double connotation. As Mann is about to take his wife to the hospital, Elder Murray starts singing, inviting the whole family to pray.

*Ahm gonna lay down mah sword n shiel  
Down by the riverside  
Ah ain gonna study war no mo . . .* (63)

Literally, the song advocates submission and the laying down of "sword and shield," "by the riverside," a reference to the "healing waters" according to Neil Graves (283). Analogically, Mann, about to swing his axe, refrains himself from killing Heartfield's son, even though the latter might potentially identify him as the murderer of his father. This consideration leads the protagonist to his death since the son denounces him. Thus, Neil Graves concludes: "The title of the story is ironic, for Mann's heroic struggles bring him only to a sordid death beside a muddy river that for sure is not Jordan [...] In the context of the other stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, it seems the first to question the Christian pacifism as a proper response for blacks" (283).

Not less than a dozen songs, religious or not, "flood" the collection of short stories. Each has its own significance and bears its connection to the plot. However, an exhaustive study of the whole corpus would only reinforce our previous comments: the songs either translate Wright's irony or show his desire to incorporate material belonging to the African American folklore. Thus, in letters or in essays, the author of

*UTC* encourages other black writers to “put on paper” the “black lips of men, women and children” (*Richard Wright: Letters to Joe C. Brown* 13):

Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular, work songs sung under blazing suns – all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 99)

Another recommendation of Wright’s, stemming from this quotation, is the adoption of the vernacular in the characters’ speech and in the dialogues. In the same way songs discredit and react against Stowe’s impassioned biblical verses, Wright’s language challenges the writing of the black characters’ voices in *UTC*. This also means “rendering unto Caesar’s the things which are Caesar’s.”

### iii) Wright’s Use of the Vernacular

Already in *UTC*, the New England writer shows some effort to transcribe the slaves’ dialect into the written form, certainly for credibility purposes. Indeed, we can surely assume that she could not have made her black characters speak in the same way her white characters did: such a level of erudition on the part of black slaves would have been improbable, if not outlandish. Thus, Uncle Tom does not know how to read, or when he does try, it is only from the Bible. However, what critics seem to highlight on *UTC*’s use of language is the prevalent influence that minstrelsy and blackface comedy plays had on Stowe. Sam and Andy’s farcical trick on Haley is the most manifest example of all. In the following quotation, Sam’s recounting of Eliza’s crossing the Ohio River is, apart from being barely articulate, childlike as the onomatopoeias signal.

“Lord bless you, Mas’r, I couldn’t help it, now,” said Sam, giving way to the long pent-up delight of his soul. “She looked so curi’s, a leapin’ and springin’ – ice a crackin’ – and only to hear her – plump! her chunk! ker splash! Spring! Lord! how she goes it!” and Sam and Andy laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks. (67)

Thus Sarah Robbins comments: “we can see parallels between the use of dialect as a source of entertainment and the sometimes bumbling efforts of the black male figures to handle their interactions with whites through minstrelsy-oriented behaviors” (47). The context in which dialect comes to be uttered or voiced is purely derogatory. Its function therefore oscillates between entertaining the reader as a form of comic relief and simulating the black people’s voice in an effort to authenticate the discourse. Other



critics like Alice Crozier point at Stowe's inconsistency in rendering dialect, using it "for local flavor and to enhance the effect of authenticity," but often confusing "Yankee with Negro idioms" (71). Not only do these confusions debase the slaves' vernacular, but they also betray Stowe's superficial knowledge of linguistic representations.

We can imagine that Wright could only be resentful of these misappropriations and must have looked at the former minstrel shows with bitter contempt. In those plays, white actors put on make-up and tried to imitate the "Negro" dialect, slaughtering and mocking a voice that was not their own. We can easily estimate that Stowe was hardly any different from the white minstrels. An "actor" on paper, Stowe used a voice that was not her own. Similarly, William Faulkner's use of black voices in *The Sound and the Fury* tends to imitate the techniques of the minstrel shows. As Aurélie Guillain notes, "Faulkner's novelistic use of black characters can be compared to the act of a white speaker borrowing a black mask" (139). Therefore, Wright attempts – in *UTC*, but not only – to recapture the true and genuine language of his people. Like Stowe, Wright marks off the verbal, lexical and syntactic differences between blacks and whites. But unlike the author of *UTC*, Wright shows consistency. Côme Ndongo Onono lists the figures of speech and diction in Wright's fiction and notices the great number of protheses as in "wwwhich," aphaereses as in "'cause" or apocopes as in "fo" for "before."

*Par ce[s] procédés, Wright fait revivre le langage des quartiers qu'habitent les Noirs. [...] Ainsi parlent les Noirs. Leur langage trahit leur piètre instruction exprimée par les distorsions de mots, c'est-à-dire le mépris des normes phonétiques et syntaxiques en vigueur. (131-135)*

To a certain extent, Stowe uses these same devices, even if inconsistently. But because this particular "lingo" originates from a black man's "mouth" (we should say pen), Wright's vernacular is also more reliable, and subsequently more credible. The linguistic devices previously mentioned, among many others, are to be found in dialogues, but also in passages of internal focalization, introducing a break in the "standardly-written" narration and thus manifesting the pervasiveness of "voices" at all times.

A gust of wind dashed rain against the window. Johnny-Boy oughta c mon home n eat his suppah. Aw, Lawd! Itd be fine ef Sug could eat wid us tonight! Itd be like ol times! Mabbe aftah all it wont be long fo he comes back. (182)

Henry Louis Gates, quoting James Weldon Johnson, thus describes the early stance of black writers vis-à-vis black dialect: “Johnson had described the necessarily urgent preoccupation of the emerging ‘New Negro’ poet to be the ‘break away from, not Negro dialect itself, but the limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention’” (179). That convention, according to Gates, is the “unrealistic – indeed, insidious – archetypal portraiture of the black man as a head-scratching, foot-shuffling, happy-go-lucky fool” (179). Despite the conflicting disagreements over Wright’s skills at rendering the vernacular – Zora Neale Hurston being a particularly harsh judge in her review of the collection<sup>12</sup> – exceeding the boundaries of language in fiction is the issue at stake. Careful to transcribe, in the closest manner possible, the “voice” of African Americans, the author of *UTCh* does not omit to reconstruct the plurality of voice(s). Indeed, one voice (or point of view) often stands for several, and/or invites other voices to come into play. This is clearly shown in Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* where a unified “we” speaks for all, but it is already palpable in *UTCh*.

#### B – Polyphonic Voices vs. Monologism

In Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men*, the same story – or the antecedents of a murder on a sugarcane plantation – is told by an “assembly” of voices: Tee Jack, Lou Dimes, Rufe, Sully... Each speaks in his or her own name, but each paves a road towards the revelation of the “truth.” Gaines’s book hereby invites at a metafictional reflection on the importance of voice(s) or polyphony to reach at a final denouement. This reflection goes hand in hand with Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition he gives of “polyphony” in *Problèmes de la poétique de Dostoïevski*.

*Ce qui fait l’essence de la polyphonie, c’est que les voix y restent indépendantes et se combinent en tant que telles dans une unité d’un ordre plus élevé que celui de l’homophonie. [...] On pourrait dire que la volonté artistique de la polyphonie est une volonté de combiner une multiplicité de volontés, qu’elle est volonté d’arriver à un évènement. (29)*

In a similar fashion, the five short stories encompassed in *UTCh* stage five different voices. Each short story has a single focalizer: Big Boy, Mann, Sarah, Dan Taylor and An Sue. Though the unity and cohesion of these different and individualized voices might not be expressed in fictional terms (no murder needs to be solved), they still

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<sup>12</sup> In her review of *UTCh* for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Hurston thus ridicules Wright: “Since the author himself is a Negro, his dialect is a puzzling thing. One wonders how he arrived at it. Certainly he does not write by ear unless he is tone-deaf” (32).

contribute to a single achievement and aim: give voice to the voiceless. Like Faulkner, Wright uses polyphony, but to drastically different ends. Among Wright's community of characters, An Sue stands as a particularly strong embodiment of such aim. When facing the sheriff, she dismisses years of deferential silence and lets out her voice forthrightly:

One of the white men came forward and stood directly in front of her.

"Lissen, nigger woman, yuh talkin t *white* men!"

"Ah don care who Ahm talking t!"

"Yuhll wish some day yuh did!"

"Not t the likes of yuh!"

"Yuh need somebody t teach yuh how t be a good nigger!"

"*Yuh* cant teach it t me!"

"Yuh gonna change yo tune."

"Not longs mah bloods warm!" (195)

Behind An Sue's fictional voice appears a real or empirical voice, that of millions of African Americans. One voice stands for several. Through a sly effect of *mise en abyme*, the exchange between An Sue and the sheriff echoes the dialogic interaction between Wright and Stowe, itself reflecting a balance of power between black and white.

The plurality or multiplicity of points of view – or yet again "heteroglossia" – in *UTCh* questions, and ultimately affronts, the dogmatic narration of *UTC*, a "monologic novel" in many ways. The phrase, repeatedly used by Bakhtin in his theories, commands us to go back to the definition of "monologue" as found in the dictionary: "a long speech by one person during a conversation that stops other people from speaking or expressing an opinion." Obviously, *UTC* is not a monologue in its simplest acceptance, but the idea was kept by Bakhtin to describe novels having "an ideological single-toned quality" reflected in "all the elements of the work" (97). Thus, Stowe never reverts to internal focalization and the story is told by only one univocal heterodiegetic narrator. Furthermore, every narreme, or critical moment, in *UTC* reinforces the ideological message supported by Stowe. For example, the death of her hero results in Sambo and Quimbo's religious conversion – Stowe's religious message – and displays Tom as yet another victim of slavery – Stowe's political message. By contrast, *UTCh* adopts several points of view or focalizers, of different ages and different gender, thus preventing archetypical representations. Moreover, we distinguished the sometimes conflicting influence of several ideological yearnings at work. In "Fire and Cloud," Reverend Taylor stands somewhere between acting "accordin t [his] lights" – his

Christian lights – and acting in the name of communism. At the end of the short story, not one side presides over the other: Taylor and his people demonstrate in town while singing a Christian spiritual: “They sang as they marched. More joined along the way” (178). Several voices unite as though they are only one. Placing emphasis on chorus and harmony, as in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and in “Fire and Cloud,” Wright therefore imitates the polyphonic characteristics of the black gospel and simultaneously strives to re-appropriate for himself and his people the legitimacy of recounting their own experience. Reviewing *UTCh* for the *New York Evening Post* in 1938, Herschel Brickell thus predicts Wright’s literary career: “Mr. Wright speaks for his own people in a voice which demands to be listened to, and it is more than likely that we shall hear from him further.”

## Conclusion

In the protest marches of the 1960s demanding civil rights for all citizens, “Uncle Tom’s children” rallied under a unifying hymn, singing “We Shall Overcome” in unison. Overcoming racial prejudices, bloodthirsty lynchings and segregationist laws was the underlying message. Analogically, overcoming images of the past, stereotypical representations and cultural misappropriations in *UTC* is what Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* subversively aims at. A few years after the publication of Wright’s collection of short stories, Langston Hughes versified his own response to Harriet Beecher Stowe in his poem “Uncle Tom.”

Uncle Tom is a legend and a dream.  
Uncle Tom is a groan and a scream.  
Uncle Tom is a lash on the back.  
Uncle Tom is a man who’s black.  
    But Uncle Tom  
    Was long ago.  
    Gone is the lash  
    And the slaver’s blow.  
    Ours is the freedom  
    Tom did not know –  
So tend your freedom that the lash and the pain  
And his head bowed down be not in vain.  
Tend your freedom that tomorrow may see  
Uncle Tom’s children wholly free! (302)

In a few lines, the black poet synthetically embraces the essence of Wright’s *UTCh*, perhaps adding a hint of optimism, suggesting that Tom’s sufferings “be not in vain.” But even though Hughes’s poem clearly wishes to do away with the past (“ago” vs. “tomorrow”), it can only do so much in so many lines. Thus, “Uncle Tom” bypasses critical notions of “revision,” dear to Henry Louis Gates and highlighted in this study. As we saw, *UTCh* not only redefines the characters of African Americans in literature, but also “empties” – as Bloom suggests – *UTC* of its motifs and themes, of its religious backing and of its aesthetic and linguistic form. Richard Wright thus terminates years of an enduring monologue and, in the meantime, contributes to the dialogic edification of an African American literature written by African Americans. No longer cringing and no longer silent, but perhaps still enslaved, Uncle Tom’s children are anti-Uncle Toms. They transgress words, boundaries and social codes, and break their masks for the reader to “see.” Violence is, as we saw, excessive and betrays all-too-clearly the desire

to escape, or at least to further the limits of the black man's condition. "Exceeding boundaries" is a vital issue engaging one's life and/or death.

Wright reverses ideologies in claiming the uselessness of God, debunks racialist views and characterizations, and finally repossesses the verbal and vocal authority on black experience. These are the protruding signs of an author engaged in the rewriting of a literary canon, one that is still nonetheless considered a classic of American literature. Facing this fact, one may doubt if Wright really did succeed in silencing the New England writer and her armada of stereotypes. According to Claire Parfait, the sheer amount of paratextual and intertextual elements surrounding *UTC* are demonstrative of a novel "whose story is never quite finished" (206). Before Claire Parfait and along the same lines, Bakhtin's view on the "birth" of genres makes for another element of answer.

*Jamais un nouveau genre en naissant n'abolit ni ne remplace aucun des genres existant antérieurement. Tout genre nouveau ne fait que compléter les anciens, qu'élargir le cercle des genres existants. Car chaque genre a sa sphère privilégiée d'existence, par rapport à laquelle il est irremplaçable. (315)*

Correspondingly, a newly published book never supplants or replaces any already existing book. Each new book merely completes the old ones.

Still, trespassing and conquering a space that has been too long subjected to limits and threats is the issue for Big Boy, but also for the author of *UTCh*. Displacing Stowe from her pedestal seems to have been for Wright the cathartic and necessary step to achieve greater freedom; the prerequisite before establishing himself as an influential writer. As James Baldwin confesses in his essay "Alas, Poor Richard": "[Wright] saw clearly enough, far more clearly than I had dared to allow myself to see, what I had done: I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block of my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself" (256). Similarly, Uncle Tom must have represented for Wright a "road-block" to surmount before he could pave the road for himself and for others. Wright's own words are particularly enlightening: "I need to live free if I am to expand" (Rowley 352). Whatever the means – violence, escape, rebellion –, expansion and growth undeniably mark the dawn of Wright's literary career.

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*Appendix 1*

Elliott Erwitt. *Segregated Water Fountains, North Carolina, 1950.*

Gelatin silver print. 6.25 x 9.5 in.

[http://www.stephendaitergallery.com/dynamic/artwork\\_display.asp?ArtworkID=1255](http://www.stephendaitergallery.com/dynamic/artwork_display.asp?ArtworkID=1255)



Appendix 2

John Vachon, *Courtroom Scene* in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, p. 44.



The law is white

### Appendix 3

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Volume II, Chapter XXXIII, pp. 365-366 in the 1998 Oxford World's Classics Edition.

"There!" he said, as he stopped to rest; "now will ye tell me ye can't do it?"

"Yes, Mas'r," said Tom, putting up his hand, to wipe the blood, that tickled down his face. I'm willin' to work, night and day, and work while there's life and breath in me; but this yer thing I can't feel it right to do;— and, Mas'r, I *never* shall do it,— *never!*" [...]

Tom had a remarkably smooth, soft voice, and a habitually respectful manner, that had given Legree an idea that he would be cowardly, and easily subdued. When he spoke these last word, a thrill of amazement went through every one; the poor woman clasped her hands, and said, "O Lord!" and every one involuntarily looked at each other and drew in their breath, as if to prepare for the storm that was about to burst.

Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth, —

"What! Ye blasted black beast! Tell *me* ye don't think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? I'll put a stop to it! Why, what do ye think ye are? May be ye think ye'r a gentleman, master Tom, to be a telling your master what's right, and what an't! So you pretend it's wrong to flog the gal!"

"I think so, Mas'r," said Tom; "the poor crittur's sick and feeble; 't would be downright cruel, and it's what I never will do, nor begin to. Mas'r, if you mean to kill me, kill me; but as to raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall,— I'll die first!"

Tom spoke in a mild voice, but with a decision that could not be mistaken. Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely, and his very whiskers seemed to curl with passion; but, like some ferocious beast, that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse to proceed to immediate violence, and broke out into bitter raillery.

"Well, here's a pious dog, at last, let down among us sinners!" [...]

In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom's soul. He suddenly stretched himself up, and, looking earnestly to heaven, while the tears and blood that flowed down his face mingled.



Appendix 4

*Uncle Tom's Children*, "Fire and Cloud," Richard Wright, pp. 162-163 in the 1965 Harper & Row Edition.

"On your knees, nigger!"

He did not move. Again his arms were caught from behind and a kneecap came into the center of his back. Breathless, he dropped his hands and knees cooling in the wet grass. He lifted his fingers to feel his swelling lips; he felt his wrists being grabbed and carried around the trunk of a tree. He held stiffly and struggled against a rope.

"Let go!"

His arms went limp. He rested his face against a cold tree-trunk. A rope cut into his wrists. They tied his feet together, drawing the rope tight about his ankles. He looked around; they stood watching.

"Well, nigger, what do you know?"

"Nothin, suh."

"Youre a preacher, aint you?"

"Yessuh."

"Well, lets hear you pray some!"

He said nothing. The whip lashed across his bare back, *whick!* He flinched and struggled against the rope that cut his wrists to the bone. The leather thong hummed again, *whick!* And his spine arched inward, like a taut bow. [...]

Another lash came across his half-turned check, *whick!* He jerked around and sheltered his face against the tree-trunk. The lash hit his back, *whick!*

"*Hit* that black bastard, Bob!" [...]

He said nothing. He was expecting each blow now; he could almost feel them before they came, stinging, burning. Each flick came straight on his back and left a streak of fire, a streak that merged with the last streak, making his whole back a sheet of living flame. He felt his strength ebbing; he could not clench his teeth any more. His mouth hung open. [...]

"Ooour Fffather. . . [...] wwwhich aaaaart in hheaven . . . hhhallowed bbe Ttthy nname. . ." The whip struck, *whick!* "Ahm prayin, Mmmmistah!"



**MOTS-CLÉS** : Littérature Afro-Américaine, Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Intertextualité, Réécriture, Transgression

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Faisant référence à *La Case de l'Oncle Tom*, le titre du recueil de nouvelles de Richard Wright nous montre clairement qu'il s'agit d'une réécriture de ce qui est considéré comme le premier best-seller américain. Presque cent ans après la publication du roman de Harriet Beecher Stowe, les « enfants » de l'Oncle Tom, toujours placés sous le joug de l'homme blanc, adoptent une attitude rebelle et rejettent en même temps le carcan imposé par l'héritage du personnage de l'Oncle Tom. Dès lors, les nouvelles de Richard Wright entrent dans un affront idéologique et tendent à déconstruire les représentations stéréotypiques de Stowe. Cette étude se propose donc d'analyser les différents aspects de la réécriture de Wright à la lumière des théories littéraires sur la notion d'intertextualité initiée par Mikhaïl Bakhtine.

**KEYWORDS** : African American Literature, Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Intertextuality, Rewriting, Transgression

## **ABSTRACT**

Referring to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the title of Richard Wright's collection of short stories clearly indicates a rewriting of what is considered the first American best-seller. Almost a hundred years after the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's "children" are still subjugated by the white man. Therefore, they are liable to behave rebelliously and reject the enduring legacy of Uncle Tom's character in the mean time. Resultantly, Wright's short stories are engaged in an ideological confrontation and tend to deconstruct Stowe's stereotypical representations. This study therefore aims at analyzing the different aspects of Wright's rewriting with the help of the literary theories based on the notion of intertextuality as initiated by Mikhail Bakhtin.