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The Introductory Essay: Richard Wright's Covert Challenging of Jim Crowism and Uncle Tomism

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Abstract

Richard Wright's introductory essay to his collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* describes hidden forms of resistance against Jim Crowism and Uncle Tomism. The essay entitled *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch* relates Wright's daily confrontations with Jim Crowism with a particular emphasis on his evasive actions, and his covert activities, such as silence, playing the role of the Monkey trickster in the library, lying consistently to whites if this act did not question his life and "sly civility," to fight the humiliation imposed by Jim Crow laws and customs back. In the short stories, however, he focuses on more open forms of defying Jim Crowism, especially the resort to physical violence. In all the stories of the collection of *Uncle Tom's Children* and in its introductory essay, whites are the originators of the violence; however, blacks are not always portrayed as entirely innocent. The essay is divided into nine "lessons". For the purpose of this paper, I limit my study of the introductory essay to four of Wright's so called Jim Crow "lessons," selecting two examples from the beginning of the essay and two examples from the end to show what Wright meant by "covert tactics" and how he used them in his day-to-day life. Towards the end of the essay, I conclude, Wright increases his attacks on Uncle Tomism either by criticizing the submissive reactions of his family and black folks or by refusing to be meek and loyal to whites. When he was seriously threatened, though, he had no choice but to play the role of an Uncle Tom.

Keywords: 1. Richard Wright 2. Jim Crowism 3. Uncle Tomism, Introductory Essay 4. Sly Civility 5. Signifying Monkey 6. White Violence 7. Evasive Actions and Covert Defiance

1. Introduction

Richard Wright first published *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch* as a separate essay in *American Stuff: an Anthology of Prose and Verse*, published by the Federal Writers' Project in 1937. Later he used it as an introductory essay to the enlarged edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*, which appeared in 1940. Wright used this essay again almost verbatim in the nucleus of his autobiography *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945). In *Black Boy*, he divided the essay into several sections before incorporating it into a book. He also made some minor changes to it. In fact, *Black Boy* is so heavily reliant on this autobiographical essay that some critics, including Arthur Scherr and Richard Wormser, have said that "Richard Wright expanded this autobiographical essay into his novel *Black Boy*" (Living with Jim Crow, 2002; Scherr, 2004; Wormser, 2003). As Wright stated in an interview (1993b), *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow* introduces "the theme of Jim Crowism" to *Uncle Tom's Children*; however, it also reveals Wright's attempt to defy Jim Crow practices in a covert fashion. (Wright, Kinnamon, & Fabre, 1993b).

In this section I explore the hidden tactics that Wright implied blacks could adopt to defy Jim Crowism, especially in the South, as these are portrayed in the *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch* (1965a). Wright, it seems, tries to suggest that African Americans will not be on the receiving end of so much violence if they also learn to resist oppression using more subtle means. The questions I seek to answer in this section include: how did Wright envision African Americans' managing to defy Jim Crow customs and laws, and how successful was the covert defiance practiced by him and some of his characters as distinct from the overt violence practiced by others?

2. Discussion

The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch is divided into nine “lessons” that Wright devised based on his experiences in the Jim Crow South. Using these “lessons”, he hoped to alter white America’s racist behaviour. The “lessons” centre around various aspects of the dehumanizing effect of Jim Crow customs on African Americans: the punishment strategies that black women use to protect their children, the black peoples’ submissive reactions, the necessity of African Americans’ adhering to strict social etiquette in their conversations with white Southerners, and the inability of white laws and the police to protect poor black women against rape. Wright’s incapacity to do anything about the violence that was occurring in the hotel where he was working as a bellman, led to his decision to resort to trickery, as did his desire to use the library facilities in the South. In addition, he found that clever tactics were required of blacks if they were to avoid having to practice customs like removing their hats in the presence of white Southerners in the elevators.

Wright wrote *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch*, in order to make his white readers aware of the private indignities suffered by African Americans as a result of Jim Crow laws and customs. In his 1960 interview Wright explained that “Our life is still invisible to whites. It still remains outside the pale of whites’ preoccupations. I’d like to hurl words in my novels in order to arouse whites to the fact that there is someone here with us, Negroes, a human presence.” In an interview with Georges Charbonnier (1993a), when he was asked whether he wanted his interlocutor to be a white person first, he replied, “Yes, because we are a minority in my country, you know. It is a white country in the imagination of Negroes. And when I write, I have a white image of my audience” (p.225). Wright admitted that he also thought of a Negro audience but he said he wrote “mostly for whites.” (Redding, 1970, pp. 8-9)

That he depicted interracial violence in many of the stories of the first edition caused African American critic Zora Neale Hurston to call

“all the characters . . . elemental and brutish”(Hurston, 1938). Both Hazel Rowley and Michel Fabre note that Hurston was the only African American writer to criticize Wright’s collection (Fabre, 1993b, pp. 161-162; Rowley, p.142). In fact, the Wright-Hurston debate started after Wright criticized the folk romanticism in Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when it was published in 1937 (Wright, *Between Laughter and Tears*, pp. 18-19). When Wright published the first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), Hurston responded to it in her preface to *Stories of Conflict* a year later (Hurston, 1938). She charged that the characters in the novel embodied the concept of brutal violence, and that Wright created a harsh picture of the South by portraying it as “A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else.” Hurston added that the collection is “about hatred” and that “Mr. Wright serves notice by his title that he speaks of a people in revolt, and his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live.” Finally, she criticized the overly masculine perspective from which Wright’s stories are written (Hurston, 1938).

Hurston’s criticisms were directed at the first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, which consisted of a collection of four short stories: *Big Boy Leaves Home*, *Down by the Riverside*, *Long Black Song*, and *Fire and Cloud*. In fact, after reading Hurston’s negative comments about his book, Wright reissued the second edition of the collection with an essay, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch*, and a new concluding short story, *Bright and Morning Star*. The inclusion of the introductory essay helped Wright to rectify what Hurston had seen as a flaw in his collection—namely the focus on overt forms of defiance that endangered the protagonist’s lives. Evidently, he had come to agree with Hurston’s claim that the overt form of violence featured in the stories would, if enacted in real life, endanger the lives of actual people. Moreover, the readers at that time would have expected to know how Wright himself lived through white violence. That would be another reason why Wright added the introductory essay to the second edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1965b).

In this paper, I refer to Wright's second edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* for two reasons. The first is that the second edition revises and elaborates the first edition's account of violence. The second reason is that the first edition also fails to represent black women's resistance: all the women who feature in the collection are passive and unresisting. In the second edition by contrast, Wright represented black women's struggles and resistances in order to balance the picture of passivity constructed in the first edition. In words of James R. Giles's, these additions "contributed, both to the aesthetic unity and to the thematic militancy of the volume" (Gilles, p.257).

In her biography *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2001), Hazel Rowley has recently responded to Hurston's charge that the characters in the novel employ the concept of brutal violence and that the South was ruled only by "brutish hatred". In Rowley's view, "Wright paints a picture of a Jim Crow South animated by terror. The main characters, who, as the title suggests, are the children and grandchildren of slaves, are officially 'free'. They do not pretend to like white people, and they fight back" (Rowley, p. 143). Like Rowley, many critics have focussed on the collective and overt forms of resistance featured in the stories. For instance, James R. Gilles, in *Richard Wright's Successful Failure: A New Look at Uncle Tom's Children* (1973), argues that the stories represent an advance from "a spontaneous, fear-motivated reaction by a black character against the 'white mountain' of racial hatred, to a realization of the necessity for concentrated Marxist organization of the poor" (Gilles, p. 256). Keneth Kinnamon finds a similar progression in the collection: "there is again a movement from an individual form of a belief in a consolatory Christianity to a militant collectivism" (Kinnamon, 1972, p.113). Likewise, Dan McCall asserts that the "stories . . . comprise a rising tide of militancy" (McCall, 1969, p.25). In *Rehistoricizing Wright: The Psychopolitical Function of Death in Uncle Tom's Children* (1987), Abdul Jan Mohamed asserts that the cohesion of *Uncle Tom's Children* derives from its incremental repetition of themes, with Wright's concerns advancing outward from individual survival toward community solidarity

and eventual political activism (JanMohamed, p.192). These critics all view *Uncle Tom's Children* as embodying a progression from individual forms of defiance to something resembling collective militancy. However, I would contend that they all overlook the fact that in the introductory essay Wright uses the term covert defiance to describe a form of day-to-day struggle that does not necessarily entail resorting to violence, but which instead involves getting around Jim Crow customs by peaceful means, such as the mastering of white language and the use of verbal tricks.

For the purpose of this paper, I limit my study of the introductory essay to four of Wright's so called Jim Crow "lessons", selecting two examples from the beginning of the essay and two examples from the end of the essay to show what Wright meant by "covert tactics" and how he used them in his daily life.

Wright recalls that his first contact with whites or his first Jim Crow "lesson" occurred when he went to work for an optical company in Jackson, Mississippi. It was during the Great Depression and Wright's mother could not earn enough money to keep her family in food, so he badly needed the job. He stresses that it was essential that he play the submissive role of an "Uncle Tom" by answering the white manager's questions with "sharp yessirs and nosirs." Such behaviour, as Wright says, convinced the white man that he (Wright) knew his subordinate "place", and that he was courteous in front of them. Because Wright tried "to please" his white employers, he did not have any problems in the first month. But when he asked them if he could train for the profession of grinding lenses, they became extremely annoyed. Pease, for instance, fiercely replied, "This is a *white* man's work around here, and you better watch yourself!" while Morrie angrily advised him not to "get smart" (Wright, 1965a, p. 6). In that period, as a Mississippian elaborates, the phenomenon of "a smart nigger would have been unbearable [for whites]" (Laurence, & Lowe, 2002, p.68). Thus Pease and Morrie started calling Wright "a lazy black son-of-a-bitch" whenever he was slow to fulfil his duties. Wright could not report this to the overall white boss out

of fear of losing his job. His situation worsened one day when Pease said to him, "Richard, *Mr. Morrie* here tells me you called me *Pease*." Holding a steel bar in his hands, Morrie grabbed Wright by the collar, and growled, "*I* heard yuh call 'im *Pease*! 'N' if yuh say yuh didn't, yuh're calling me a *lie*, see?" Wright knew that he couldn't win either way: "If I had said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you *Pease*, I would have been automatically calling Morrie a liar. And if I had said; Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you *Pease*, I would have been pleading guilty to having uttered the worst insult that a Negro can utter to a southern white man" (Wright, 1965a, p.7).

Embedded in the above exchange are a couple of Jim Crow rules that Pease and Morrie adopt to threaten Wright. These rules have been explained by Stetson Kennedy in his book *Jim Crow Guide: the Way It Was* (1990). Kennedy writes that the first rule of Jim Crowism commanded blacks to "Never assert or even intimate that a white person may be lying" (Kennedy, p. 216). This rule made it impossible for Wright to deny Morrie's false charge. Morrie also resorted to another Jim Crow adage in the above conversation. Having its roots in the slavery era, the rule required blacks to maintain appropriate interracial etiquette when addressing white people: "If you are nonwhites, always say 'Mr.', 'Mrs.', 'sir', or 'ma'am' to whites, and never call them by their first names" (p.213). What would happen if ever a black man failed to adhere to these rules? Kennedy vividly recounts that "During World War II two Negro soldiers were murdered at Flora, Mississippi, for saying 'Yes' instead of 'Yes, sir' to a group of local white civilians" (pp. 216-217). Wright was also living in the Jim Crow Mississippi in the 1930s and could not easily escape Morrie's charges.

Wright's final reply to Morrie and Pease is not like that of an "Uncle Tom" who would bear the insult and turn the other cheek. He remains neutral by replying, "I don't remember calling you Pease, Mr. Pease." He then adds, "And if I did, I sure didn't mean . . ." (Wright, 1965a, p.8). Immediately, Pease slapped Wright several times saying, "You black son-of-a-bitch! You called me *Pease*, then!" Morrie was on top of Wright

and was beating him with the crowbar. Morrie said, “Yuh can’t call a white man a lie ’n’ git erway with it, you black son-of-a bitch!” They spat, then slapped Wright and beat him with the steel bar. Eventually they warned him not to show up again. Wright begged them not to bother him any more, and promised that he would leave the factory without telling the boss. When Wright told his family what had happened to him that day, much to his surprise none of them sympathized with him because like many African Americans they practised Uncle Tomism—the name for total submission in front of whites: “. . . they called me a fool. They told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries”. Wright was told that if he wanted to keep working for white men, he had to stay in his “place” (p.8).

Wright’s first Jim Crow “lesson” was so important that he employed it in many of his works. For instance, in his last novel *The Long Dream* (1963) Fishbelly’s father Tyree is a black businessman who bribes the police and the mayor. Before being lynched, Tyree gives Fishbelly all the cancelled cheques he has given out as bribes to the white authorities. Cantley is a white police chief who frames Fishbelly with a rape allegation in order to recover the cancelled cheques. Fishbelly refuses to hand over the cheques by denying that he had them. Cantley uses the first rule of Jim Crowism in order for him not to be Fishbelly’s alibi. Though Cantley is a witness to Fishbelly’s innocence, he flatly denies it in the following conversation.

“But, Chief, I run straight to you!” Fishbelly argued. “You know I wouldn’t run to the police if I was guilty.”

“You didn’t run to me,” Cantley said coolly.

“You was gitting out of your car—”

“I wasn’t there, Fish. I’m no witness for you,” Cantley said.

“You was in my room—”

“Are you calling me a liar, nigger?”

Feeling stiffness in his muscles, Fishbelly apprehensively replies, “Nawsir, nawsir . . .” (Wright, *The Long Dream*, p.290). Implicit in this short conversation and the former one is Wright’s deep criticism and

understanding of the mechanisms of the first rule of Jim Crow practices. The rule implied that you could never disprove a white man's lies if you were a black person. Thus *whiteness* carried with it a sense of *rightness* and *blackness* did not mean but *wrongness*.

Wright's second "lesson", as outlined in *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch*, sheds more light on how whites were supported by the police when they resorted to violence. The "lesson" occurred when Wright was working as a porter in a clothing store. One day Wright sees that his white boss and his boss's twenty-year-old son were dragging and kicking a "Negro" woman into the store. Wright notices that there was a policeman standing at the corner, but he seemed not to care about the black woman's high-pitched screams. After some time the woman left the store "bleeding, crying, and holding her stomach." Immediately after this, the policeman grabbed her and accused her of being drunk. He took her to the police station. Wright was silently watching them and noticed the bloody floor. Suddenly, the boss slapped him on the back and said, "Boy, that's what we do to niggers when they don't want to pay their bills" (Wright, 1965a, p.9). He then offers Wright a cigarette, as if to say I will not beat you if you keep your mouth shut. Wright was concerned to find that his fellow black porter reacted indifferently to this incident when he told him what he had seen that day in the shop. Worse than that, the porter said that the woman was lucky that "they didn't lay her when they got through" (p.9).

In fact, neither the law nor the police protected a poor black woman against rape if a white man was implicated. According to Kennedy, "If you are a nonwhite woman, the courts of segregated territory offer you little or no protection against rape by white men. Even when there are confessions, convictions are seldom brought in." To provide evidence of this state of affairs, Kennedy refers to a case in which even though three white youths confessed to a Christmas Eve rape of a seventeen-year-old Negro girl at Decatur, Georgia, they were acquitted by DeKalb County jury (Kennedy, p. 210).

Wright's account suggests that he was at first incapable of devising tactics that would enable him to avoid the oppressor's violence. In the optical factory, there was no escape from Morrie's charge because Jim Crow laws and social etiquette allowed him no effective rejoinder. In the second example, Wright recalls how he was forced to remain silent while white people beat a black woman. Wright gradually becomes conscious of the way he could use language in order to pre-empt white violence. However, as it is outlined in the last Jim Crow "lesson" of the introductory essay, he had to go through a series of drastic changes in his reactions to white people before he could reach this stage. What he ends up achieving is planned or simultaneous acts of covert defiance. For instance, the first part of Wright's last Jim Crow "lesson" occurs in Memphis, after leaving Jackson, and it involves learning about the ban on black people using library services in the Jim Crow era because, according to whites, the black man "had no further need for books" (Wright, 1965a, p.13).

The above incident is elaborated and expanded more colourfully in Wright's autobiographical book *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1966): One morning Wright arrived early at the optical factory and started reading an article in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*. The article furiously denounced a white man called Henry Louis Mencken. Since Wright knew that only African Americans were denounced in the South, he felt a sort of sympathy towards this white man who was hated by other white Southerners. Wright had heard about Mencken, and was eager to know what his books were about. To find out, he had to borrow books from a huge library near the riverfront in Memphis. He had previously borrowed books for white men from the library but, as Jim Crow laws demanded, he was banned from borrowing books for himself: "Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city" (Wright, 1966, p.268).

Borrowing was one problem and reading in front of white people was another. To solve the borrowing issue, Wright carefully devises a plan to get books for himself from the "public" Cossit Library. He thinks

about all the different types of white men who could borrow books from that library, ruling out many of them, including those who were Kluxers or Jews. Wright knew that they were “anti-Negroes” and he could not trust them at all. But there was a white man called Mr. Falk, who was similarly hated by all white Southerners because of his religion (he was an Irish Catholic). Wright knew that Falk had read Mencken. Indeed, Falk had loaned his card to Wright to borrow two of Mencken’s books, although he asked Wright not to disclose this fact to other whites (Wright, 1966, pp. 270-274). Wright forges what he calls “a foolproof note” to get Mencken’s books. His act of getting the book and his sly behaviour in the library constitute a challenge to the Jim Crow assumption that African Americans were intellectually inferior to whites. He writes, “*Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy—I used the word ‘nigger’ to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note—have some books by H.L. Mencken*” (p.270)? Standing before the librarian, Wright tried to look “as unbookish as possible.” In order to deceive the librarian, he had to play dumb because, according to Wright, whites assumed that blacks were inarticulate. Thus he pretended that he “did not possess the power of speech” (p.270). Since Mencken’s books were forbidden especially to black readers, the librarian was a bit suspicious of Wright, wondering whether he needed them for himself. When asked if the books were for him, Wright had to tell her outright lies, responding that he couldn’t read at all. When the librarian expressed curiosity about what Mr. Falk wanted with Mencken, Wright felt quite relieved because “I knew now that I had won; she was thinking of other things and the race question had gone out of her mind” (pp.270-271).

What strategies did Wright employ if the books he wanted to read were not in the library? In a 1938 interview with Marcia Minor, which was later published in *Conversations with Richard Wright* (1993), Wright explained that “When a book I wanted wasn’t in, I would never ask for another. Oh, no! I would go out, change the list, and come back again.” Wright says that Mencken’s books opened his eyes to a style of writing

that used “words as weapons” (Wright, Fabre & Kinnamon, p.16). As Wright writes in *Black Boy*, Mencken’s books introduced him to naturalism, realism and the great literary figures who excelled in these styles, such as Anatole France, Joseph Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dostoevski, George Moore, Gustave Flaubert, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Frank Harris, Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, Stephen Crane, Zola, Norris, Gorky, Bergson, Ibsen, Balzac, Bernard Shaw, Dumas, Poe, Thomas Mann, O. Henry, Dreiser, H. G. Wells, Gogol, T. S. Eliot, Gide, Baudelaire, Edgar Lee Masters, Stendhal, Turgenev, Huneker, Nietzsche and so many others. Wright tells the reader how he managed to borrow hundreds of books through this method, and how reading changed him.

Reading so many books improved Wright's writing style. He wrote after reading the books. At the age of fourteen, Wright’s white employer attacked his literary ambition by saying, “You’ll never be a writer”. The fact that Wright eventually emerged to be a great writer despite such hindrances is the greatest example of Wright’s own defiance of Jim Crowism. In concluding summary of this section, we can say that *Uncle Tom’s Children* can be read as postcolonial because it describes African American people’s attempts to achieve self-liberation despite the forces arraigned against them.

Wright also informs the reader that he overcame the problem of reading in the vicinity of whites by covering the books and lying. For example, each time he borrowed a book from the library, he wrapped it in newspaper, and when white workers asked him what he was reading, they did not protest as long as he said he was reading romance or just killing his time. He says that reading helped make him understand what white men were thinking and feeling. Through reading he also learned that it was counter-productive to fight openly with whites.

Wright tells us that shortly after discovering this secret way of borrowing books he began preparing an escape to the North, where whites were against lynching blacks for minor crimes. Before describing another of Wright’s techniques of covert defiance, it is worth referring to

what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls the “signifying monkey”. Gates uses this term to refer to the development by African Americans of a way of using their “masters” language that allowed them to retain some independence or voice of their own. The “signifying monkey” is present wherever the oppressed play with language to trick people in positions of power who are unaware of or don’t understand the word play. This is explained by Gate’s example below, in which the Monkey tricks the Lion:

In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably repeats to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant. The Monkey, however, speaks figuratively. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology of the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion. The Lion, realizing that his mistake was to take the monkey literally, returns to trounce the monkey (Gates, 1988, p. 55).

In his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism* (1988), Gates applies the concept of “the signifying monkey” to a couple of Wright’s early works—namely, *Lawd Today!* and the first short story of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Big Boy Leaves Home*. Drawing upon the eight characteristics of signification delineated by linguist Geneva Smitherman, Gates singles out passages from *Lawd Today!* in which some of the different aspects of signification are illustrated (Smitherman, 1986, p. 118). To analyze Wright’s short story, Gates employs Smitherman’s concept of “the dozens,” the term used in African American society to designate a ritual joke about mothers (Gates, 1988, p.99).

Gates did not extend the concept of “the signifying monkey” to Wright’s own personal experience in borrowing books from the library; nevertheless I suggest that Wright did employ a sly form of trickery while he was borrowing books from the library for himself, and that on these occasions he was playing the role of the Monkey trickster who speaks figuratively and ironically. The librarian understood only the literal level of his speech and was therefore willing to lend the book to

him. In the introductory essay, Wright said that although he knew that lying was not good, it nevertheless functioned as a survival tool for blacks in the South: “here [in Memphis] I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live” (Wright, 1965a, p.13). Roger D. Abrahams explains that lying was one form of the sly signifying practice that African Americans used: “Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey. It certainly refers to the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie” (Abrahams, 1970, pp. 51-52).

According to Abraham, the trickster can use “a whole complex of expressions and gestures” (pp. 51-2). Wright frequently borrowed books from that library using this method. His actions show his ability to play the role of “the signifying monkey,” and, more broadly, that blacks were intellectually sharp and could devise sophisticated plans. In the introductory essay, Wright observes that if white Southerners were to become aware of his description, their reaction would be similar to that of the lion that was tricked by the clever monkey: “No doubt if any of the white patrons had suspected that some of the volumes they enjoyed had been in the home of a Negro, they would not have tolerated it for an instant” (Wright, 1965a, p.14).

Wright’s second example of a strategy to covertly defy Jim Crow customs is directed at the Southern custom that all men had to take off their hats when they entered an elevator: “And especially,” states Wright, “did this apply to us blacks with rigid force” (p.14). One day Wright entered an elevator with his arms full of packages. He could not take off his hat before the two white men who stared at him coldly. Out of kindness one of the white men took Wright’s hat off and put it upon his packages. According to custom, in response to the white man’s action he had to “look at the white man out of the corner of his eye and grin,” a customary reaction that the stereotype of Uncle Tomism required black people to perform. In fact, the same behaviour was expected from slaves

if they failed to maintain racial etiquette. According to Neil R. McMillen in *Jim Crow and the Limits of Freedom, 1890-1940*, slaves were expected to “either laugh, or grin, when they committed breaches of etiquette, or when they did not know precisely how to act.” Wright did not intend to “grin” like a slave before his master; rather he chose to defy both Uncle Tomism and Jim Crowism by looking for a third, pre-emptive way.

Before focussing on Wright’s behaviour in this scene, we need to ask if he could have simply said “thank you” on occasion such as this, when a white man offered him assistance. The answer is straightforward: Wright knew that he was unable to do so because, as Wright explains, to react in such a way made “the white man *think* that you *thought* you were receiving from him a personal service. For such an act I have seen Negroes take a blow in the mouth.” Wright found it really “distasteful” to look at white people “out of the corner of his eye and grin,” but at the same time he did not feel that it was safe simply to thank them, so he swiftly looked for a third response that would allow him to keep his “pride”. He says, “I immediately—no sooner than my hat was lifted—pretended that my packages were about to spill, and appeared deeply distressed with keeping them in my arms” (Wright, 1965a, p.14). Thus he did not need to acknowledge this service, as the white man intended, and as he says, “in spite of adverse circumstances, [I] salvaged a slender shred of personal pride” (p.15).

In the above incident, Wright practiced what Homi Bhabha has called “sly civility.” By this term, Bhabha means the sort of strategy the colonized adopt when without overtly confronting the oppressor, they refuse “to satisfy the colonizer’s . . . demand” (Bhabha, 1994, p.99). Given that the situation of African Americans in the Jim Crow era was similar to that of colonized people, I believe that it is reasonable to assume that in the elevator scene Wright does not intend to “satisfy” the white man and that he refuses to play the accepted Uncle Tom role. Indeed, in the first epigraph of *Uncle Tom’s Children* Wright stressed that there was no place for Uncle Tomism in the Emancipation era.

Through an act of covert defiance, Wright evades white violence, disobeys the subservient custom of Uncle Tomism, and recovers at least his inner satisfaction and superiority.

3. Conclusion

In the 1930s, Wright's treatment of the Jim Crow problem was fictional and realistic, depicting his central characters' fear and rage. At this time, Wright assumed the racial problem was perpetuated because African Americans actively participated in their own oppression. By creating a new type of black figure—one who opposed the Uncle Tom role and America's racist laws—he waged a two-pronged attack on Jim Crow violence. In so doing, he anticipated a body of literature called "Protest Literature," which emerged fully in the 1940s and which was "designed to offend white society and goad it into positive social action" (Thompson, 1965, pp.18-29; Britt, Autumn, 1967, p.5; Trodd, 2006; & Kostelanetz, 1991, p.154). One can say that in the second edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright develops a new understanding of the nature of collective resistance, by depicting the many levels and ways in which a people opposes its oppressors, and by suggesting the ways in which these different forms of struggle can be seen as a unified whole: Wright's autobiographical essay deals with covert defiance; the story "Big Boy Leaves Home" incorporates children's resistance against segregation and lynching; "Down by the Riverside" focuses on the struggles of a married black man to save his wife; "Long Black Song" portrays a black sharecropper's revenge of his wife's rape; "Fire and Cloud" represents the struggles of a truly Uncle Tom type of black leader who organizes a collective demonstration; and "Bright and Morning star" introduces a black woman's resistance. Seen as a whole, the collection represents the resistance of a new generation of Uncle Tom's children, who use many methods of resistance—covert and overt, individualized and collective, violent and non-violent, verbal and physical—to defy the legacy of Uncle Tomism and Jim Crowism. It is reasonable to come to the conclusion that it was this overall picture, of a

community struggling for its freedom, that Wright was trying to achieve; and that he was critical of individual defiance when it could not be turned into collective action.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright turned from "internalized oppression" and black-on-black violence depicted in his first novel *Lawd Today!* to the theme of white violence; but he also created characters that reacted to this violence either covertly or overtly, through individual or collective acts of defiance. As distinct from *Lawd Today!*, none of the stories focus on acts of domestic or gender violence; instead, there are families comprised of men, women and children, who refuse to play the submissive Uncle Tom role before whites. It is telling that, unlike his fictional figures, Wright found he could not refuse the role of subservience because of the serious repercussions that such a refusal would entail. All he could do was resort to occasional acts of covert defiance. What he effectively did in the library, as Michel Fabre notes, was "forging notes to circumvent the Jim Crow regulations" (Fabre, 1985a, p.3).

In all the stories of the collection of *Uncle Tom's Children* and in its introductory essay, whites are the originators of the violence; however, blacks were not always portrayed as entirely innocent. For instance, in the first story, the protagonists trespass on a white man's property in order to make use of a swimming-hole there; and in the second story, a black person steals a white man's boat at the time of the Mississippi flood. These relatively innocuous acts lead to acts of violence, carried out in self-defence, rather than as deliberate, premeditated forms of defiance. In the last two stories, however, the protagonists' decision to attack whites is not accidental. Rather, they intentionally and violently defy white people and kill them, for which they are in return killed, albeit in a fashion that turns them into black heroes. Only in one story of the collection, "Fire and Cloud," do we see a large scale, collective act of defiance, in the Reverend Taylor's non-violent protest. This is a strategy that Wright approves of and indeed it is unanimously praised by his critics. The other successful acts of defiance are all covert acts, including

Big Boy's successful escape to the North, in "Big Boy Leaves Home," and in all of his "lessons" in the introductory essay.

Wright published "The ethics of living Jim Crow: An autobiographical sketch" at a time when Jim Crowism had reached its height. In the South during that period, overt rebelliousness or open defiance could end in violence, so Wright found subtle ways, such as silence in the first "lesson," playing the role of the Monkey trickster in the library for so many years, lying consistently to whites if this act did not question his life and "sly civility" in the last "lesson," to fight the humiliation imposed by Jim Crow laws and customs back. Wright's reply to Hurston's charges that blacks were bestial and aggressive in his stories can be found in the fact that in all of the "lessons" of the introductory essay without exception it is the whites who resort to violence, while Wright adopts a covert form of defiance in order to free himself from the shackles of Jim Crowism. Towards the end of the essay Wright has learnt how not to become the victim of white superiority, by devising furtive ways of challenging the Jim Crow system. Moreover, he increases his attacks on Uncle Tomism either by criticizing the submissive reactions of his family and black folks or by refusing to be meek and loyal to whites. When he was seriously threatened, though, he had no choice but to play the role of an Uncle Tom.

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