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*Fredric Jameson, Richard Wright, and the Black
National Allegory*

Fredric Jameson's 1986 essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," incited controversy over injunctions such as these:

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel.

[T]he telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself.¹

The reprisal and doubling down of that hypothesis in *Allegory and Ideology* (2019) offers us a rich opportunity to test its enduring relevance. For Jameson in *Allegory and Ideology*, a national allegory is more broadly definable as "a form in which emergent groups find expression at the same time that they promote it" (loc. 213). The "third-world" text is always a national allegory because it has not, like texts of the "first world," undergone a radical separation of the public and the private, or "the poetic and the political," nor has it suffered a loss of coherence in the totality of the social order. Ahmad's now well-rehearsed response applies pressure to Jameson's inconsistent application of the term "nation" in that schema:

If we replace the idea of the nation with that larger, less restricting idea of collectivity, and if we start thinking of the process of allegorisation not in

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019) (Kindle Edition), loc. 3106, 3488. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically. Cf. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88 (pp. 69, 85-6).

nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal, then it also becomes possible to see that allegorisation is by no means specific to the so-called third world. While Jameson overstates the presence of “us,” the “national allegory,” in the narratives of the third world, he also, in the same sweep, understates the presence of analogous impulses in US cultural ensembles.²

Responding to Ahmad, Jameson replied that “U.S. literature also includes its own third-world cultures.”³ In his new addendum to the essay, included in *Allegory and Ideology*, Jameson points out that Ahmed wrongly assumes he misjudges possible interpenetrations of the three worlds, but does this mean that we should dismiss the possibility of *national* allegories in “first-world,” and specifically in American, literature?

Probing Jameson’s conceptual slippage between *nation* and *collective*, Ahmad gave several illustrations of what texts might qualify:

For, what else are, let us say, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* or Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* [sic] but allegorisations of individual—and not so individual—experience? What else could Richard Wright and Adrienne Rich and Richard Howard mean when they give to their book titles like *Native Son* or *Your Native Land, Your Life* or *Alone With America*? It is not only the Asian or the African but also the American writer whose private imaginations must necessarily connect with experiences of the collectivity. One has only to look at black and feminist writing to find countless allegories even within these postmodernist United States. (15)

What I am proposing is to expand and historicize this connection between allegory and nationalism in the literature of the United States, within a global context, by putting Jameson’s theory of allegory in conversation with one of these texts, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and with Wright’s changing theory of the role that Black nationalism in “Negro fiction” must play both in U.S. literature and in world

² Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25 (p. 15).

³ Fredric Jameson, “A Brief Response,” *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 26-8 (p. 26).

literature. Wright's politico-aesthetic philosophy anticipates aspects of Jameson's argument, as he locates connections between developing nations, Black nationalism, and socialist internationalism which are essential to resisting American capitalism's cultural hegemony. Since Jameson's original essay was published, scholars of U.S. literature have identified other Black nationalist representational strategies that emerged at the time Wright was writing. Barbara Foley has conceived of a representational practice she calls metonymic nationalism, which treated "a social group within a nation as empowered to signify the larger totality that is the nation," though it largely "ended up facilitating the perpetuation of the very notions of racial difference that these critics hoped to eradicate by asserting the Negro's claim to full citizenship."⁴ Though Foley's theory of metonymic nationalism elegantly defines the limitations of the role that Black nationalism played within and beyond the United States leading up to the Red Summer of 1919, I will illustrate how the post-1920s period saw an ideological and representational shift that foreshadowed Jameson's description of the broader conditions of "third-world" national allegory as a "life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically called, modernization."⁵

What I will refer to as the Black national allegory emerged out of the perceived limitations of a Black nationalism used to figure (metonymically) America as a whole, presaging what Ahmad describes as the U.S. Black literary intelligentsia's turn to "Third Worldism," which he further suggests was paradoxically disengaged from "Third World Literature."⁶ I do not necessarily agree with this latter point, given the large role that migrancy played in the United States's New Negro culture and the intellectual climate that superseded it, a history which I shall unpack in what follows. The U.S. Black literary intelligentsia's own conception of their relationship to the "third world" was furthermore often mediated by the politics of the "second world," that is, communism, as Cedric Robinson famously argued. In establishing those political relations within the "first world," writers

⁴ Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) (Kindle Edition), loc. 3349-3350, 3404.

⁵ Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, loc. 3072.

⁶ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nation, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 87.

such as Wright critiqued the limitations of what they saw as the “third-world cultures” within the “first world,” as they sought representational strategies that could configure those relations in Black national literature. Whilst metaphor, Jameson suggests, is “a temporal act of identification where difference turns out to be similarity,” allegory is “a scan, mobilized by a search for differences and negations”:

In metaphor you go no further; whereas an allegorical bent follows each identification on to the next level of its difference, and, as in the Greimas square, the difference of its difference; its narrative is that of differential consequences, and transversality scrambles the levels of those, leaving us in unexpected places, and in particular in that missing fourth place, the negation of the negation. (loc. 5994)

Unlike metonymic nationalism, the national allegory that Wright anticipated in his literary critical essays and engaged in in his own fiction scans for identification on multiple geopolitical levels and stages of modernization, in Jameson’s sense. Writing from within and beyond the so-called “first world,” and in relation to both Black nationalist and Communist-Internationalist cultural frameworks, Wright forces us to reassess the presumed categories upon which the three worlds, including the first, are established in American literature. In many ways, Wright and Jameson wrestled with similar questions, debates, and aesthetic possibilities regarding national and political allegorization, the scale of world literature, and the interpenetration of multiple “worlds” operating across porous cultural and economic modes of production, though the interrelations between worlds are not all necessarily antagonistic.

Jameson’s theory of allegory thus helps us to track the emergence of the Black national allegory, which Wright’s theory of aesthetics and fiction exemplified. The overarching point of these investigations is to demonstrate that whilst Jameson’s theory of “third-world” national allegory is not without its limitations, rethinking those limitations in relation to Wright’s writings reveals to us how Jameson’s refined conception of allegory in *Allegory and Ideology* may yet provide us with a useful conceptual tool for mapping the globalized political relations of the Black intelligentsia of the United States, as well as the representational strategies that underwrote radical Black literature there. One limitation I will raise in the second

half of this essay is that Jameson's allegory model does not engage with how particular state apparatuses, such as the FBI and CIA in the United States, may inflect the national allegory's representational approaches behind the scenes, as was the case in the mixed global reception of Wright. Though our understanding of Wright's Black nationalism and internationalism has become clouded in de-historicized, "first-world" interpretations of the work as a "national allegory" that projects a one-dimensional vision of "first-world" America, this is precisely the kind of unhistorical thinking and resultant allegoresis which, in *Allegory and Ideology*, Jameson problematizes in terms of the marketplace of ideas, where radical politico-economic agendas are interpreted only as pseudo-Freudian representations of the struggle between the individual and society. In that sense, *Allegory and Ideology* thus provides us with one vital opportunity to restore the full implications of that Black national allegory within the complex, multi-storied world system of literature.

Black Nationalism and Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Fiction"

The "story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society," Jameson reminds us (loc. 3110). This claim recalls those raised in the early twentieth century, when Black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois began to theorize how the revolutionary subject of history had emerged in transnational and transhistorical experiences of dispossession and oppression, traversing the porous borders of the Western empires, anticipating the project of Bandung as a prototype of the pan-Africanist international political body. What is more, figures such as Du Bois were theorizing how what Jameson calls that "western machinery of representation," the novel, could be brought under the service of this project of political globalization. Out of the African diaspora, a Black radical tradition emerged, whose historical project was aligned with Western radicalism, yet which had emerged out of distinct forces.

Out of this war will rise, soon or late, an independent China; a self-governing India, and Egypt with representative institutions; an Africa for the Africans, and not merely for business exploitation. Out of this war will

rise, too, an American Negro, with a right to vote and a right to work and the right to live without insult.⁷

After the failure of Reconstruction, the Great War became one opportunity to press the urgency of this revolutionary subject leading the democratic emancipation of the world's other victims of colonization. The proposition that America be involved in colonial power struggles had accentuated issues in the "national" fabric of America. Insidious rumours of a "Negro insurrection" in the South fuelled by the Germans "in the spring and summer of 1917 led to an upsurge of white chauvinism and a determination to defend the system,"⁸ while consecutive seasons of failing crops and the exodus of Black farmhands out of the rural South led to racialized labor tensions in the industrial centres. After the Red Summer of 1919, the development of Black "propaganda," lionized in Du Bois's famous defence that "all art is propaganda" in his 1926 essay for *The Crisis*, "The Criteria of Negro Art,"⁹ had become an essential stratagem in the path forward for Black liberation to counter the damage of D. W. Griffith's white-nationalist epic, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which demonstrated that an insidious reactionary cultural war was already well underway. At this time, leftists and progressives were engaged in a "representational practice" that Barbara Foley calls "metonymic nationalism," which treated "a social group within a nation as empowered to signify the larger totality that is the nation," though it largely "ended up facilitating the perpetuation of the very notions of racial difference that these critics hoped to eradicate by asserting the Negro's claim to full citizenship."¹⁰ One of the most influential inheritors of that representational system was Richard Wright, whose unfolding theory of politics and the novel was forged in this struggle to formalize the

⁷ [W. E. B. Du Bois], Editorial, *The Crisis* 16.2 (June 1918): 59-61 (p. 60); quoted in Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) (Kindle Edition), loc. 171-3.

⁸ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, loc. 274.

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Criteria for Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926), pp. 290-297.

¹⁰ Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) (Kindle Edition), loc. 3349-3350; 3404.

metonymic political struggle of the New Negro as a cohesive representational strategy.

Yet despite Ahmad's suggestion that *Native Son* is a "national" allegory in the sense that it was written within the "first world," a point Ahmad expanded in his follow-up monograph, *In Theory* (1994), what is clear is that those three worlds were not separate entities for many Black U.S. writers, and certainly not for Wright. In *In Theory*, Ahmad indicates that the African American literary intelligentsia, including Du Bois, Wright, and Paul Robeson, embraced the "Third World" in its "descriptive" sense, whilst paradoxically distancing themselves from "Third-World Literature."¹¹ Thirty years on, this now seems an oversimplification of our current understandings of the global geopolitical dimensions of Black literary intellectualism in the period he is discussing. Immigrants such as Claude McKay and Eric Walrod, both of whom Du Bois championed, moved to Harlem from the West Indies and wrote extensively about that region; their view of what Ahmad calls the African American intellectual's understanding of the United States's unique "contemporary predicament and its African origin"¹² was approached through the lens of the Caribbean immigrant. Zora Neale Hurston, who engaged extensively with Haiti and the Bahamas in both her ethnography and in her dialect fiction, situated her home state of Florida as part of what Martyn Bone has recently described as a globally expansive U.S. South.¹³ Whilst I support Ahmad's claim that Black U.S. intellectuals and writers engaged in descriptive "Third Worldism," his claim that "few if any" supported the principles of a "Third World Literature" is simply untrue, given that debates about Black aesthetics in the 1920s were over whether to mine the African origins of Black culture or turn to the aesthetics of "modern" Black subjectivity rooted in the United States's own "Third-World" literatures and languages. These debates focused on the voices of the inner city's *barrios* and ghettos, as Ahmad notes, as well as on those of sites Ahmad does not name, such as the Black Belt of the South. This is an important point to redress, as it is this logic of rejecting what might be described as a literary "third world" contained within the "first" that drives Ahmad's rebuttal of

¹¹ Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 87.

¹² Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 87.

¹³ Martyn Bone, *Where The New World Is: Literature About the U.S. South At Global Scales* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2018), pp. 28-9.

Jameson's rhetoric of othering, as well as anchoring *In Theory*, and that gives context to the vantage from which writers such as Wright were approaching the global politics of Black literature. Nevertheless, Ahmad's magnification of a "first-world" literature defined in contrast to the literature of the "third world" strikes me as an important part of his dispute with Jameson, even if both of their accounts of "Third Worldism" and literature in the first half of the twentieth century remain either truncated or myopic.

As Ahmad first noted, the greatest problem with Jameson's theory of "third-world" national allegory is not merely its othering rhetoric, but its rhetorical deflection from a more nuanced class-based analysis. It reifies the disconnection between the capitalist "first world," the soviet bloc of the "second world," and the unclearly defined "third world," a world demarcated by its shared experience of colonisation and imperial oppression, as opposed to its mode of production. Indeed, U.S. literature potentially contains its own second-world cultures, too; and many decisive moments in American literary history emanated out of that relationship between those overlapping spheres, especially in the first half of the twentieth century when what Michael Denning calls the communist Cultural Front held significant sway over the future of American culture.¹⁴ The close relationship between Black nationalism in the United States and the Soviet bloc, in the form of what Cedric Robinson has termed Black Radicalism,¹⁵ mediated the turn of Du Bois, Wright, and others in the long term to what Ahmad calls "descriptive [...] Third Worldism."¹⁶ These strategic alliances were pressurized within the so-called first world by the State, which viewed them as dangerous in terms both of the government's domestic handling of racial segregation and of its racist, xenophobic, and anticommunist foreign policies; thus, these writers became political targets. McKay advocated for Black American nationalism with the Communist International (c. 1921) and, at the Communist International's Fourth World Congress (1922), campaigned for the "self-determination" of Black Americans as a nation within and beyond the nation. What's more, figures such as

¹⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998).

¹⁵ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

¹⁶ Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 87.

McKay and later Wright experimented with the aesthetic possibilities that derived from these international alliances.

To make particular sense of Wright's sense of these aesthetic horizons, which for the novelist would take the form of allegory, we would do well to compare Jameson's definition of national allegory in 1986 to his earliest definition of it, introduced in relation to the work of Wyndham Lewis. Writing in 1981, Jameson describes national allegory as

a formal attempt to bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday life within a given nation-state and the structural tendency of monopoly capital to develop on a worldwide, essentially transnational scale. Nineteenth-century or "classical" realism presupposed the relative intelligibility and self-sufficiency of the national experience from within, a coherence in its social life such that the narrative of the destinies of its individual citizens can be expected to achieve formal completeness.¹⁷

This conflict between everyday life within a nation-state and the transnational scale of monopoly capitalism's sprawling development underpins realism's emergence as a cultural dominant, and it sowed the seeds of realism's emergent antagonist, modernism, the avant-garde of which often resisted realism through aesthetics of fragmentation and incompleteness:

Once in place, such a system has a kind of objectivity about it, and wins a semiautonomy as a cultural structure which can then know an unforeseeable history in its own right, as an object cut adrift from its originating situation and "freed" for the alienation of a host of quite different signifying functions and uses, whose content rush in to invest it.¹⁸

The national allegory then transforms into a Lyotardian

libidinal apparatus, an empty form or structural matrix in which a charge of free-floating and inchoate fantasy—both ideological and

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 94.

¹⁸ Jameson, *Fable of Aggression*, p. 95.

psychoanalytic—can suddenly crystallize, and find the articulated figuration essential for its social actuality and psychic effectivity.¹⁹

So, in relation to Wright, whilst the “literary works Wright composed between 1937 and 1941 focus explicitly on issues related to nationalism,” as Anthony Dawahare notes,²⁰ that nationalism and the representational strategy it led Wright to, which Jameson would call national allegory, ought to be contextualized in terms of the different “worlds” in which the strategy operates, returning that allegory to its “originating situation” in Jameson’s terms. Merging Marxist theory with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Wright’s “literary treatment of nationalism remains avant-garde since he reveals what many contemporary theorists have yet to disclose: a complex insight into the deep psychology of nationalism.”²¹ Stalin’s *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (1913), the political prototype which underpinned the Communist Party of the United States of America’s (CPUSA) Black Belt Thesis for a revolutionary Black uprising in the Southern states, can be seen as another crucial model for Wright’s understanding of Black cultural nationalism in the United States. On the other hand, as Dawahare notes, that nationalism was “neither as stable nor as progressive as the CP Black Nation Thesis makes out,” since its “shared way of life [was] the result of forced experiences of slavery and segregation that produced an *unwanted* black culture.”²² More likely, Wright drew upon Lenin’s “Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions” (1920), given that Wright’s personal experiences of life in the South set him at odds with the CPUSA’s Soviet-modelled approach, as well as the fact that Wright was outspoken in his disapproval of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939.

The muse of Wright’s early writing career was located in the connections he drew between the domestic politics of Jim Crow apartheid and the foreign policies that were spreading across Ethiopia, China, Spain, and Germany. After joining the John Reed Club, a literary organization affiliated with the CPUSA, he published

¹⁹ Jameson, *Fable of Aggression*, p. 95.

²⁰ Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora’s Box* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 111.

²¹ Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature*, p. 112.

²² Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature*, p. 113.

in periodicals such as *New Masses*, *International Literature*, *Partisan Review*, and *Left Front*, before joining the Chicago Chapter of the Communist Party in 1932. Accordingly, the allegorical tenor of his early non-fiction and journalism stems from the influence of U.S. Black nationalism as a metonym for a Marxist internationalism that insists upon transnational solidarity between all oppressed proletarians and underclasses—the same vaguely conceived grouping to which Ahmad objects in Jameson’s “Third-World Literature” essay. Though I suspect McKay’s influential appearance at the Fourth World Congress significantly cemented this political alliance for Black American writers, Dawahare suggests that Wright’s position aligned with the current Third International response to the “race question.” Dawahare cites Lydia Filatova, an influential Soviet critic who had declared that “minority literature should be ‘national in form and socialist in content.’”²³ In 1936, Wright became involved in Black Cultural Front organizations affiliated with the Communist Party such as the National Negro Congress, “a coalition of civil rights groups and labor organizations officially launched in 1936 at a national conference in Chicago.”²⁴ As Dolinar explains, the formation of the National Negro Congress “was typical of Popular Front organizing, at a time when the Communist Party softened its revolutionary rhetoric to work with liberal groups.” Though Langston Hughes, Dorothy West, McKay, and others had travelled to the Soviet Union, Wright refused to, on the grounds that he needed to focus on writing. Nevertheless, Wright remained an enthusiastic organizer of the 1936 National Negro Congress conference, where he arranged a panel entitled “The Role of the Negro Artist and Writer in the Changing Social Order,” which the *Chicago Defender* described as a conference highlight.²⁵ In 1937, working for the CPUSA newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, Wright produced upwards of sixteen articles on protests in Harlem in solidarity both with the Loyalists’ fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War and with the Chinese in the Second Sino-Japanese war.²⁶ At the same time, Wright’s increasing focus on

²³ Quoted in Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature*, p. 127.

²⁴ Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012) (Kindle Edition), p. 3.

²⁵ Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front*, p. 38.

²⁶ Nicholas T. Rinehart, “Richard Wright’s Globalism,” in Glenda Carpio, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 164-84 (p. 167).

fiction coincided with his professional apprenticeship at the Federal Writers' Project, which involved investigating the lynching epidemic in the Jim Crow South, where he himself had been raised in abject poverty. In Chicago, Wright had followed the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of the trial of Robert Nixon, a "slow witted colored youth" whom the *Tribune* likened to a "jungle beast"²⁷ and who was tried by an all-white jury and sent to the electric chair for murdering Florence Johnson in 1938, after a police confession was extracted from him under dubious circumstances for not only that crime, but also another four murders and two rapes, in Chicago and Los Angeles. Wright followed this and comparable cases such as that of the Scottsboro boys, nine African American youths from Alabama who, having been falsely accused of raping two white women in 1931, were sentenced to death. Like the international events unfolding in Europe and Africa, these local events radicalized Wright as a political writer, drawing him back towards a Black-nationalist cultural framework which, as a metonymic approach to representation in his non-fiction, nevertheless did not fully satisfy his political ambitions for relating the African American struggle to the global struggle.

Encouraged by Dorothy West, editor of *New Challenge*, Wright finally penned an essay that detailed what he had decided should be the Black cultural front's answer to the metonymic nationalism of the post-war New Negro: "Blueprint for Negro Fiction" (1937). In a section entitled "The Basis and Meaning of Nationalism in Negro Writing," Wright contends that

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must *possess* and *understand* it. And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism

²⁷ Charles Leavelle, "Brick Slayer is Likened to Jungle Beast: Ferocity is Reflected in Robert Nixon's Features," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 5 June 1938, p. 6.

whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.²⁸

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” political allegory is never explicitly mentioned in relation to either nationalism or internationalism, but it is implied as the key representational strategy for the novelist to engage in a kind of metonymic nationalism which looks beyond the nation to transformative transnational alliances between the Black minority and other oppressed collectivities:

By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, liberal writers of all races can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow. And, simultaneously, Negro writers can help to weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with sturdier types.²⁹

To read between Wright’s lines here: the risk of national metonymy was always that it might lead to the political myopia and reactionism of a Black nationalism that sees itself as disconnected from the global struggles of race, colonialism, and capitalism. For Wright, the function of the Black national allegory must not only be to represent Black interests in the nation’s racial struggles and raise race-consciousness in that sense; the writer’s allegorical configuration must furthermore intersect with the struggles of other oppressed nations and “nations within nations” in their struggle against colonialism and capitalism. This is where the significance of the “second world” in Wright’s representational strategy comes into full effect. Wright here reacts against Marcus Garvey’s separatist nationalism, which had remained influential since the end of the Great War. Charismatic and notorious, Garvey was the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and in 1937 he boasted that Hitler and Mussolini had copied their fascism from the UNIA,³⁰ though Garvey had previously aligned his movement with Bolshevism and though he also denounced the Italian invasion of Ethiopia,

²⁸ Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in Henry Louis Gates Jr, Nellie Y. McKay, et al., eds, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 1380-88 (pp. 1383-4).

²⁹ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” pp. 1387-8.

³⁰ Mark Christian Thompson, *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 6.

an event that Wright had covered as a journalist for *Daily Worker*. When Wright argues that

a nationalist spirit in Negro writing [...] means that the Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism,³¹

he is advocating literary nationalism as a stepping stone to leftist organization and socialist internationalism predicated on modernization and the abandonment of encrusted local traditions around which weaker forms of association and collectivity had emerged. That stepping stone is the Black national allegory: a sublimation whereby “Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them.”³²

Whilst conceiving of Black national allegory as a stepping stone of sorts to a “second-world” allegory raises certain theoretical risks, Wright’s “Blueprint” nevertheless offers a persuasive theory for interpreting *Native Son* as the template of a kind of protest novel which, allegorical in nature, would both force racial inequality to the front of the American collective consciousness and shock white comrades with its grim personification of the desperate Black urban proletariat whom they purported to champion.³³ As Robinson contended in relation to Wright’s growing concerns over the myopia of Western “second-world” politics,

Bigger Thomas’s lack of class consciousness—more precisely the odyssey of his development of consciousness—is deliberate and purposive. This was not simply a literary device, but a means of coming to grips with the abstraction and romanticization of the proletariat that had infected Western Communist ideology.³⁴

³¹ Wright, “Blueprint,” p. 1384.

³² Wright, “Blueprint,” p. 1383.

³³ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, pp. 297-8.

³⁴ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p. 296.

As an extension of that provocation, Wright's 1940 essay, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," written after *Native Son*, would articulate a radical *and* allegorical theory of literature to challenge this myopia. Here Wright argues that the author's politicized act is effected not only in the text but in his attempts to preside over the allegoresis of his readership; Wright insists that his reader look past the surface narrative of a young Black "thug" who, having accidentally murdered his white real-estate capitalist boss's daughter, decides to politicize his actions as a kind of Black-nationalist anticommunism, and who finds redemption through communist solidarity. "How 'Bigger' Was Born" also offers an ambitious retrospective account of the internationalist allegorical groundwork of *Native Son*, indicating that its national allegory is in fact metonymically intertwined with an international level: the worldwide struggle of the oppressed caught between colonialism and oppression, and the vying promises of fascist and socialist populist leaders, observed from the metonymic vantage point of Black America under Jim Crow. "How 'Bigger' Was Born" insists that

an imaginative novel represents the merging of two extremes; it is an intensely intimate expression on the part of a consciousness couched in terms of the most objective and commonly known events. It is at once something private and public by its very nature and texture.³⁵

If, as Jameson writes, the "story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society," that story forms the representational strategy for politicizing the private experiences of rage and dispossession Wright knew in the South. For Wright, allegory connects those experiences to the collectivity of "Negroes [who], in moments of anger and bitterness, praise what Japan is doing in China, not because they believed in oppression (being objects of oppression themselves)," or of those who think "that maybe Hitler and Mussolini are all right; that maybe Stalin is all right," or, indeed, of those who flock to Garvey's vision of a "nation, a flag, an army of our own."³⁶ The latter, says Wright, think that "colored folks ought to organize into groups and have generals, captains, lieutenants, and so forth"; they

³⁵ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born" (1940), in *Early Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), pp. 853-81 (p. 853).

³⁶ Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," p. 865.

think that “We ought to take Africa and have a national home.” They are won over by nationalism—even if it is modelled from the outside—out of a sheer desperation to identify in a common cause that would allow them to politicize their negative affects. Above all, Wright’s personal rage (what he describes as his inner Bigger Thomas) is diverted into the solidarity he had learned from trade unions: “I began to feel far-flung kinships, and sense, with fright and abashment, the possibilities of *alliances* between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness.”³⁷

As Robinson notes in *Black Marxism*, Wright had declared

that he meant his work to reflect a committed intellect, one informed by a political intention and the process of historical movement. He was also dedicating himself to the task that would occupy him for the remaining 23 years of his life: the location of his “perspective” in the complex struggles for liberation in the Third World.³⁸

Jameson writes in the Appendix to *Allegory and Ideology* that “it is only after the modulation of the ethnic into the class category that a possible resolution of such struggles is to be found,” for “ethnic conflict cannot be solved or resolved; it can only be sublimated into a struggle of a different kind that can be resolved.” One resolution of such struggles is the “market and consumption,” or “what is euphemistically called *modernization*, the transformation of the members of various groups into the universal consumer,” which appears to be “universal” due to “the possibilities of social levelling that arose with the development of mass media.” Another possible resolution is class struggle, “which has as its aim and outcome, not the triumph of one class over another but the abolition of the very category of class.”³⁹ In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright lays down his position that the artist must, to adapt Jameson’s most famous pronouncement, “always allegorize!”, in order for art to participate in the global class struggle around which racial liberation and social progress can band. The first version of Jameson’s “Third-World Literature” essay was delivered as a speech in front of a

³⁷ Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” p. 861.

³⁸ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p. 292.

³⁹ Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, loc. 6936.

predominantly white American academic audience in the mid-1980s, as a provocation to that particular cohort to recognize in world literature the “capacity of allegory to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change places,” rather than relying on a conception of allegory as “an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalence.”⁴⁰ Though Bigger Thomas “was an American, because he was a native son,” in Wright’s vexed image of the nation “he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American.”⁴¹ As Nicholas T. Rinehart has recently proposed, if we read back from Wright’s late to early writings, “each successive text further elaborates a globalist critique of power that was present from the outset.”⁴² This point would challenge the view that *Native Son* is to be read as a national allegory *unless* we see that geographic container as negotiating its position within a global matrix. As Bigger Thomas is read through the prism of Jameson’s broader allegorical schema, therefore, *Native Son*’s protagonist emerges as far more than a foreboding “symbol”⁴³ or frozen metaphor of an invisible “third world” within an equally loosely defined “first-world” America.

The Problem of Allegoresis: Recoding What Bigger “Killed for” in the Global Responses to Wright’s Work

In twenty-first-century literary studies, *Native Son* is cautiously embraced by the so-called Western canon as a “national allegory,” as Ahmad suggests. But as Wright’s case evidences, the national allegory’s reception changes as it is transplanted out of its original historical context, and this is one reason why Jameson’s model may assist us in configuring how Wright’s original view of the Black national allegory within world literature has been understood over time. The warning Wright posed to the state has been neutralized, its warning of imminent revolution softened into a more universal Freudian struggle between the individual and the collective. Whatever Bigger allegorically “killed for,” he no longer exists politically. Partly, this is because Wright’s political inconsistencies and his

⁴⁰ Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, loc. 3228, 3208.

⁴¹ Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” p. 870.

⁴² Rinehart, “Richard Wright’s Globalism,” p. 183.

⁴³ Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, loc. 5987.

critique of the Communist Party have been too readily accepted. I will give something of a caricaturised example. In Harold Bloom's unapologetic interpretation, a position reinforced across Bloom's numerous volumes dedicated to Wright, he indicates that it has become "rather too late to make so apparently irrelevant an observation" as that *Native Son* displays an "inadequate mastery of language," given the fact that "Wright has become a canonical author, for wholesome societal purposes."⁴⁴ That is, the white academy's embrace of Wright's "wholesome" political achievements had to overcome his crude prose style because he had inaugurated the "Wright tradition" of African American fiction typified by more elegant stylists such as Ellison, as if the two things, aesthetics and politics, are somehow separate. "What remains of Richard Wright's work if we apply to it only aesthetic standards of judgment?" Bloom wonders, a question that he admits assumes "that strictly aesthetic standards exist, and that we know what they are."⁴⁵ Bloom finds himself dangerously close to getting the point.

In Robinson's infinitely more nuanced account of Wright's novelistic achievements, he writes: "Serious attention to these works should not be deflected by the form through which Wright sought to articulate his ideas. Indeed, it must be recognized that his works are uniquely suited to their tasks."⁴⁶ The allegorical novel was the ideal machinery, Robinson continues, by which "Wright could reconstruct and weigh the extraordinary complexities and subtleties of radical politics as he and others had experienced it." Jameson shares this viewpoint in "Periodizing the Sixties," published the year after Robinson's study, in which he theorizes a historical framework for the marginalized to become the new subjects of history, as they "slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale."⁴⁷ Wright's aesthetics formalize his political commitments, echoing Bertolt Brecht's contemporaneous proposition that the singular "ally against growing

⁴⁴ Harold Bloom, "Editor's Note" and "Introduction," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Richard Wright: New Edition* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. vii and pp. 1-4 (p. vii and p. 2).

⁴⁵ Bloom, "Introduction," p. 1.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p. 292.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the Sixties," *Social Text* 9-10 (Spring-Summer 1984): 178-209 (p. 209).

barbarism” was “the people, who suffer so greatly for it,” and that, therefore, *popular* art means an art which is

intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them / communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.⁴⁸

Style is what facilitates an allegory which, in “first-world” literary works such as *Native Son*, brings the “three worlds” together.

And yet, despite what Bloom sees as the literary canon’s “wholesome” embrace of Wright, “Achebe’s novels,” Ahmad declared, “are consistently more easily available in the US book market” than Wright’s are.⁴⁹ Though this may be true, Ahmad’s argument again reduces economic complexities to undialectical personifications: Wright versus Achebe in the free market. National allegorical works such as Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* remain the author’s most widely circulated texts in the United States. Ahmad’s point relies on a position that Paul Gilroy would critique in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Though Gilroy makes the same point about Wright’s late unpopularity in U.S. literary circles, he also insists that particular wings of Americanist literary studies and cultural criticism had set “fortifications” between Wright’s “American” novels and his “post-American” novels, written from outside the United States after 1946.⁵⁰ Whilst as Bloom suggests, Wright has come to be perceived as a canonical “first-world” writer, what has been most neglected are the works that do not explicitly present as national allegories at all: those works produced in the last thirteen years of Wright’s life, the period of his relocation to Paris and his travels

⁴⁸ Bertolt Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” trans. Stuart Hood, in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 79-85 (pp. 80-81).

⁴⁹ Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric,” p. 16.

⁵⁰ See Paul Gilroy, “‘Without the Consolation of Tears’: Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community,” in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 146-86.

through Africa, Asia, and Europe, when Wright's writing bifurcated between his European existentialist novels and his travel writing. The former were written largely from exile in Paris and were influenced by his friend Jean Paul Sartre: *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *The Long Dream* (1958). The latter include *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), an account of his visit to the revolutionary Gold Coast; *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), which detailed his experiences as a journalist; and *Pagan Spain* (1957), a chronicle of life under Franco's regime. The last of these saw Wright return to a theme he had examined for almost three decades and which, as we have seen, he had covered as a journalist for the *Daily Worker* in 1937: America's involvement in the Loyalist fight against Franco during the Spanish Civil War. One reason for the relative neglect of Wright's writings on the emergent "Third World" is that various perspectives reflected in those works chafed against evolving views on world literature emerging in the United States and internationally from the 1980s. There are also good reasons for criticism's tendency to focus on Wright's "American" writings such as *Native Son* and *Black Boy/American Hunger*, and not his writing on the "third world". S. Shankar is not alone in interpreting Wright's resistance to Western colonialism in *The Color Curtain*, for example, as reliant on the author's representational primitivism.⁵¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah has criticized the Western "paranoia" of *Black Power*,⁵² whilst Henry Louis Gates Jr has questioned Wright's view that tribal religion and culture must necessarily be erased.⁵³

In reverse, many critics have argued that Wright's earlier national allegories do hold transnational significance, and perhaps more so than those works that take the struggles of the global "third world" as their explicit subject, such as *The Color Curtain*. In 1986, for instance, the year in which Jameson's essay appeared, the Sri Lankan literary critic Wimal Dissanayake published an article entitled

⁵¹ S. Shankar, "Richard Wright's *Black Power*: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narratives," in Virginia Whatley Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 3-19.

⁵² Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Long Way from Home: Richard Wright on the Gold Coast," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Richard Wright: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 173-90 (p. 181).

⁵³ Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Third World of Theory: Enlightenment's Esau," *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (January 2008): 191-205 (p. 195).

“Richard Wright: A View from the Third World,” in which he describes Wright as still “one of the most widely discussed writers in the Third World.”⁵⁴ Wright’s novels were the proof of American society’s need to revolutionize its own power relations, Dissanayake argues. Bigger Thomas’s denial of “the rules and codes of behavior laid down by the society which he found so oppressive,” as well as Wright’s reflection throughout *Native Son* on the “concept of power as a relationship, how it is permeated in society, how it is encompassed in certain discursive practices, the way in which these discursive practices can usefully be overturned,” resonated well with “intellectuals and writers in the Third World.”⁵⁵

An even more curious example of the uptake of Wright’s early Black national allegories within and beyond the “first-world” United States is the Argentinian film adaptation of *Native Son*. As Wright approached Hollywood directors about adapting the novel into a film, several wanted to significantly alter its plot, with one director even suggesting he rewrite the screenplay with a white man as the protagonist. Even the most prominent Black American filmmaker of the period, Oscar Micheaux, had rejected the novel as a basis for a screenplay, determining that “the Chicago Board of Censors, and all the other many Boards of Censors” would reject any attempt to picture *Native Son* in “all its vile horror, its sordid and distorted preamble of hatred, expressed in the words and actions of Bigger Thomas, moving across the screen.”⁵⁶ In 1951, Wright himself starred as Bigger Thomas in Pierre Chenal’s *Sangre negra*, a movie adaptation of *Native Son* filmed in Argentina. American critics responded negatively to the 94-minute version left after the master-copy was hewn by U.S. censorship bodies, and the film flopped at the U.S. box-office.⁵⁷ “*Sangre Negra* stood little chance with audiences and critics in the United States. Though they were willing to read about racial protest, they remained, it seemed, unreceptive to viewing such a narrative,” writes Thy

⁵⁴ Wimal Dissanayake, “Richard Wright: A View from the Third World,” *Callaloo* 28 (Summer 1986): 481-8 (p. 481).

⁵⁵ Dissanayake, “Richard Wright,” pp. 483, 488.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 35.

⁵⁷ Thy Phu, “Bigger at the Movies: *Sangre Negra* and the Cinematic Projection of *Native Son*,” *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 2.1 (Winter 2010): 36-57 (p. 42).

Phu.⁵⁸ Yet as scholars such as Phu have also noted, the film's melodramatic aesthetic and depiction of racially determined class antagonisms resonated with the politics of audiences in Peronist Argentina, where it was well received. From the 1920s, South American studios had begun to look more attractive to large production companies such as Paramount, which competed with Argentina's existing film industry and at the same time brought its local customs into the transnational marketplace.⁵⁹ This fostered a cross-fertilization of Hollywood and Argentine ideological mainstays belonging to popular cultural production, including film but also radio, literature, and other media. Matthew Karush notes that the formative era in Argentine cinema in the 1920s and 1930s saw filmmakers caught dialectically between the rock of attracting Hollywood capital, which had led to the erasure of "plebeian elements" and to a desire for local filmmakers to replicate both the ideologies and technologies of North American cinema, and the hard place of retaining the interest of its domestic audience.⁶⁰ Caught between these two drives, Argentine cinema of the 1930s made "lowbrow and potentially subversive traditions" central to its commercial operations.⁶¹ The consensus among film scholars, writes Karush, is that the popularity of melodrama in Argentina, from popular prose fiction to film, "spoke effectively to working-class concerns at a time when industrialization and internal migration were eroding traditional lifeways."⁶² Nevertheless, Karush adds, this logic insists upon melodramatic narratives being inherently conservative and discouraging towards the transformation of the social order. For these reasons, *Sangre negra* resonated with South American audiences, and Wright's relative success in Argentina contrasts the lukewarm reception given him by North American film critics.

This issue of the U.S. culture industry's censorship of Wright's works raises a point of ambiguity in Jameson's model of allegory, which concerns the direct role

⁵⁸ Phu, "Bigger at the Movies," p. 45.

⁵⁹ Matthew B. Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 44.

⁶⁰ Matthew B. Karush, "The Melodramatic Nation: Integration and Polarization in the Argentine Cinema of the 1930s," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 87.2 (2007): 293-326 (p. 296).

⁶¹ Karush, "The Melodramatic Nation," p. 297.

⁶² Karush, "The Melodramatic Nation," p. 309.

which the nation-state apparatus plays in shaping the public's reception of a text as a national allegory in the age of multinational capitalism, and in particular the ability of state interference to promote or demote certain texts and authors. Wright's engagement with world literature and politics outside of the United States, including his decision to relocate his film adaptation's production to Argentina, was partly the result of him trying to escape the Jim Crow racism of his home country, but an even more significant factor was McCarthy's intrusive, racist anticommunism. This is especially significant in terms of the relationship between the way Black national allegories have been received and the State's attempts to erase communism from the United States's domestic politics. Pursuing this notion from the vantage of Black radical literature may actually bring us closer to a productive redefinition of the "second world" in this national allegorical schema, for the two areas are clearly linked, as can be seen in the case of Wright's career. The protracted history of U.S. government interventions in the reception of the Black radicalism of writers such as Wright, where the FBI's and CIA's anticommunist literary heuristics guided the consumption and interpretation of their works, shadows Wright's theory of a Black national allegory. Given the fact that, from the 1910s onwards, many of America's most influential Black writers and political spokespersons had recognized that a robust cultural front was necessary for the liberation of Black and other oppressed collectives, the FBI and the CIA in turn showed an increasing interest in conducting their own politicized literary analysis of various Black liberation writers. Gilroy writes that the international successes of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were particularly extraordinary achievements because their representation of "injustices and political administration by racial terror" mortified "the American government, both in its anti-Nazi posture and in its later dealings with the emergent politics of anti-colonial liberation."⁶³ That is to say, in promoting the "Negro" as "America's metaphor,"⁶⁴ Wright's novels enacted a transformative destabilization of the United States as a cultural and political hegemon. Red-baiting was a significant obstacle, as an "unrelenting campaign" of threatening and harassing behaviour caused fractures in the relationship of Black cultural radicals with communist activities. This fact undermines the dominant narrative, which has long been exaggerated in accounts of Wright's and Ralph Ellison's public and politicized

⁶³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp. 146-7.

⁶⁴ Wright, quoted in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 149.

divorce from the CPUSA, whereby leftist in-fighting is said to have caused a flight of African Americans from the Communist Party.⁶⁵ As Barbara Foley has noted, Ellison's increasingly revisionist account of this history pandered to McCarthy's red-baiting, and the satirical representations in *Invisible Man* of Ellison's involvements and dealings with the Communist Party are simply fabrications, a kind of anticommunist discourse that distorts the real Communist Party's Harlem chapter in ways that have been too readily accepted as fact.⁶⁶

The antagonism between second-world culture and radical organization on the one hand, and the nation-state apparatus on the other, has left an enduring mark on both literature and its reception, especially in the case of African American literature. The U.S. government actively monitored Black literature on domestic and international fronts. It interfered in the activities of Hughes and McKay, who ventured to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s to engage in politicized cultural exchanges, and it even went so far as to prevent McKay from re-entering the States. As both William J. Maxwell and Juliana Spahr have argued, literature itself was an important site not only of political resistance but of state control within "first-world" America. "FBI folklore tells us that J. Edgar Hoover once scrawled the command 'Watch the borders!' on an errant Bureau memo," writes Maxwell, but as secret agents scrambled to the borders—Canada, Mexico—it dawned on someone that Hoover was referring to the narrow margins of the document under review.⁶⁷ This "unintended slippage between print and state limits," Maxwell continues, "became intentional policy [...] on the Afro-modernist beat, where federal literary criticism was sometimes translated into federal border policing":

African American authors learned that writing beyond the nation-state required them to breach doubly hardened state borders—borders patrolled not only from inside out, with authors sometimes denied the ability to travel

⁶⁵ Dolina, *Black Cultural Front*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 1.

⁶⁷ William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) (Kindle Edition), p. 238.

internationally, but from the outside in, with the FBI scrambling to deny or taint the homecoming of black expatriates.⁶⁸

By hardening “the country’s front lines at harbor and airports,” the FBI thus attempted “to stage-manage the practice of black diaspora when it failed to prevent it.” In this way, Wright’s dense FBI file contains extrapolations drawn from literary analysis of his works, including memorandums such as this: “he is at least a fellow traveller if not a member of the Communist Party.”⁶⁹ Hoover surmised that Wright’s rejection of communism, as laid out in the essay “I Tried to be a Communist,” stemmed from his more extreme position that the Communist Party was not “revolutionary enough at the present time with respect to the advancement of the Negro.”⁷⁰

Wright remained popular within European intellectual circles, from Jean-Paul Sartre’s circle in Paris to circles in Holland and in Germany, leading to opportunities to further his geography of influence in the non-English-speaking West. I suspect that the perceived commercial unviability of Wright in the American market in the 1980s had little to do with “first-world” literary critics’ embrace of “third-world” African writers over the African American writer, and far more to do with the policing, harassment, and coercion of Black American writers engaged with world politics which jeopardized their careers and legacies. In the case of Wright, becoming blacklisted as a political figure further led to the messages of his early national allegories, such as *Native Son*, and the transnational politics they resonated, suffering distortion over time. Maxwell brilliantly accounts for the enormous powers of the state to perform literary analysis in order to intervene in the transatlantic connections of African American writers, as was the case with J. Edgar Hoover’s surveillant literary reading practices apropos African American writers. Building upon Paul Gilroy’s influential argument in *The Black Atlantic*, Maxwell’s thesis that the “FBI helped to define the twentieth-

⁶⁸ Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*, p. 239.

⁶⁹ Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (Gloucester: P. Smith, 1983), p. 152.

⁷⁰ Hazel Rowley, *The Life and Times of Richard Wright* (Urbana: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 295.

century Black Atlantic, both blocking and forcing its flows,”⁷¹ raises the issue of the extent to which government interventions have shaped writers’ engagements with both national and global dimensions. The FBI’s red-baiting and its racial profiling of prominent African American writers since the 1910s has formed a strong counter-literary tension which ensured that, whatever the writing’s content, it was read and scrutinized as an allegory of a possible Black “anti-American” insurgency, proof of broader revolutionary violence against the state and against capitalist interests. African American writers were prevented from expressing their negative views on the state of the nation to international audiences, and likewise prevented from advocating alliances between U.S. minority groups and the “second” and “third” worlds, because this would interfere with U.S. foreign policy whilst undermining the nation’s credibility as an emergent liberal democratic superpower. Throughout the 1950s, FBI agents put travel stops on various international trips planned by Du Bois, Hughes, Wright, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin among others, as well as manipulating their and other writers’ and intellectuals’ movements in other instances by posing as fake “travel agents.” As early as the 1920s, the FBI prevented writers such as McKay from returning to the United States from the Soviet Union and North Africa, and they also kept tabs on potential “fellow travellers,” even repentant former Communists such as Ralph Ellison. In direct retaliation against the Black national allegory that Wright had advocated in “Blueprint,” which *Native Son* exemplified, the FBI, it could be said, had enacted a procedure of literary analysis that converted African American literature and writerly activities into an allegory of counternationalism, insurgency, and radicalism that needed to be censored.

Brian Dolinar’s account of the Black cultural front reveals the significance of McCarthy’s blacklist on the shape of American literature’s engagement with the “second world”:

As Tyler Stovall has written, the 1950s was the “Golden Age” of African American writers in Paris. African Americans who congregated on what Michel Fabre has called the “Black Bank,” were certainly fleeing the oppressive racial apartheid in the United States, but they certainly were not the first to do so—Josephine Baker being the most famous African

⁷¹ Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*, p. 179.

American to make her home in Paris. Less acknowledged was the role that McCarthyism played in causing black writers and artists to seek a refuge in the 1950s. Others of the black cultural front such as Lena Horne, Canada Lee, Josh White, Hazel Scott, Gwendolyn Bennett, Margaret Burroughs, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson would also suffer from the blacklist. Elizabeth Catlett fled to Mexico. Aubrey Pankey and Harrington would eventually end up in East Germany. While the McCarthy period is regarded by most as a sad moment in U.S. history, scholars have yet to fully acknowledge the extent of the damage done.⁷²

One of the literary impacts of this culture of surveillance was the rise of “European” African American detective novels in the late 1940s and 1950s, also observable in Wright’s *noir* ambitions for the 1951 movie adaption of *Native Son*. In short, government interference had covertly recalibrated the conditions and machineries of representation so that Black writers who used the novel form to tell the struggles of the “experience of the collectivity itself,” in Jameson’s terms, could only ever be read as allegories of a culturally embattled minority nationalism.

In a related investigation that draws upon Benedict Anderson and Pascale Casanova, Juliana Spahr writes that “Literature, in short, is not only one of the places where nationalism manifests itself, but it carries a relation to nationalism in the very materials of its composition.”⁷³ One of Spahr’s key case studies is the United States’s cultural diplomacy from the 1950s and 1960s. The CIA infiltrated or developed numerous little magazines in this period, and it manipulated how African American cultural practitioners such as Du Bois and Wright engaged in international decolonization efforts. As a result, “U.S. cultural diplomacy concerns morph[ed] from an anticommunism to an anticolonialism (which is still an anticommunism) after the Bandung Conference and the somewhat related Congress of Black Writers and Artists held by the journal *Présence Africaine*,” and this had a long-term impact on 1960s and 1970s U.S. literary culture and

⁷² Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front*, pp. 10-11.

⁷³ Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) (Kindle Edition), loc. 203-9.

beyond.⁷⁴ Spahr argues that we must “understand the potential autonomy of mid-century U.S. literatures” by acknowledging that “the idea that there should be in Africa a form of English-language literary production that is recognizable in the West as literature is something that the CIA controlled on multiple fronts.” Spahr’s analysis of Wright’s visions for cultural and political decolonization, predicated on his anticommunism, is far more unforgiving than Robinson’s determination that, though Wright broke with the Communist Party, he remained committed to Marxist principles. Wright’s involvement as a cultural spokesperson in the politics of decolonization abroad were controlled by state agencies such as the CIA, for which, Spahr determines, he voluntarily acted as an anticommunist informant on at least two or more occasions. Whilst Du Bois had sent a telegram to be read at the first World Congress of Negro Men of Culture, his passport application having been denied by the U.S. government, Wright and a handful of other Americans were able to attend through scholarships from the American Committee on Race and Class, “a CIA front group.”⁷⁵ However, this does not seem to align with the fact that Julia Wright, the author’s daughter, suggested at the time that the State played a role in Wright’s fatal cardiac arrest in 1960, less than a week after he had given a speech in Paris entitled “The Situation of the Black Artist and Intellectual in the United States.”⁷⁶ In that speech, Wright had accused the U.S. government of assassinating civil rights leaders in order to silence the home-front of the Black liberation movement, and he challenged Black artists and intellectuals to never relent in the cultural struggle against the ruling ideas of a government that would ruthlessly mute the expression of the revolution.

When Jameson responds to Ahmad by suggesting that the “first world” indeed contains its “own third-world cultures,” one of the issues he is alluding to is the political history of the reception of Black literature. This reception involves both reading practices determined by the market and the way the division of labor is shaped by government and ruling-class interference in the form of departmentalization, grant funding, publication opportunities, and so forth. For, if the “first world” really does contain three cultural worlds, at least in Jameson’s “descriptive” (as Ahmad notes, therefore ideological) sense, how can we avoid

⁷⁴ Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram*, loc. 351.

⁷⁵ Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram*, loc. 56.

⁷⁶ See Rowley, *The Life and Times of Richard Wright*, p. 525.

falling into Ahmad's and Jameson's shared trap of reading African American novels, particularly those aligned with socialist ideology, as frozen metaphors of "the nation"? To do so locks the United States's minoritized writer into the literary machineries of the capitalist "first world" at the same time as it expels them from that world. It would be better to read these works as nuanced allegories of the struggle between the imagined nation and its material realities, including the ways that not only the capitalist mode of production but also active state intervention in cultural affairs control the production and circulation of literature. Jameson's new volume concedes that various complexities lurk within the details of his theory, as in a multidimensional chessboard. There is clearly much more that needs to be said on this issue, even though Jameson argues in "A Brief Response" that it is necessary to establish "*situational* difference in cultural production and meanings" in order to bridge the segregated division of labor in the Western university.⁷⁷ What we can conclude is that in addition to national metonymy, allegory was central to a number of African American writers in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond as a means of transforming nationalism into transnational political alliances through literature, in ways that both certify Jameson's new theory of allegory in general and put pressure on the more problematic elements in Jameson's original theory of the "third-world" national allegory. Despite its limitations, Jameson's theory of the national allegory assists us in historically resituating the literary responses that emerged out of the United States's internal "third-world cultures" in the first half of the twentieth century in response to both Jim Crow capitalism, as well as the burgeoning alliances between the Black U.S. intelligentsia and global revolutionary forces. At the same time, historicizing those representational practices in the works of Black U.S. writers and intellectuals such as Richard Wright also helps us to better understand the historical developments of the larger transnational map of political responses to the era of multinational capitalism.

⁷⁷ Jameson, "A Brief Response," p. 26.