

MULTITUDE MODERNISM: DEMOCRATIC EPIPHANY IN AMERICAN  
INTERWAR LITERATURE

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# MULTITUDE MODERNISM: DEMOCRATIC EPHIPHANY IN AMERICAN INTERWAR LITERATURE

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My dissertation develops a theory of “Multitude Modernism” by examining signal instances of what I call “democratic epiphany” in literary works by writers of color and leftist artists in the 1930s and 1940s, notably Richard Wright, H.T. Tsiang, Zora Neale Hurston, and John Steinbeck. My study analyzes narrative moments, often in the plot’s climax, where a compassionate protagonist momentarily unites, sometimes even merges with, their broader social communities. During these surrealistic moments of “democratic epiphany,” surrounding populations are transformed into a single entity, a transcendent social collective no longer bound by repressive structures of race and class. I contend “democratic epiphany” can be understood not only as radical writers’ imagined alternative to oppression, but also as the aesthetic of an era. Drawing on the scholarly contributions of Michael Denning, Alan Wald, Floyd Chueng, and Michael Tratner, my dissertation examines American writers’ subversion of High Modernist practice to forge a modernism of their own making. Though significant work has been done in recovering the existence of a distinctly leftist modernist movement, few studies formally account for these strange moments of social synthesis. Attending to writers from an array of ethnic affiliations, my chapters

seek to account for the ways in which democratic epiphany articulates the convictions of a multiethnic pluralism that blossomed throughout the interwar period.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in Orange County, California, Christopher Seiji Berardino received his B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley and his M.F.A. in creative writing (fiction) from Cornell University. He earned his Ph.D. in English from Cornell University in 2020, with a dissertation on interwar American literature.

For my mother and father.

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It is a question of transforming a necessity imposed on the multitude—a necessity that was to a certain extent solicited by the multitude itself throughout modernity as a line of flight from localized misery and exploitation—into a condition of possibility of liberation, a new possibility on this new terrain of humanity.

--Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*

Most people think  
Great god will come from the skies  
Take away everything  
And make everybody feel high  
But if you know what life is worth  
You will look for yours on earth  
And now you see the light  
You stand up for your rights! jah!

--Bob Marley, “Get Up Stand Up”

## **Multitude Modernism: Democratic Epiphany in American Interwar Literature**

### **An Introduction**

#### **Modernism’s New Direction: Returning to *Exile’s Return***

In 1951, Malcolm Cowley reissued *Exile’s Return*, his part-memoir, part-cultural history, “non-fiction novel.”<sup>1</sup> He was, like Hemingway, Cummings, Stein, and Fitzgerald, part of Modernism’s oft-called “lost generation,” one of many American

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<sup>1</sup> “Dos Passos’s prose style in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the *USA* trilogy (the first two volumes of which had appeared as Cowley was writing *Exile’s Return*) enhanced Cowley’s style of blending journalism, biography, and reflection into a form Cowley later called a ‘non-fiction novel,’ wherein fact, autobiography, and critical evaluation are woven into a storylike form” (Faulkner xvii).

expats scraping by in the purlieus of Paris during a veritable social and artistic revolution. Their creed was to “make it new!” and Cowley’s conversational mode of story-telling, replete with drunken parties, drunken debates, and drunken fights, betrays a willingness to do exactly that. *Exile’s Return*, perhaps more than any other reflective work of its ilk, attempts to capture the whole trajectory of an artistic movement, from its roots in an isolated and privileged secondary-school education all the way to “the twenties” apocalyptic terminus in Black Tuesday and the suicides of poets Harry Crosby and Hart Crane.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it can be argued *Exile’s Return* has partially framed the very way American modernism has been perceived, moving early critical opinions of it being a literature haphazardly spawned by “a little group of serious thinking drunkards,” to being “broadly accepted” as “a pivotal period in American letters” (Faulkner xxv). Yet much of our perception of Cowley’s work (and thus to some degree the idealist perception of Modernism itself) is actually emitted through a filter retrofitted some 17 years later amidst the apex of New Critical formalism and the rise of chauvinistic McCarthyism. Written with “richer store of memories,” the first edition of *Exile’s Return* was originally published in 1934 and bears a starkly different ending than its more well-known 1951 progeny.<sup>3</sup> Later excised and rewritten with new material, the 1934 edition’s epilogue contains hints of

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<sup>2</sup> Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964) stand as important and widely read memoirs for the lost generation’s time in Paris.

<sup>3</sup> “Memoirs written in [young and] middle life deserve, and are likely to find, more readers, since the author has... accumulated a richer store of memories” (Cowley as quoted in Faulkner, xxvi).

what a young Cowley saw as the next phase for Modernism's evolution—a phase rooted in social and political engagement.

As Donald Faulkner notes in his introduction to *Exile's Return*, much of Cowley's editing for the 1951 reissue was made in an effort to dampen and deemphasize traces of what his harshest critics had called during its initial publication a "suppressed radical tract, full of 'workers of the world, unite' cant and orthodoxy" (xxvi).<sup>4</sup> Though Faulkner himself credits Cowley's "social commitment" as being "passionately sincere," he characterizes the 1934 epilogue as "fraught with codified language," arguing the coda "exhibits writing largely unlike Cowley's style elsewhere in *Exile's Return*," often expressing "poorly formed ideas in hasty writing" (xxvi). But what Faulkner nonchalantly classifies as a justly discarded conclusion soured with "cant" and "hasty writing" is actually, I contend, fertile ground left fallow. Such a failure to fully consider the organic and originally intended epilogue, whether predicated on quality or overt political leanings, carelessly disregards a vital artifact useful in reconstructing what artists at the time saw as a radical pivot in direction for Modernism as a movement. Indeed, the 1934 epilogue itself reads as a reflection of this transitory moment in Modernism, exhibiting a vibrant melding of experimental Euro "high modernist" energies with elements of what would become the progressive social-artistic aesthetics of The Popular Front. At times, the epilogue adopts an interrogative structure, echoing Joyce's "mathematical catechism" in the "Ithaca"

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Faulkner's introduction appears in Penguin's edition. Although the original epilogue is included in the back as an appendix, the text used for this edition is the revised 1951 manuscript.

section of *Ulysses* (Ellmann 501, Birmingham 206, Gibson 4).<sup>5</sup> Spiced with both deference and bravado, the 1934 epilogue deftly plays on “Ithaca’s” overtly technical language, delving at times into mini jargoned treatises on the nature of art and aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> In the final, infamous, section of the expunged codicil, the Joycean question/answer format is applied to the relationship between politics and art. Cowley asks point-blank: “And now you turn to the political questions that have been playing an always greater part in literary discussions... *Should artists...take part in the class struggle?*”<sup>7</sup>

Though his lengthy response at times assumes a class-warrior’s tone, Cowley’s call for artists’ alliance with the “the ordinary people who have never heard of Chaucer...the factory workers and poor farmers and people now looking for jobs” is

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<sup>5</sup> Though such a comparison may seem haphazard, Cowley’s love of Joyce and admiration for *Ulysses* runs throughout *Exile’s Return*, cresting in a bittersweet recollection of their brief meeting for an interview in Joyce’s “sour and moldy” room, a “look of suffering so plainly marked” on Joyce’s face that Cowley “forgot the questions with which [he] had come prepared” (118-119).

<sup>6</sup> For example: Cowley poses the question: *Should artists devote themselves*, you ask first of all, *to art or propaganda?* And replies with Joycean flare: [T]he question can’t be answered quite so cavalierly. In terms of an apparently simple distinction between two familiar words, it conceals a type of metaphysical thinking that carries us back through the German Romantic philosophers at least as far as Kant, and a psychological theory that carries us even farther into the past. It was Kant who advanced the notion that esthetic activity and practical activity (in other words, art and life) are forever separate and that art has no goal outside itself, being ‘purposiveness without purpose’— *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*. This notion was elaborated by other German thinkers, and especially by Schopenhauer, who in turn exerted a great influence on the Symbolist movement in France (325).

<sup>7</sup> Much of the epilogue was penned in 1930, though *Exile’s Return* would be published in 1934.

without any overt fidelity to a specific political movement (330, 331).<sup>8</sup> Instead, young Cowley's loyalty resides with the "side" he sees as offering the greatest creative potential for artists. This potential, he writes, "can offer instead a sense of comradeship and participation in a historical process vastly bigger than the individual" and provide respite to bourgeois "solitude and uniqueness that has been oppressing artists for the last two centuries, the feeling that has reduced some of the best of them to silence or futility and the weaker ones to insanity or suicide" (331). He rejoins his stated question: "I hope and trust a great number of [artists] will take the worker's side, and I think that doing so will make them better artists" ending the 1934 edition of *Exile's Return* with an enchanting pronouncement of what he believes to be Modernism's new direction:

Artists used to think that the world outside had become colorless and dull in comparison with the bright inner world they so tenderly nourished; but now it is the inner world that has been enfeebled as a result of its isolation; it is the outer world that is strong and colorful and demands to be imaginatively portrayed. The subjects are waiting everywhere. There are great days ahead for artists if they can survive in the struggle and keep their honesty of vision and learn to measure themselves by the stature of their times. (331, 332)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cowley foregrounds his response with the coming clash between an Eliotically inflected "culture inherited from all the past" and the working class "Negroes, hill billies, poor whites, Jews, Wops and Hunkies" (330).

<sup>9</sup> When compared to the 1934 epilogue, the 1951 re-draft exhibits so little of the enthusiasm and hope of its predecessor. The Joycean catechismal inquiry and philosophical musings are nowhere to be found. The messianic anticipation marked in the first edition by the repetition of "I haven't told" is shorn away and replaced by an incessant tonality akin to that of a bathetic lullaby:

Though Cowley's decision to revise can perhaps be explained by his eventual disillusionment with leftist politics, his decision to rewrite *Exile's Return* and reframe the political energies of a unique moment in literary history evinces a much larger and more persistent pressure.<sup>10</sup> As the New Critics accrued power and influence, their strictly aesthetic project made it essential for Cowley to de-politicize and de-socialize the literary past. Cowley explains away his younger self's partisan proclivities in a short footnote for the 1951 epilogue, writing almost in the manner of a guilty plea: "As junior editor of a liberal weekly I was more involved in the political movements of the time than were many of the others"<sup>11</sup> (295). Such revision (one cannot help but feel the "opposition from conservative political groups" that Cowley faced during his professional career played some role in his decision to reissue *Exile's Return*) endangers a more complete understanding of American modernism and unfairly categorizes a unique articulation of social and artistic potential as "orthodoxy" and

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A generation of American writers went out into the world like the children in Grimm's fairy tales who ran away from a cruel stepmother. They wandered for years in search of treasure and then came back like the grown children to dig for it at home. But the story in life was not so simple and lacked the happy ending of fairy tales. Perhaps there was really a treasure and perhaps it had been buried all the time in their father's garden, but the exiles did not find it there. They found only what others were finding: work to do as best as they could and families to support and educate. The adventure had ended and once more they were part of common life. (289)

<sup>10</sup> Faulkner writes "Many changes had taken place in Cowley's own life as well between 1934 and 1951. His disillusionment with social radicalism was complete: by the late 1930s he parted company with political discussion; in 1942 he had been hounded out of a wartime government position with the U.S. office of Facts and Figures for his 1930s political associations (xxv).

<sup>11</sup> *The New Republic*

“cant” (xxv).<sup>12</sup> Reinvestigating a cultural moment when textual experimentation and progressive social commitments were welded together in an effort to “imaginatively portra[y]” the “outer world that is strong and colorful” counters this unfortunate redaction and provides the first step towards telling the story in which Americans of diverse backgrounds and social groups altered the course of Modernism.

### **“If We Fail, then America Fails,” Ethnic Americanism and Democratic Epiphany**

My chapters intercede where Cowley left off in 1934 by turning its focus to this brief yet exciting period when American writers explored literature’s social potential. The 1930’s and 40’s present an especially exhilarating era to explore, as it was one of the few times in American cultural history when leftist politics blossomed into “a mainstream affair” and the American public began to embrace a sweeping “anti-fascist,” “anti-racist ethnic pluralism” (Calverton 26, Denning 125).<sup>13</sup> In his book on 1930’s and 40’s mass culture, *Realism for the Masses* (2009), Chris Vials notes the importance of this shift, adding that while depictions of the protestant “white or liminally white” would continue to dominate American media throughout what has come to be commonly known as “The Popular Front” era, there was a very real and innovative effort by American artists to seriously “question racial hierarchies” in the

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<sup>12</sup> “[B]y 1949, after a decade of working on American literature and publishing seminal studies of American writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, [Cowley] was called upon to testify at the two trials of Alger Hiss, convicted of spying for the Soviet Union...In 1950 Cowley faced strong but ultimately unsuccessful opposition from conservative political groups when he was appointed the Walker-Ames Lecturer at the University of Washington” (xxv).

<sup>13</sup> “[A] 1942 Fortune Poll found that 25 percent of Americans favored socialism and another 35 percent had an open mind about it” (“The Fortune Survey,” *Fortune* 26.1, July 1942, p. 12)

United States (19).

In many ways, this broad reconsideration of existing “racial hierarchies” was an inevitable consequence of new demographic realities in major American cities. As socio-historical luminaries such as Marcus Klein, Werner Sollers, and Michael Denning have all pointed out, “[b]y 1930, two-thirds of the people in the great cities of the United States were foreign-born or the children of the foreign born” which, in turn, fomented “a paradoxical synthesis of competing nationalisms—pride in ethnic heritage and identity combined with an assertive Americanism” (Denning 9). In conjunction with the mass exodus of southern blacks during The Great Migration, a new and strident multiethnic milieu would emerge during the interwar period, “one that might be called ethnic Americanism” (9). Perhaps best exemplified in his 1943 article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Filipino writer and labor activist Carlos Bulosan verbalized the passion for such progressive “ethnic Americanism” by boldly and unapologetically proclaiming: “We are the multitudes... We are the mirror of what America is... If America wants us to be living and free, then we must be living and free. If we fail, then America fails,” adding, “all men, whatever their color, race, religion, or estate, should be given equal opportunity” (“Freedom from Want”) [See **Figure 1**].

The principal argument for this dissertation is grounded in the ascendancy of such radical multiethnic pluralism during the 1930’s and 40’s. Counter to the prevailing critical propensity to silo American writers according to a delineated subject/cultural focus, or what Nissa Parmar has recently (and provocatively) called

the “ghettoization”<sup>14</sup> of American literature, I argue the literature itself tells a different story. I have found in many literary texts of 1930’s and 40’s—cutting across racial and cultural boundaries—a recurring narrative pattern by which a unique “anti-racist ethnic pluralis[t]” aesthetic is repeatedly and fervidly expressed. Some of these texts include, but are by no means limited to: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep* (1934), Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), H.T. Tsiang’s *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* (1936), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locusts* (1939), Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942), Isaac Rosenfeld’s *Passage From Home* (1946), Toshio Mori’s *Yokahama, California* (1949), and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). These texts all build to a narrative climax, wherein a uniquely compassionate individual (often the protagonist) is depicted as momentarily uniting, sometimes even coalescing with, their larger social communities in the form of a “multitude.” Where many recent “new modernist” critical studies have limited their attention to tracing the influence of Eliot, Pound, and Stein in the work of American multiethnic writers (Pavlić 2002, Smethurst 2011, Wu Clark 2015), I believe their models cannot account for these powerful moments of collective synthesis.<sup>15</sup> Instead, I contend one must look to a broadened concept of “epiphany”— moments which a subject (often the protagonist) experiences a

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<sup>14</sup> See Nissa Parmar, *Multicultural Poetics* (2017), 3.

<sup>15</sup> As outlined in their article “The New Modernist Studies,” Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz describe “new modernism” as the field’s willingness to attend modernism’s other temporalities, spacialities, vertical directions, and social groups (737-748). Such “expansion” in scope has fomented important reconsiderations of texts by once overlooked modernist writers of color.

transcendent social revelation. As a result, this epiphanic figure is described as merging or “dissolving” into their peopled surroundings. In such fulgorant instants, I argue leftist American writers and American writers of color utilize these often phantasmagoric experiences to create resistant textual spaces wherein very real societal threats (such as racial and economic oppression) can be transitorily imagined and temporarily resolved. I call these moments “democratic epiphanies.” I will further argue such “democratic epiphanies” are heralded by three narrative tropes: corporeal dislocation of the epiphanic individual from the body politic (the individual is usually depicted as floating above, or leading in front), environmental hysteria (immediate surroundings are often presented as raucous, volatile, and frenzied), and visual representations of communal amalgamation (groups of people are often portrayed as being surrealistically melded into a single, autonomous entity).

It is my hope this dissertation will contribute to what Sarah Ehlers has recently and beautifully called “a collective commitment to studying and teaching suppressed authors and texts that makeup an emancipatory archive of American literary study” (2-3). However, this study may perhaps go even further by offering itself as prolegomenon to future scholarship of what might someday be called “Multitude Modernism,” that is, a radically pluralist modernist movement dedicated to expressing imagined collective action and sociopolitical alternatives (2-3). Drawing on Bulosan’s explicit identification with the “multitudes” as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s more recent theorizations, “multitude” (as opposed to “the crowd” or “the masses”) will be deployed as a term to describe what democratic epiphany makes perceptible: the people’s liberatory potential as a mobilized collective.

However, this dissertation should not be understood as a petition for scholars of American literature to wholly disregard considerations of “the individual.” Rather, my chapters urge thoughtful students of American literature to consider “the multitude” and other mass phenomena as worthy objects of study. If this inquiry makes a fervent demand of its reader, it is to deliberately make space for a mode of critique which rigorously examines the way American writers have explored collectivity in conjunction with, and parallel to, the ways literary scholarship has surveyed the legacies of liberal individualism. Ignoring the multitude in American literature, as Nicolaus Mills underscores, “has meant ignoring our writers’ willingness to take seriously a political world in which the extra-institutional alternative is not a retreat into nature or liberal angst but a banding together, the abandonment of home and isolation for the street and public square” (14). Despite American literary scholarship’s historical penchant for demophobia, my chapters attempt to show the ways in which writers of color, leftists, and their allies, ingeniously countered this legacy by imaginatively crafting a resistant modernism of their own, together.

Before venturing forth into the specifics of this study, it may first be helpful to consider the ways in which mass phenomena have traditionally been depicted in American literature. This, in combination with a consideration of crowd psychology at the turn of the century and a brief critical survey, is meant to provide necessary context to better understand the way “democratic epiphany” functions and what “Multitude Modernism,” as an aesthetic movement, sought to challenge.

## The Crowd as Contagion: Depictions in Classic American Literature

Those familiar with the American literary cannon may, at this point, begin to sift and sort through hazily recollected crowd scenes: Ahab's crew fanatically hunting the White Whale, Colonel Sherburn fending off a riotous lynch mob, Poe's indistinctive Man of the Crowd, defined only by his "genius of deep crime" (396) [See **Figure 2**]. Indeed, a survey of what many categorize as "classic" American literature would habitually find "the crowd" portrayed as an unruly mob, or what Emerson more eloquently calls, "an emblem of unreason, mere muscular and nervous motion" (437-8). With the exception of Whitman, crowds in these works are not depicted as liberating forces, but groups loyal "to authority and willin[g] to pursue antidemocratic ends" (Mills 12).<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most salient example of the classic American "crowd scene" comes in Hawthorne's haunting 1832 short story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." The chilling tale follows the meanderings of a strapping, curly-haired youth named Robin, a country bumpkin of sorts who travels to a New England city to seek his uncle Major Molineux's employ. After a tireless night of searching amongst the townsfolk, Robin stops to rest on the steps of a church. Before drifting off to sleep, Robin is

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<sup>16</sup> I intend to take up a fuller discussion of Whitman at a later time. However, I will mention in this brief aside that Walt Whitman occupies a rather precarious place in crowd studies devoted explicitly to American literature. Some scholars, such as Larzer Ziff (1982), contend Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* models an ingenious linguistic form which resolves the individual/ crowd paradox. Others, such as Mary Esteve (2003), questions Whitman's true political intentions, arguing "Whitman's decades-long poetic project" is devoted to "envisioning democracy as something thoroughly to relish more than to recommend, to adore more than to respect" (27). Still others, such as Nicholas Mills (1986), choose not to speak about Whitman at all, citing the poet's crowd scenes as blandly apolitical, merely "the crowd in general or the crowding of mass society," or "casual crowds" (8).

abruptly stirred “as if a dream had broken forth from some feverish brain” by a “multitude of rioters” who drag his uncle, smothered in tar and feathers, through the cobblestone streets (269). The insurgent throng is led by a devilish figure on horseback, a shadowy creature who appears like “war personified; the red of one cheek was an emblem of fire and sword; the blackness of the other betokened the mourning that attempts them” (269) [See **Figure 3**]. Instead of aiding his tormented uncle or attempting to stop the procession, Robin quickly falls prey to the “contagion... spreading among the multitude,” infecting him with “a sort of mental inebriety” (271). In a flare of rapturous insanity, Robin bellows “forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street” causing “every man [to shake] his sides,” to “empt[y] his lungs” (272). Yet, as soon as Robin’s hallucinatory experience crests in this collective scream, the crowd moves on, dispersing into the night, leaving only the “silent street behind” (272).

Echoing the dangers of what Tocqueville termed “tyranny of the majority,” the wicked mass (revealed to be the local denizens Robin had previously visited) exemplifies what Nicola Paladin has recently called “Hawthorne’s preoccupation for the collective irrationality and bestiality that can take control of the actions of the mob” (156). Far more frightening than the “mighty stream of people,” or “the shrill voices,” or even the split-faced devil on horseback, is the crowd’s supernatural magnetism, it’s transmissible “contagion” of irrationality.<sup>17</sup> Under the influence of this

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<sup>17</sup> Hawthorne would refine this unnatural draw to the crowd almost two decades later with his publication of *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). While watching a parade flow through the town square, Clifford Pyncheon reflects: “The spectator feels it to be fool’s play, when he can distinguish the tedious common-place of each man’s visage... and the dust on the back of his coat. In order to become majestic, it should be viewed from some vantage-point, as it rolls its

strange malady, the autonomous, self-determining subject becomes but one of the horde—a homogenous entity divorced entirely from reason. To 19<sup>th</sup> century American thinkers and authors concerned with humankind’s perfectibility through intellect (Emerson), or, alternatively, the preservation of an enlightened ruling class (Poe and Hawthorne), the crowd’s threat to tear both asunder represents an untenable “abandoning [of] liberalism,” a manifest dissolution of the “political-liberal agent” upon which American representative democracy is built (Esteve 3, 4).<sup>18</sup> It is this understanding of mass phenomena that informs Mills’ astute and unsettling contention that in classic American literature “democratic men are the enemy of democratic man” (12).<sup>19</sup>

If Mills’ observation is to be believed, it usefully foregrounds the growth of “crowd psychology” some fifty years later at the turn of the century. That these two developments are related, if not directly linked, is strengthened by American sociologist Edward Ross’s distinctly literary reference in his 1897 essay for *Popular Science Monthly*, “The Mob Mind.” In a “good democracy,” Ross proclaims, “blind

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slow and long array through the centre of a wide plain, or the stateliest public square of a city... it melts all the petty personalities, of which is made up, into one broad mass of existence—one great life—one collected body of mankind... a mighty river of life, massive in its tide, and black with mystery, and, out of its depths, calling to the kindred depth within him... It might so fascinate him, that he would hardly be restrained from plunging into the surging stream of human sympathies... Had Clifford attained the balcony, he would probably have leaped into the street” (165-66)

<sup>18</sup> See Mill’s *The Crowd in American Literature* (1986) pg. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Mills elaborates this point later in the text. “There was,” he explicates, “no getting around the fact that, in a nation committed to majority rule, the majority crowd constituted a unique, potentially cannibalistic menace... in America the individualism and egalitarianism they most admired were safest when political action stayed at a minimum (76).

imitation can never take the place of individual effort to weigh and judge... We must hold always to a sage *Emersonian individualism*, that...shall brace men to stand against the rush of the mass” (italics added, 398). But if Ross’s reliance on a conception of Emersonian individualism is a perpetuation of 19<sup>th</sup> century American social thought, it is equally a harbinger of its pending cessation. The need to “stand against the rush of the mass” reads not so much as a prescription but as a plea, for even those social scientists most concerned with the dangers of mass movements were soon forced to concede the new century would be the “Era of Crowds” (Le Bon X).

### **Of Microbes and Discharges, Crowd Psychology in the Era of Crowds**

Indeed, the “Era of Crowds” could be said to start with the publication of the study that coined the phrase. Written in 1895 and translated into English in 1897, Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* has remained the most-cited theorization of “crowd psychology.” Le Bon’s groundbreaking text was among the first to hypothesize that when “individuals are gathered together in a crowd,” each person’s consciousness uniformly becomes integrated into “a collective mind” (iii, 2). This “collective mind,” in turn, forces the entirety of the group to “feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation,” transfiguring the mass into a composite “single being” (4). For Le Bon, the coming “Era of Crowds” would not only be an epoch of certain unrest, but “one of the last stages of Western civilization” which would devolve into “a barbarian phase” (xii-xiii).

Similar to the concerns raised by Hawthorne in “My Kinsman, Major

Molineux,” Le Bon’s crowd is presented as both contagious and dangerous, mysteriously “weakening” the “intellectual aptitudes of individuals,” and diminishing their unique sense of “individuality” (6). Even “distinguished men of learning” can fall victim, powerless to the crowd-mind’s imbecilic yet potent craving for conformity (17).<sup>20</sup> Like Hawthorne’s “contagion,” Le Bon describes crowds as “microbes” which “hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies,” threatening the “downfall” of “civilization” itself (xiii). Moreover, both Le Bon and Hawthorne contend the crowd is susceptible to manipulation by a single, charismatic figure. In the case of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” the devil on horseback is prominently featured at the crowd’s head. Though some form of sorcery or persuasion, the mounted demon has elevated itself to become the de facto leader, a solitary individual through whom, like a lightning rod, the parade’s hysteria is conducted. Le Bon voices a similar apprehension to the powers of this captivating leader, noting:

The most careful observations seem to prove that an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself—either in consequence of the magnetic influence given out by the crowd, or from some other cause of which we are ignorant—in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer... All feelings and thoughts are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer (7).

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<sup>20</sup> According to Le Bon, the crowd can, therefore, never “accomplish acts demanding a high degree of intelligence... it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accumulated” (6).

The importance of this “hypnotizer” introduces a curious incongruity. The crowd as collective is made submissive to the will of an individual, and, conversely, the individual comes to embody the anarchic spirit of the mass. After all, the violence witnessed and insanity felt by Robin is made manifest, quite literally, by the figure of a devil. However, neither Hawthorne nor Le Bon make clear how the hypnotizer is able to repel the crowd’s inebriating spell. No clarification is offered as to whether this hypnotizer is in command of his rational faculties, or, like the others, subservient to the mass’s appetites. Is the hypnotizer a product of the crowd or its leader? A tyrant or a puppet? The issue is never resolved, though it does for Hawthorne and Le Bon blur the lines of distinction between individual and mass. Through some preternatural osmosis, the crowd and hypnotizer are presented as interrelated if not symbiotic parts forming a larger, destructive whole.

*The Crowd* would influence an entire movement of sociopolitical treatises purporting to analyze the “collective mind,” including Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1906), Graham Wallas’s *Human Nature in Politics* (1908), Wilfred Trotter’s *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1916), William McDougall’s *The Group Mind* (1920), and Sigmund Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Ego* (1921). Though riddled with the varieties of disturbing nationalism and chauvinism (Le Bon frequently relies on racial and gender stereotypes) that would continue to afflict the social sciences for years to come, *The Crowd* proved equally significant to modernist craft. As Michael Tranter has persuasively argued, Le Bon’s described hypothesis on crowd cogitation “should seem uncanny to literary critics, because it sounds as if he were describing modernist literary techniques” (2). Fixated on the crowd’s irrationality and

reliance on images, Le Bon's descriptions do bear remarkable similarity to the modernist techniques of montage and stream of consciousness:

A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first. We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of the imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between subjective and the objective... Such is always the mechanism of... collective hallucinations. (Le Bon 15)

Eleven years after *The Crowd's* initial publication, Sorel would add to Le Bon's "fantastic succession of ideas," proposing this barrage of images could be channeled through "myths." Through a clever employment of mythic narratives—in Sorel's case the myth of the all-powerful "general strike"—the crowd's inherent power could potentially be directed towards a greater purpose, even leveraged for sustained revolutionary action. However, Sorel's anticapitalistic notion of "general strike," though formative for anarcho-syndicalism thought, bears less literary-historical importance than his tacit agreement with Le Bon's theory of "collective hallucination." Accepted as a kind of empirical truth, "collective hallucination" would find its way into modernist literature, just as both *The Crowd* and *Reflections of*

*Violence* found its way in many modernist reading circles.<sup>21</sup>

Before moving on from crowd psychology, I would be remiss not to mention Elias Canetti's seminal *Crowds and Power* (1960). Though published more than six decades after *The Crowd*, Canetti's lengthy work stands as a useful bookend to the aforementioned texts on crowd theory, also, rather tellingly, capping the period commonly accepted as literary modernism. As such, Canetti's work may prove particularly helpful to our investigation, not only for its inventive concepts, but for the modernist conclusions informing their very structure. In other words, if there was any change in the way crowds were perceived to function during the modernist era, Canetti's text bares the etched traces of its shift.<sup>22</sup>

Canetti, the 1981 Nobel Prize winner for literature, identifies the four essential attributes of the crowd: the first is that all crowds desire growth, the second is that there is equality within the crowd, the third is that the crowd desires density, and lastly, that the crowd needs direction (29). Like Le Bon, Canetti defines crowds as gatherings of individuals usually formed rapidly and with little forethought:

suddenly there where there was nothing before, [the crowd is] a mysterious and universal phenomenon. A few people may have been standing together—five, ten or twelve, not more; nothing has been announced, nothing is expected. Suddenly everywhere is black with people and more and more come streaming from all sides as though

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<sup>21</sup> See Tranter, pg. 2.

<sup>22</sup> For a history on “crowd psychology,” see J.S. McClelland's *The Crowd and the Mob* (1989)

streets had only one direction. (16)

Both Le Bon and Canetti also see crowds as powerful and possibly dangerous, subject to the whims of conjured passions. Canetti asserts, “[t]he destructiveness of the crowd is often mentioned as its most conspicuous quality,” adding, “the crowd particularly likes destroying houses and objects: breakable objects like window panes, mirrors, pictures, and crockery”(49).<sup>23</sup> However, unlike Le Bon, Canetti sees the crowd’s passions not as a liquidation of reason, but as the embrace of profounder emotion—an ecstatic expression of absolute equality. According to Canetti, even a crowd’s destructive potential is a consequence not of its compulsory rejection of rationality, but of the need to destroy “images... of a hierarchy which is no longer recognized” (19). In fact, it is this turn to the coequal that sets Canetti’s text apart from its predecessors, making *Crowds and Power*, in the words of Benjamin West, “generally regarded as the most authoritative work on the topic of crowds and crowd psychology” (32).<sup>24</sup>

Central to Canetti’s thesis is his concept of “discharge,” or “the moment when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal” (17). Canetti elaborates, “[i]t is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than another that people become a crowd” (17). However, Canetti is quick to critique the discharge’s utopian quality, comparing its elation to that of an “illusion” (18). For

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<sup>23</sup> Canetti mentions the crowd may sometimes even mutate into a pack “out for killing” with “unsurpassed intensity” (17).

<sup>24</sup> Canetti’s work would go on to influence a generation “crowd studies,” including the works of E.J. Hobsbawm (1971), E.P. Thompson (1971), George Rudé (1972), Pauline Maier (1972), Gordon Wood (1972), and Alfred Young (1976).

“people who suddenly feel equal,” the experience is evanescent, fully expired when each “return to their separate houses” and “keep their possession and their names” (18). As one reads Canetti’s work, the language used to describe his theory of discharge shimmers with lament. The collective possibility realized in a moment of discharge is over as quickly as it flashes, a phantom “illusion” that dissolves from one’s grasp. There is, in Canetti’s beautifully written lines, a palpable hope turned inside out, a buoyant nostalgia for a time and moment never to return. And yet, it is exactly this tender bathos coaxed from Canetti’s words that delineates the contours of our sought-after “shift.” For Canetti in 1960, the crowd’s primary function has somehow changed from a descent into base illogic into a transient materialization of social equivalence. In noticing this evident metamorphosis, one must ask, what happened in the years between Le Bon’s *The Crowd* and Canetti’s *Crowds and Power* to cause this transference? What sociocultural movement pushed the needle on the barometer from destructive mob to coequal collective? Where do we look? And how do these hypotheses play into our understanding of the crowd’s relationship to equality today?

### **“These Diverse Vectors of Consideration”: Essential Critical Texts**

With the almost ubiquitous presence of crowd scenes in American literature—indeed, Mary Esteve has claimed the “list of crowd representations verges on endless”—I find myself surprised, if not shocked, by the lack of critical discussion devoted explicitly to this subject (2). Many of the literary studies devoted to “the crowd” have already been mentioned either directly or through reference. This

regrettable lack of attention has, at times, been variously blamed on the fetishization of individualism in American literature, or on collectivism's theoretical naivete—too attached to a bygone sentimentalism for the Popular Front. It may also be, in the end, that writing about mass expression in literature—particularly fiction—is to inadvisably pick a fight with an unyielding paradox. As demonstrated in our discussion of Hawthorne, fiction has, by and large, remained moored to (perhaps even tailor-made for) the perspective of an individual subject. The “collective novel,” if ever there was one, has not caught on.<sup>25</sup>

Of the few studies written on the topic, perhaps the best and earliest consideration of the crowd's relationship to modernist fiction is Nicolaus Mills' *The Crowd In American Literature* (1986). Slim in profile yet extensive in its considerations, Mills' study examines American literature from the American Revolution through the early 1960s. Though by no means a thorough account of the crowd's appearances in almost two hundred years of American letters, Mills' monograph does present a valuable critical alternative to the many formative works purporting to offer a unified theory of American literature. Mills' stated “aim” for his investigation is simple in concept, attempting to “show what happens when the crowds of American literature with their multiple associations challenge the hegemony of the pastoral and timeless images traditionally used to define the meaning of America” (13). Conversing directly with influential works like Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), R.W.B. Lewis' *The American Adam* (1955), and Leo Marx's *The Machine in*

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<sup>25</sup> See Barbara Foley's discussion of the “collective novel” in her 1994 book *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletariat Fiction*.

*the Garden* (1964), Mills encourages his reader to view “American democracy as a collective process epitomized by men in flux, not merely a body of institutions or a state of mind symbolized by an Adamic figure alone in nature” (122). While these sweeping Adamic theories of American literature have long since fallen victim to postmodernism’s vengeful hunt for grand narratives, Mills’ call to reconsider American literature from a collectivist vantage point has largely gone unheeded.

Michael Tratner’s 1995 study *Modernism and the Masses* would take a slightly different approach than Mills’ book, instead choosing to apply a consideration of social collectives to canonical British and Irish modernist literature. Tratner’s study is as instructive as it is bold, challenging the common belief that “the modernist era marked a retreat from Victorian concern with social issues into introspection, solipsism, or aesthetic detachment” by defiantly arguing “precisely the opposite” (3). For Tratner, “modernism was an effort to escape the limitations of nineteenth-century individualist conventions and write about distinctively ‘collectivist’ phenomena” (3). Modernism, then, is not a “rejection of mass culture, but rather an effort to produce a mass culture, perhaps for the first time, to produce a culture distinctive to the twentieth century” (2). Accordingly, the innovative textual forms we associate with modernism “emerged out of efforts to write in the idiom of the crowd mind... based on different conceptions of how the masses think” (2). Broadly speaking, Tranter splits these “different conceptions” into two separate ideological currents, one following the proto fascism of Pound and Eliot, and the other following the feminist pluralisms of Wolfe and Joyce. However distinct their political differences, for Tratner, modernisms both left and right of center should be reconceptualized fundamentally as an effort to

“speak the language of the mass unconscious” (9).

Mary Esteve’s *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (2002) would return to an examination of American literature explicitly, extending the trails Mills had blazed sixteen years prior. Slightly narrowing her scope, Esteve analyzes specifically urban crowd scenes from the antebellum period until the 1930s. Where Mills often grounds his analysis in close reading, Esteve sharpens her argument against the whetstone of “political-liberal” theory. Drawing on sources diverse as Gabriel Tarde, William James, and Emmanuel Kant, Esteve considers the crowd in relation to a tradition of Western liberal thought, contending the crowd “made visible the idea of a categorically separate sphere” of experience, a “non-political” space at “the edge of human consciousness” (8). While the crowd comes to embody this “aesthetic mode of being” at the liberal subject’s perceptual limit, for Esteve, such experience remains firmly “commit[ed] to the political requirements of liberal republicanism, whose presupposed citizen possessed self-conscious reason” (8). That is, crowd representations “make visible the reciprocally defining contours of a broadly existing culture of affect and a more narrowly existing, yet... conceptually overarching, sphere of political-liberal reason” (12). Esteves’s theory of the crowd as an embodiment of consciousness’s limit is insightful, providing the conceptual foundations and language for the affective experience crowds seem to elicit. However, Esteve’s declaration that the crowd ultimately reinforces a “commitment to the political requirements of liberal republicanism,” I believe, fails to account to for its ability to also function as a radical alternative. The crowd’s ability to transport the subject to the very affective threshold of the self should not only be understood as a

reification of reason and liberal republicanism (as we have surely seen in Hawthorne), but also, potentially, as a conduit for temporary ontological escape from the logics of capitalist exploitation and liberal republicanism.

The primacy of the political-liberal individual greatly informs Benjamin West's *Crowd Violence in American Modernist Fiction* (2013). In many ways a descendent of the thoughts and theories found in Hawthorne, Emerson, and Poe, West suggests the crowd operates as a kind of mechanism designed to pulverize those who struggle to "self-fashion" a unique identity. This tension, West argues, "is especially foundational in the literature produced by American Modernist writers" (23). Focusing on descriptions of riots and lynchings, West draws attention to crowd violence's importance to American literature as a genre. Though the slightest of nods is made towards the crowd's potential for positive social change, West contends American modernists use descriptions of crowd forces, by and large, as a device to "control and define an individual's identity, often physically maim[ing] and even kill[ing] individuals who insist on self-fashioning an identity independent from the group and the socially constructed normative behaviors that crowds and groups often impose" (29). For West, the crowd in American modernism functions much like the crowd in classic American literature—a steam roller for the unique and individual self. But where Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Poe see the crowd as something of a seductive disease, West conceives of "the crowd" as a bludgeon, swung hard and relentlessly against those who would dare act out against American social norms.

Even in the rather small compendium of essential critical texts devoted explicitly to "the crowd" in American and modern literature, collectivism has been

variously defined as a challenge to the Adamic individual, as the language of modernism, as the limit of conscious experience, and as a violent repudiation of self-fashioning. This study acknowledges these valuable contributions and, to varying degrees, employs them as premises to guide analyses. However, when surveying these diverse vectors of consideration, there appears to be a noticeable omission during collectivism's hey-day in the 1930s and 40s. Though destructive crowd scenes in American literature abound in all periods, there is little attention to the brief time in which "the crowd" was deployed as a vehicle for social revolution, an alternative modality to portray the masses—the poor, people of color, radical leftists—as equally self-aware and insightful as the educated and privileged. This dissertation will attempt to remedy such an oversight. By examining the works of Richard Wright, H.T. Tsiang, and John Steinbeck, my chapters will show the crowd's importance as a site for an existence beyond social and economic persecution. It is high time we turn our attentions to the voices who have been silenced either through critical neglect or scholarly dismissal. I propose we bend our ears to this forgotten literature, and transcribe what shouts back from its pages.

### **“What Is and What Can Be”: Democratic Epiphany and Multitude**

The economic effects of the Great Depression leveled the social playing field to a degree unseen before or since in American history. The underserved who had spent their lives huddled in pitiable “ghetto conglomerates” became models for a newly impoverished nation (Klein 13). For writers and poets who had immigrated and migrated from places as far as China and as close as Missouri, there was an

opportunity to recast American culture into the pluralistic *mélange* it had always promised to be. Reflecting back on these days of social awakening, Alfred Kazin recalls,

What young [ethnic] writers...wanted was to prove the literary value of our experience, to recognize the possibility of art in our own lives, to feel that we have moved the streets, the stockyard, the hiring halls into literature—to show that our radical strength could carry on the experimental impulse of modern literature. (15)

Like their laboring compatriots packed into union halls or jostling with scabs on the picket line, artists of color and their allies would place their faith in the promise of collective action. Thus, literature was fundamentally reconceived as a means to a social end, a cultural tool leveraged to “convert one thing oppressed people have always claim as their own, their bodies, into a strength that can counteract the might of those at the top of society” (Mills 6). Now, in opposition to the individual alone in nature, the aesthetic wellspring from which radical artists would draw came from the crowd and its attendant physicality, clamor, and passions. To adequately address the chaos of their sociopolitical circumstances, these artists would continue to “make it new,” ingeniously forging a modernist aesthetic tempered with collective possibility.

The choice of “democratic epiphany” as the theoretical axis upon which this study turns is informed by leftist interwar writers’ unique emphasis on the collective-as-subject. The appellation “democratic epiphany” is intended to be flexible and multifaceted, drawing in equal parts from the kinetic turbulence of a mass demonstration and the elation spawned by sudden revelation. The term “democracy,”

whether one believes the word can be rescued from its status as a buzzy political slogan, or worse, as a codeword for American nationalism, was chosen with caution. After all, the word “democracy,” and the various parochialisms it harbors, was equally fickle for interwar writers, with H.L. Menken famously quipping in 1926: “I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing” (223). And yet, as in Menken’s day (and still in our present moment) democracy has managed to maintain its deeper significance as a revered social ideal. Even the most dubious leftist political philosophers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004), C. Douglas Lummis (2009), Chantal Mouffe (2009), and Jan Aart Scholte (2014) have not abandoned “democracy,” instead choosing to rescue its legacy from its associations with Western liberal ideology.

Derived from ancient Greek, democracy fuses *demos*—the people—with *kratia*—rule or power. As Lummis has argued, democracy should be understood as, quite simply, “the name of a political form in which the people have the power” and “not the name of any particular arrangement of political or economic institutions” (22). Hardt and Negri define democracy with similar straightforwardness: “the rule of everyone by everyone...without ifs or buts” (*Multitude* 237). However, conceiving democracy purely as the “rule of everyone by everyone,” though “beautiful in theory,” effectively divorces the term from any sociopolitical reality (244-245). The governmental systems of the industrialized West that have long championed their democratic underpinnings, including Great Britain and the United States, fall pitifully short, blocking their political subjects from self-rule through various republican guardrails and state-sanctioned violence. If one is to embrace this simple yet powerful

definition, as I believe artists in the 30s and 40s did, then democracy must be necessarily be reconceived as a paragon, pried from actuality and reimagined as potentiality: “an ideal...not a kind of government, but an end of government; not a historically existing institution, but a historical project” (Lummis 22).

It is not my intention to debate this particular notion of democracy’s practicality or feasibility. Nor will I speak to whether these radical philosophers’ definition of democracy—the rule of everyone by everyone—is even the *correct* definition. What is clear, I hope, is that the concept of democracy is, in some sense, fundamentally idealized. As Hardt and Negri have cited, democracy’s association with the quixotic is essential to its function in modern western political regimes:

The eighteenth-century revolutionaries did not call democracy either the rule of a vanguard party or the rule of elected officials who are occasionally and in limited ways accountable to the multitude. They knew that democracy is a radical, absolute proposition that requires the rule of everyone by everyone. It is also useful to recognize that if the eighteenth-century revolutionaries were utopian, it is simply in the sense that they believed another world was possible. (*Multitude* 307)

It is precisely because of this undisguised utopianism, that democracy, particularly in the context of literature, lends itself towards often being described as sublime or mystical. “If there were a nation of gods,” Rousseau cleverly posits, “it would be governed democratically” (71). Perhaps, then, this comprehension of democracy obliges its literary expression to be articulated through creative experiment, mapping an experience at the very “edge of human consciousness” in the aperture between the

potential and actual—a transcendent space we might call epiphany.

This brings us to the second half our operative terminology. In many ways, epiphany is as expansive as democracy both in concept and application, bound simultaneously to Greek drama, traditions of Christianity, and secular epistemologies. In her study *Literary Epiphany in the Novel* (2012), Sharon Kim defines epiphany as it appears in modern literature as “the revelation of... being” often “attended by the language of spirituality” (2). Though strikingly broad, Kim’s definition provides a serviceable course on which to traverse, bridging “revelation” with notions of the “being” and the “spiritual.” As we will see in the proceeding chapters, “democratic epiphany” often fits Kim’s prescribed profile, heightening a “revelation of...being” into an ecstatic experience.

Like democracy, “epiphany” is gleaned from ancient Greek’s linguistic tradition. Commonly associated with Classical dramas such as Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides* and Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, epiphany’s etymological root *epiphaneia* means “a coming into light or view,” manifested by a deity “showing itself plainly to human eyes” (Liegbregts 252, Kim 7). In the centuries to follow, epiphany was absorbed by Christianity and would come to be associated with the night Christ was said to reveal himself to the traveling Magi.<sup>26</sup> In the New Testament, the word *epiphaneia* is often used in connection with Christ’s second coming as the final manifestation of his divinity (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1,8; Tit. 2:11,13).

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<sup>26</sup> This is also known as the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, the Twelfth Night of Christmas.

Still, epiphany has come to be known, particularly within modernist critical circles, as a transitory moment of secular awakening. Many literary critics (Levin, Hendry, Wolf, and Tigges) have suggested epiphany was remade during modernity into an aesthetic substitute for religion, citing examples in works by William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, W.B. Yeats, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Katherine Mansfield, and James Joyce.<sup>27</sup> Cleverly described as a “lightning strike,” Phillip Wolf contends modernist epiphany was reconceived as “a surprising moment of perceptive intensity,” arising “out of the empirical void” (166-167). During these exalted moments of epiphany “categories of time and space are dissolved” giving way to a new “ontologically different mode of being” (167). On the page, narrative crumbles and gives way to a “structural openness” attuned to “anti-historicist vistas of history” (168-169). As Daniel Schwarz has argued, this liberatory form of literary epiphany was likely meant to bear significance beyond the page, marshaling the reader’s attention “to have her or his own revelatory moment of awareness that [goes] beyond the character’s” (66).

Just as Esteve thinks of the crowd in terms of offering an experience at the limits of human perception, and Canetti describes discharge as one “transcending the limits of [their] own person,” so the modernist epiphany transports its diegetical subject into modes of being outside rational formations such as time, space, and history (20). For modernists attuned to the masses, the crowd and its associations with

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<sup>27</sup> See Harry Levin’s *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (1941), Irene Hendry’s “Joyce’s Epiphanies” (1946), Robert Langbaum’s “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature” (1983), Phillip Wolf’s “‘The Lightning Flash’: Visionary Epiphanies, Suddenness and History in the Later Work of W.B. Yeats” (1999).

pluralism, equality, and democracy not only provides the ideal conditions for an epiphany, but, like a mirror's reflection, becomes the focus of the epiphany itself. Amidst the roil of limbs and bodies, a character's realization that democracy can be leveraged for potential social revolution and absolute liberation effectuates a supernatural experience outside of time, space, history, and logics of oppression, or as Laura Riding describes it, "the collective manifestation of Spirit in the total human substance" (148). Just as the splendid deity is revealed to the Grecian player upon the stage, so the multitude's potentiality is bared to the attentive individual dissolved within the crowd.

My suggested pattern for detection of such democratic epiphanies is but a prototype. By no means exhaustive, it offers but a skeletal diagram to indicate both what a democratic epiphany looks like, and how it functions within the diegesis. My proposed criteria are, though indebted to the many secondary sources discussed above, primarily derived from careful readings of literary texts. In the democratic epiphanies I have examined, three narrative tropes routinely apply. The first is that of "corporeal dislocation." In the moments of epiphany, the individual experiencing said revelation—whom I call the collective individual—is often, paradoxically, in some way adjacent to the body politic, usually floating above, or leading in front. The second is that of "environmental hysteria." During the realized epiphany, the collective individual's surroundings are overtly portrayed as being chaotic, volatile, and atemporal. The last is "visual representations of communal amalgamation." Recalling Le Bon and Canetti, the social collectives surrounding the individual are often portrayed as being surrealistically commingled into a unified being, "one in the

same body” (Canetti 16).

The last order of business is to elucidate my decision to use “the multitude” instead of “the masses,” or “the crowd” when referring to a transcendent collective. After all, many of the aforementioned critical texts use either “the masses” or “the crowd” in their titles (Le Bon, Canetti, Mills, Tratner, Esteve, West). However, as has been suggested by Hardt and Negri, the use of these terminologies runs the risk of blurring the multitude’s vibrant plurality into an featureless muddle. For Hardt and Negri, the masses, the crowd, and the people “fade everyone to gray,” expelling “diversity” and making the population into “one identity” (*Multitude* xiv). The multitude, by contrast, “is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity—different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires” (xiv). The multitude, therefore, is constituted by “all those who work under the rule of capital,” and is able to maintain “multiplicity of all...singular differences” (xiv, 106). Not unlike the internet, the multitude can be “conceived as a network: an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally” (xiii-xiv). In addition to its exquisite design, this useful schema permits reflexive modification, wherein “the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and new relationships can always be added” (xv).

Thinking of multitude as a network begins to conceptually resolve the paradox between the individual (single) and the multitude (the many). By conceiving of each individual as a node entwined within a larger matrix, a subject can be both integrally

of the collective and a distinct entity unto themselves. Hardt and Negri take care to mention the multitude is neither “an identity (like the people) nor uniform (like the masses)” (xv). Instead, the “internal differences of the multitude must discover *the common*,” that is, shared forms of resistance, “that allows them to communicate and act together” (xv).<sup>28</sup> In this way, “democratic epiphany” can be seen as contributing to “the common.” A single node—the collective individual—produces a new and liberatory form of awareness. Like a vital line of programming code, this transcendent intelligence is uploaded to the network to potentially initiate a change in the way the network (or the multitude) as a whole conceives of itself. The collective individual, in their awakening, is both a junction in the larger network, and a independent synapse. Democratic epiphany is therefore constituted by, and exists as, a form of immaterial labor ready to be shared, imbued with revolutionary and liberatory potential. It is, by virtue of being cogitated, already in the network and, thus, already of the multitude.

Indeed, much of the way Hardt and Negri come to think about the multitude bears remarkable similarity to the ways interwar writers describe scenes of democratic epiphany some sixty years earlier. Astonishingly, Hardt and Negri describe mass movements as being realized in “a magical moment...united by a common desire for liberation,” where, in a sudden “glimpse of a future... modern mechanisms of

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<sup>28</sup> “The common,” an essential component to understanding Hardt and Negri’s concept, is first and foremost a form of immaterial labor, that is, an intangible labor product such as information, communication, cooperation, or affect. These forms of intelligence, both subsumed and created, “produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship” (*Multitude* xv). In essence, the veins and nerves that hold the multitude together are these shared forms knowledge, which, in turn, become new knowledge. The common that births new methods and modalities to resist capitalism and structures of oppression “is one strong pillar on which stands the possibility of global democracy” (xvi).

domination would once and for all be destroyed” (*Empire* 42). Existing outside of time and space, the multitude communicates in hypermodern linguistic abstractions, “disconnected images rather than... [a] coherent narrative,” echoing Le Bon, Sorrell, and the environmental hysteria we shall find in the forthcoming chapters (*Multitude* 192). Moreover, Hardt and Negri’s multitude is described as forming a soldered entity, “a fundamentally new kind of body, a common body, a democratic body” composed of a “living flesh that rules itself” (189-190, 100).

Though this study does not accept all of the Hardt and Negri’s premises of what the multitude is and can be (Hardt and Negri take exception to the multitude’s spontaneity), their model offers a helpful conceptual aid for understanding democratic potentiality without reducing the collective to an indistinguishable mass or the manifestation of a single political issue. The diversity and reflexivity of “the multitude” better illuminates the vision of the diverse collective body which can foment a truly inclusive democracy.

In this light, Bulosan’s “Freedom from Want” shines with renewed luster, as his “multitudes” anticipate the insights of Hardt and Negri’s future work. Just as multitude retains the internal diversity of its constituents, so Bulosan demands “all men, whatever their color, race, religion, or estate, should be given equal opportunity.” Just as the multitude exists outside of time and space, so Bulosan conceives his multitudes as being composed of “many strands of fear and hope, that snarl and converge at several points in time and space” (“Freedom”). Just as knowledge is created and shared to stoke revolution, so Bulosan champions “the men reading books, searching in the dark pages of history for the lost word, the key to the mystery of

living peace” (“Freedom”). Perhaps most importantly, Hardt, Negri, and Bulosan all conceive of democracy as an unrealized ideal: “We are the living dream of dead men. We are the living spirit of free men...our march to freedom is not complete” (“Freedom”).

However, my decision to conceive of multitude as a social subject capable of realizing democracy does not mean I will completely excise the use of “the crowd,” “the masses,” “the people,” “throng,” “mob” or other similar terminology used to describe collective phenomena. To do so would be to unnecessarily stress both the English language and the reader’s ear. Moreover, completely substituting these terms would consciously turn a blind eye to the critical studies that have preceded and dedicated their thinking to “the crowd.” Rather, in this study, the crowd, the masses, etc. will be used to describe mass gatherings and human-formed cooperatives in general. Multitude, by contrast, will be used to describe what the crowd can be, or, through democratic epiphany, can be potentially transformed into. *The crowd awoken is the multitude realized.*

I hope to demonstrate the ways both democracy and epiphany can be seen as two sides of a phenomenological coin. And like a coin set spinning atop a table, the faint illusion of the perfect whole, a union of two distinct halves (the people and potential), is made visible for a moment, a luminous realization that through the collective there is possibility. This phantom sphere is multitude. It is simultaneously, for that wonderous moment of turbulence and balance, *what is* and *what can be*.

## **Summary of Chapters**

My first chapter, “Into the Sea of Faces,” considers Richard Wright’s short story “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942). Building on Edward Pavlič’s audacious *Crossroads Modernism* (2002), my argument challenges the established critical consensus that “The Man” is an exhibition of nihilist thought (Brignano, Everette). After fleeing underground from a trio of corrupt police officers, the story’s protagonist, “Daniels,” spies on a church where the mellifluous voices of the choir are described as “melting” and “melding” into one another. He later sneaks onto a balcony overlooking a crowded theatre, where, for a moment, he imagines himself walking above an amalgamated “sea” of faces. The supposed pessimism of the story cannot fully account for Daniel’s compassion for others and the repeated descriptions of synthesis—exemplified by the “melting,” the “melding,” and “sea” of faces. Supported by archival research into Wright’s unpublished essays and ephemera, I read such moments through James Joyce’s concept of “epiphany,” a narratological technique in which an individual is depicted as “dissolving” into, or merging with, their surrounding environment.

In Chapter 2, “But I am a Nut No More,” I examine H.T. Tsiang’s *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) with an eye to American agitprop theater. The novel follows the exploits of Tsiang’s awkward yet compassionate protagonist, “Mr. Nut,” as he wanders the streets of Great Depression-era New York City. Conversing with theatre historian Ilka Saal’s *New Deal Theatre* (2007), my analysis focuses on the climax of the novel where the surrounding public is melded into a single collective and momentarily shepherded to world peace. Though jobless and without a penny to his name, Mr. Nut is mystically transformed into a heroic “Forgotten Man...Little

Man... Average Man, a Worker” who fantastically overthrows the capitalistic “Mr. System” and liberates the homogenized character of “Society.” Self-published and sold by hand in communist committee meetings, *The Hanging on Union Square* not only articulates an ideal non-racist society through the modernist technique of “montage,” but is also an important novel written by an Asian American author more than 30 years before the term “Asian American literature” would be coined.

Chapter 3, “A Man in A Group Isn’t Himself at All” discusses the major works of John Steinbeck from 1936-1945. While navigating *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *Cannery Row* (1945), this chapter’s compass is Steinbeck’s own “Phalanx Theory,” a hypothesis drawn from marine biology postulating an organism in a group is capable of displaying characteristics it would not otherwise as an individual. For humans, this thesis take on greater consequence, as Steinbeck contemplates whether a collective group, whom he referred to as “groupman,” can be steered towards being super-humanly cruel or extraordinarily beneficent. Plotting the ways in which Steinbeck’s notion of “groupman,” evolves over time, I investigate the ways in which the actual described synthesis, the very “phenomenon” itself, adds a new dimension democratic epiphany by exploring the consequences of when collective action fails. This chapter is forthcoming in the *Steinbeck Review*.

Figure 1:



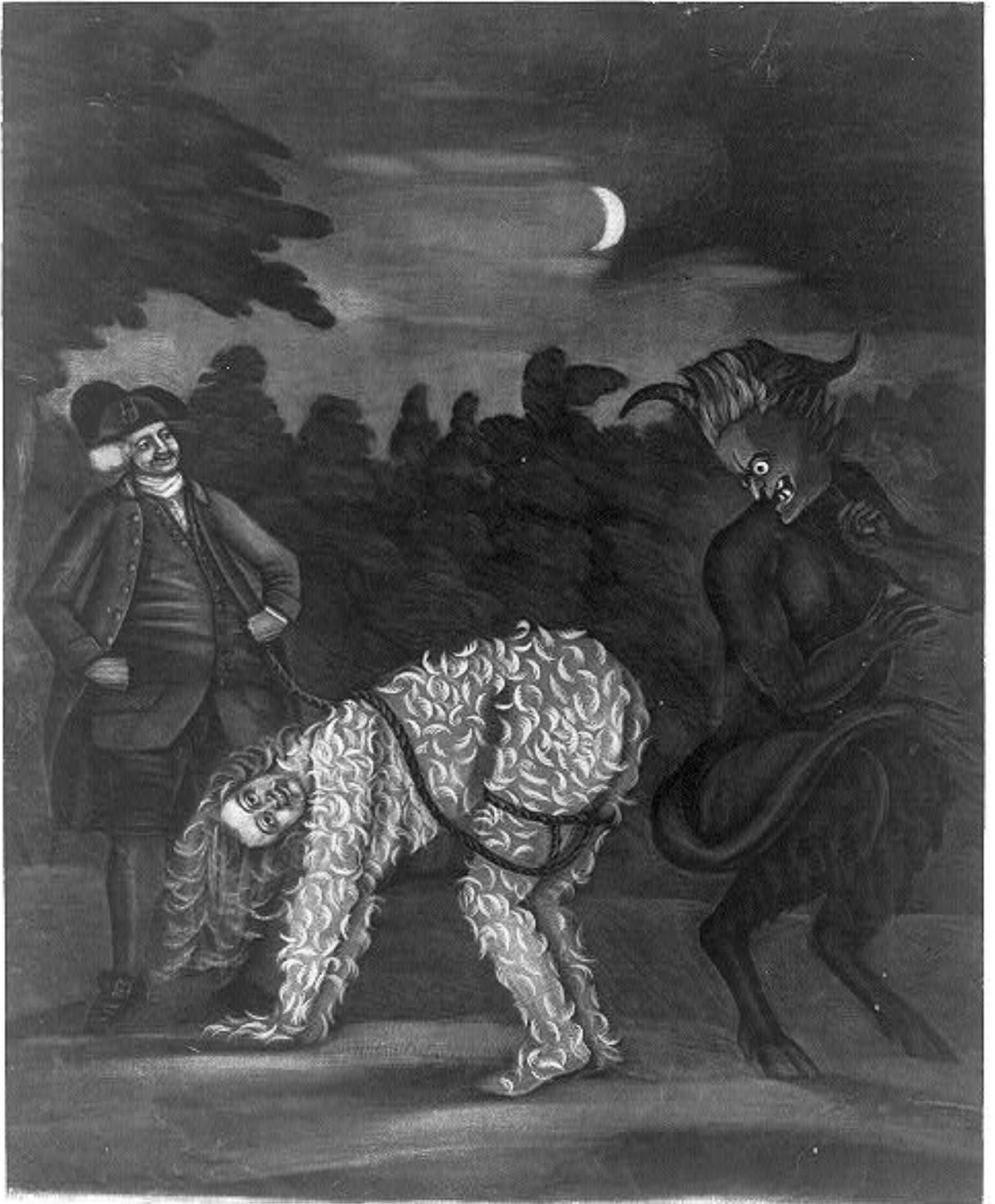
“Freedom From Want,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 1943

**Figure 2:**



Illustration for Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Man of the Crowd" by Harry Clarke (1889-1931), first printed in 1923.

**Figure 3:**



British depiction of a tar and feathering in Boston, Circa 1770s. Library of Congress.

He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.

--James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*

All the will, all the strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people!

--Richard Wright, "Fire and Cloud"

### **"Into the Sea of Faces": Joyce's Epiphany in Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground"**

Conceived and assembled during Richard Wright's exile in Paris, *Eight Men* was published in 1961, the first of three works to be released after Wright's untimely death. By far the longest piece in the short-story collection (indeed, many refer to it as a novella), "The Man Who Lived Underground" follows its ill-fated protagonist, Fred Daniels, as he flees to the sewers to escape a false murder charge leveled by a trio of corrupt police officers.<sup>29</sup> As time passes in the dark of the subterranean causeways, Daniels's exile evolves into a journey of self-discovery that eventually leads to his tragic demise. Daniels's parallel descents below ground and into the self have made "The Man Who Lived Underground" especially fertile ground for critics to explore the

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Fabre takes care to identify the story as "a novella of forty-six pages rather than a novel," while Mildred W. Everette and Susan Neal Mayberry, respectively, call it a "lengthy short story," and a "paradoxically *long* short story" (Fabre 12, Everette 318, Mayberry 71).

intersection between Freudian psychoanalysis, Platonism, naturalism, existentialism, and modernist reclusion. However, much of the critical attention surrounding “The Man Who Lived Underground” has failed to sufficiently account for what seem like the most bizarre characteristics of the piece—the repeated, often surrealistic moments of described synthesis. For example, when Daniels spies on a basement church, the mellifluous voices of a black choir are described as “melting” and “melding” into one another. In another scene, Daniels imagines himself stepping off a balcony above a crowded theater and walking across an amalgamated “sea” of faces. I propose reading such odd moments of union through the modernist literary techniques of James Joyce. Though Wright critics typically limit Joyce’s influence to “apprentice works” such as *Tarbaby’s Dawn* and *Lawd Today!*, I contend Joyce’s presence is alive and well in “The Man Who Lived Underground.”<sup>30</sup> I believe Joyce’s use of “epiphany,” a narratological technique in which an individual is often depicted as coalescing with the multitudes, provides the structural pattern for what Wright is describing during these moments of fusion.

### **“An Outburst of Generosity”: Michel Fabre’s Case for “The Man Who Lived Underground”**

To find the seeds of what would flower into the “The Man Who Lived Underground,” one only need dig into the brittle pages of an August 1941 issue of

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<sup>30</sup> In his essay, “Richard Wright, Community, and the French Connection,” Eugene Miller argues Henry Barbusse’s “influence on Wright... lasted longer than did, say, Stein or Joyce’s, as these latter appear in such apprentice works as *Tarbaby’s Dawn* and *Lawd Today!* (267).

*True Detective*, a popular pulp magazine widely circulated during the interwar years.<sup>31</sup> Wright was enthralled with “The Crime Hollywood Couldn’t Believe,” a story written by Hal Fletcher based on a first-hand account of Lt. C. W. Gains of the Los Angeles Police Department. On a chilly November night in 1931, the story reads, the local manager of the Owl Drug Company closed shop and secured eleven thousand dollars in the store’s private safe. Upon inspection the following morning, the money was gone—seemingly vanished into thin air. There was no sign of burglary, no evidence of forced entry. Two weeks later, the strongbox from a nearby clothing store was looted in a similar, mysterious fashion. Again, there was no evidence to be found, no leads to be followed. In the coming months, jewels, food, books, and other goods disappeared from the neighborhood without a trace. In one instance, the manager of the Baker Shoe Company, “who had left two thousand dollars and twenty-six cents in his safe...found two thousand dollars there, but no sign of the twenty-six cents” (Fabre 10). The case remained unsolved until the following year when, during his watch, a policeman witnessed a human arm wriggle through a small opening in the floor of a local store. The disembodied limb, fingers spread and searching, was attempting to reach for a release latch on the trapdoor to the basement. The startled officer was not able to apprehend the culprit, but managed to find the thief’s underground hideout furnished with blankets, food, and a cache of booze. Finally, in February of 1933, the police arrested Herbert C. Wright, a thirty-three year old Caucasian man who “decided to solve his problem of unemployment by building his world [in an] underground

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<sup>31</sup> For Wright’s copy see The Richard Wright Papers at Yale’s Beinecke Library, call number: JWJ MSS 3 Box 120

universe” (11). The man “did not harbor any particular grudge against society,” the magazine details, “and was perfectly sane” (11).

Wright was so captivated by the story that on October 27, 1941, he asked the governor of California for Herbert Wright’s record, “prisoner number 55836” (11).<sup>32</sup> Throughout the fall of 1941, Wright crafted a fictionalized account of his like-named counterpart, feverishly producing 150 pages of what was then planned to be a complete novel.<sup>33</sup> The first seventy typewritten pages (excised before initial publication) have remained unpublished.<sup>34</sup> In the spring of 1942, Wright’s friend Kerker Quinn published two ten-page sections in *Accent* [See Figure 4]. In April of 1944, the piece would be published as a forty-six page novella in Edwin Seaver’s anthology *Cross Section*, again in *Stag* in October of 1956 [See Figure 5], and, eventually, as a sixty-five page story in *Eight Men* (1961).

“The Man Who Lived Underground” would receive mixed reviews, with many reading Daniels’s descent as a clumsy “denunciation of the white race” (12). Perhaps best summed up by Sterling North’s comments in the *Chicago Sun*, critics found Wright’s story to be a lesser iteration of his already wildly successful *Native Son* (1940): “As an enthusiastic Wright fan of several years standing, I may perhaps be

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<sup>32</sup> In an early article analyzing “The Man Who Lived Underground,” J.F. Gounard suggests that Wright likely “noted a parallel between Herbert C. Wright’s dilemma and the problems faced by the Black man in American society. Herbert Wright, who was a white man, was looking for a place in a society that rejected his attempts to establish himself as a responsible citizen” (381).

<sup>33</sup> In his introduction to *Eight Men*, Paul Gilroy notes “The Man Who Lived Underground” is a “dazzling fragment from a longer work that had been rejected by Wright’s original publisher” (Gilroy xvii).

<sup>34</sup> These too, can be found in the Beinecke’s Richard Wright Papers: box 41, f. 531-549.

permitted to point out that Wright is still doing variations on the same theme and is dangerously near J. Farrell's cul de sac" (*Chicago Sun*, June 4, 1944 [sec. 5, p.2]).

Of late, "The Man Who Lived Underground" has received something of a minor return into the critical spotlight with the Spring 2019 volume of *Studies in the Novel* featuring a full reprint of Michel Fabre's "radical" 1971 essay "Richard Wright: The Man Who Lived Underground." As Walton Muyumba points out in his introduction to the feature, Fabre's essay, published eleven years after Wright's death, functions not only as an important exploration of a "famous and influential novella," but stands as a necessary rebuttal to the ruthless "beating" Wright's literary "reputation took in the '60s/ early 70's" for being "insufficiently political, not radical enough to escape the margin" (6-7). This supposed paucity in political commitment was, at the time, only made worse by the now infamous remarks made by James Baldwin and an older, decidedly crankier, Ralph Ellison. Baldwin's rebuke of Bigger Thomas as "accept[ing] a theology that denies him life" in conjunction with Ellison's censure for Wright's privileging a white conception of "the Negro's reality" unquestionably befouled the larger critical atmosphere surrounding Wright's literary oeuvre (Baldwin 23, Ellison "The World and the Jug" 114).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the prominent Black Arts Movement poet Etheridge Knight went so far as to argue that Wright gave up the political fight for "a unified black literary political agenda" in favor of

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<sup>35</sup> It must be added, as Muyumba notes in his introduction, that both Baldwin and Ellison "gained literary entrée based on [Wright's] largesse (7). For further discussion about Baldwin attacks on Wright, see Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1955), "Many Thousands Gone" (1955), and "Alas Poor Richard" (1961). For Ellison, see "Remembering Richard Wright" (1961) and "The World and the Jug" (1963).

retreating to Paris to seek “the opiate of Universalism” (Muyumba 6, Knight 38). Seemingly “narcotized,” Knight continues, Wright’s “voice and vision” became “weak, vague, misdirected” (38). Thus, Fabre’s essay, Muyumba insists, is made all the more important when considered in relation to these hostile contexts. Fabre takes great pains to correct what he sees as a continual (and unfair) misreading of the “The Man Who Lived Underground,” drawing attention to the story’s structural complexities, philosophic thought, humanism, and modernist experimentation.<sup>36</sup> In Muyumba’s estimation, “Richard Wright: The Man Who Lived Underground” provided a necessary refutation and “challeng[e to] the critical status quo,” rescuing the story from misapprehension and cementing Wright as “a commanding Western cultural figure” (6).<sup>37</sup> Muyumba’s claim for the essay’s impact, though grandiose, is essentially accurate as criticism surrounding “The Man Who Lived Underground” has since expanded and evolved in all directions. The story has been variously interpreted as a treatise on the falsity of the American dream (Everette 1974), a modern rendition of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (McNallie 1977), a thesis on racial transcendence (Gounard 1978), a symbolic retelling of the fall of man (Mayberry 1989), both naturalist and existentialist parable (Watkins 1989), a meditation on death and rebirth (Bryant 1990), an adaptation of Henry Barbusse’s *The Inferno* (Miller 1995), an upending of phenomenological bipolarity (Young 2001), a commentary on the

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<sup>36</sup> Of the last point, Fabre writes: “The shift between what is real and what is imaginary lasts so long we no longer know if reality actually exists or if it is reducible to a succession of appearances” (21).

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Miller notes Michel Fabre’s “thorough and admirable attention revived an interest in Wright when he was out of vogue in American literary study” (265).

alienation of the oppressed (Cappetti 2001), and a textual expression of film noir aesthetics (Istomina 2016).

Whatever influence Fabre's 1971 essay may or may not have had on Wright's reputation and future criticism, subsequent studies have often credited the story itself, with its "splendid polyphony of meanings and its balanced precision," as "far and away the best piece of short fiction that Wright ever composed" (Fabre 22, Bryant 378).<sup>38</sup> However skeptical a critic might be of such gushing praise, Fabre does make a convincing case for the importance of "The Man Who Lived Underground," tracing its interconnection to the many works Wright would produce during his creative apex.<sup>39</sup> Fabre notes:

The short story is...situated in the heart of a culminating period in Wright's production, between the adaptation of *Native Son* and the composition of the unpublished novel *Black Hope* and *Twelve Million Black Voices* on the one hand, and the birth of *Black Boy* on the other. All of these undertakings were more or less intermingled in Wright's mind at that time, and we can find slight or strong traces of these preoccupations in ["The Man Who Lived Underground"]. (13)

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<sup>38</sup> One might see the direct influence of Fabre's defense in Paul Gilroy's important *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). In addition to citing Fabre directly, Gilroy too sees Wright as misunderstood, chastising earlier critics for critiquing Wright's supposed "betrayal of his authenticity" (18).

<sup>39</sup> Despite scholars such as Earl V. Bryant's contention that "The Man Who Lived Underground" has "received the greatest amount of critical attention and praise," the story has still received less attention than much of Wright's major work (378). On this score, Carla Cappetti notes: the novella is still "not known as a classic of American modernism, despite the numerous scholars who have recognized the great artistic merit of the novella" (42).

The story borrows and adapts many elements found throughout Wright's other master works: evading the police, the psychological stress of being hunted, the ubiquity of racial oppression, and, as Wright would exquisitely express in *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), the desire to foment social change to better "expand the realm of collectivity and unity" (Ghasemi 84).<sup>40</sup>

Fabre's insistence on the story's unifying social message is perhaps the essay's most striking feature, contradicting many prior characterizations of "The Man Who lived Underground" as a vicious "study in meaninglessness" (Everette 326).<sup>41</sup> "Instead of revenge," Fabre writes, Daniels approaches "his tormentors in an outburst of generosity" (13). Though the story is often read as a reflection of Kierkegaardian dread and/or solipsistic withdrawal, Fabre asserts "it is impossible to create *ex nihilo*, to attain an independent asocial perspective; the individual cannot elude his human and cultural heritage, since the metaphysical reality of the human condition seems to deny solitary existence" (15). In essence, Fabre argues Daniels should be read as an "Everyman," born again in the "maternal womb" of the sewer, "recreated, charged with a new force, and then ejected" to become "a member of the human family" (16, 17).<sup>42</sup> "The Man Who lived Underground," Fabre continues, "is related to *No Exit*,"

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<sup>40</sup> For more on *12 Million Black Voices* and "collectivity," see Mehdi Ghasemi's "An Equation of Collectivity: We + You in Richard Wright's '12 Million Black Voices,'" *Mosaic* Vol. 51 Issue 1 (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Everette's claim echoes Dan McCall's *The Example of Richard Wright* (1969) which argues Wright came to view America "not the name of a country," but the "name of a mental illness" (195).

<sup>42</sup> McCall makes a similar pronouncement in calling Daniels "Everyblackman" (167). The influence of Fabre's essay may be further evinced by future articles' (re)use of its language. For example, in her essay "Richard Wright's Allegory of the Cave: 'The Man Who Lived

except that “Sartre’s words ‘Hell is others’ are literally reversed, since, for Daniels, damnation is the absence of others” (17). Perhaps unintentionally, Fabre’s final thoughts on the story mimic the peculiar and unmistakable call of a seasoned Joycean, suggesting the “hallucinatory” climax of the “The Man” “can be seen as the epiphany of artistic creation” (20).

Before we delve into the intricacies of Joyce’s influence, it will first be beneficial to explore Wright’s expressed affinity for modernist technique as a vehicle for expressing a collective affect, or what Wright himself has called an “emotional expression of group-feeling” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 101). For this, we turn to three essays composed in the formative years leading to the publication of his major works: “Avant Garde Writing” (1935), “Personalism” (circa 1935), and “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937).

### **Blueprint for Wright’s Writing: Modernism and the Masses**

In an unpublished essay written in 1935, Wright emphasizes the importance for artists to “break the old modes of artistic expression and fashion new and more appropriate ones,” adding such new modes of expression must necessarily “espouse a new way of seeing life, a new way of knowing life, a new way of feeling life, and a new way of apprehending the social reality of the objective world” (“Avant Garde”).<sup>43</sup>

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Underground,” Robin McNallie refers to the sewer as a “womb in which Daniels begins a new and embryonic existence” (82). Earle V. Bryant’s wonderful essay “The Transfiguration of Personality in Wright’s ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’” follows suit, noting the sewer “is, in short, as much womb as it is tomb” (385).

<sup>43</sup> Wright won second prize for “Avant Garde” in a contest sponsored by two magazines, though it was never published.

Aptly titled “Avant Garde Writing,” Wright argues that such techniques must ultimately be in service to expressing the plight of “the broad masses of workers, the farmers and the poverty-stricken sections of the intellectuals” (“Avant Garde”).<sup>44</sup> Sometime during that same year, Wright would write “Personalism,” a kind of “aesthetic manifesto” that theorized a novel “basically made of images... philosophically and emotionally united to such an extent that the unity itself becomes the ‘ruling symbol’ of the work” (Miller 267). For the young and radical Richard Wright, then, such “complex unity...might also be a metaphor for social community” (275). Eugene E. Miller summarizes Wright’s concept in a simple maxim: “Image is to unity as individual is to society; unity of the novel derives organically from separate images, as society derives organically from the individuals that physically constitute it” (267).<sup>45</sup> The ideas expressed in “Personalism,” which at times advocated for “personal protest” in terms of the “individual”—no doubt echoing Whitman’s 1871 essay of the same name—were seen by leftist literary gatekeepers as “heretical” and, thus, not published in leftist periodicals such as *New Masses* or *Anvil* (Webb 138, Aaron 43)<sup>46</sup>

These ideas would be developed and refined three years later in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in a short-lived periodical Wright himself helped establish,

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<sup>44</sup> For a draft of “Avant Garde,” see box 5, folder 73 in the Richard Wright Papers at Yale’s Beinecke library.

<sup>45</sup> For Wright’s essay “Personalism,” see box 6, folder 131 in the Richard Wright Papers at Yale’s Beinecke library.

<sup>46</sup> Whitman’s “Personalism” (1868) was published in *The Galaxy* as one installment of a planned trilogy. The three essays, together, would become *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

*New Challenge*. In the essay, Wright calls for an “emphasis upon... experiment” with its component “complexity [and] strangeness” (“Blueprint” 98, 103). The writing itself cannot be “a carbon copy of reality,” but must “be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom” (105, 104). The need to articulate the struggle of the working poor becomes the need to “create a more intimate and yet more profoundly social system of artistic communication between [artists] and their people” (99).

For the careful reader, the highly influential “Blueprint for Negro Writing” operates as a kind of “blueprint” for the future evolution of Wright’s thought and artistic praxis. Meandering and meditative, the essay outlines philosophies that would soon materialize in Wright’s fiction, particularly the need to vibrantly express the larger “hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere” (104). There is, in these formative essays, a marked turn towards embracing collectivity, not just in producing cooperative work but in positing the “emotional expression of group-feeling” that would be voiced in “Fire and Cloud,” (1938), *Native Son*, *12 Million Black Voices*, and “The Man Who Lived Underground” (104). Though much of this desire for transcendental unity has been explained away as a symptom of Wright’s juvenile romance with Marxism, the relationship between modernist technique and collective affect appear to occupy a space distinct from Wright’s political commitments. To be sure, “Blueprint” is steeped in Marxist thought, as Wright explicitly mentions Marxism as offering “the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling... for the Negro writer,” providing a “sense of dignity which no other vision can give” (102). However, Wright does take great pains to separate Marxist doctrine from the

duty of the artist, anticipating his very public disavowal of communism to follow some nine years later in his essay for *The Atlantic*, “I Tried to Be A Communist” (1944). For Wright, even when his relationship with Marxism was at full strength, “Marxism is but the starting point... After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant fresh upon those bones out of his will to live” (102). Wright even goes so far as to include an independent sub-section explicitly devoted to the matter entitled “Autonomy of Craft” (102).

There is, in “Avant Garde Writing,” “Personalism,” and “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” an unmistakable optimism about experimental fiction’s social potential, a buoyant view of society “as something becoming rather than as something fixed” (98-99). A delicate balance is struck between the oppressive social forces that must necessarily be addressed and the possibility of change:

[The writer] may, with disgust and revulsion... depict the horrors of capitalism encroaching upon the human being. Or he may, with hope and passion... depict the faint stirrings of a new and emerging life... the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence. (102)

Wright continues this train of thought by bridging such “hope and passion” with a usable inheritance for the black writer, where, in addition to negro folklore, “Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway and Anderson” must provide the “grist for [the artist’s] mill, no matter how farfetched they may seem” (103).

Predictably, Wright’s artistic theses bear remarkable similarity to those of Joyce. Consider, for example, Wright’s call for a “complex unity.” In *Ulysses on the Liffey* (1972), the inimitable Richard Ellmann remarks that *Ulysses*’s design “proves to

be...elaborate...yet beautifully simple in its purport” (xvii). Indeed, Miller’s summation of Wright’s “aesthetic manifesto” calling for literature to be “philosophically and emotionally united” pulses on the same frequency as Joyce’s own comments to Carlo Linati.<sup>47</sup> In an addendum to an explanatory diagram, Joyce proclaims: “My intention is... to allow each adventure (that is, every hour, every organ, every art being interconnected inter-related in the somatic scheme of the whole) to condition and even to create its own technique” (Ellmann xvi, *Selected Letters* 271).<sup>48</sup> The Linati schema was a precursor to the now “famous table of colours, techniques, organs” that would appear later in Stuart Gilbert’s *James Joyce’s Ulysses: A Study* (1930). That Wright may have come across a version of the “skeleton key” explaining *Ulysses* is possible, as Gilbert’s book was published and widely distributed in June 1930 by Knopf (271). Wright’s inspection of *Ulysses* itself prior to the composition of these important essays is also plausible, as the American release date was January 25, 1934, about a year prior to his writing of both “Avant Garde Writing” and “Personalism.”<sup>49</sup>

Though Joyce’s footprints track the pages of Wright’s essays and aesthetic

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<sup>48</sup> For the differences between the Linati and Gilbert schemas see the appendix in *Ulysses on the Liffey*. For the letter referenced, see Joyce’s message to Linati dated September 21, 1900 in *Selected Letters*.

<sup>49</sup> Wright may have come across a copy of *Ulysses* prior to its legal American release date. As Kevin Birmingham notes in his *The Most Dangerous Book* (2014), there were many contraband copies of *Ulysses* floating around major American cities, as the masterpiece had been imported from other countries since 1922 (303). *Ulysses*’s release also loosely coincides with Wright’s friendship with Jane Newton and Joyce Gourfain, who both, in the early months of 1935, recommended Wright read the works of James Joyce (*The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* 111).

manifestos, Wright's adaptation of modernist technique has often been overlooked and discounted. Tainted by his (and his artistic era's) commitment to radical leftist politics, Wright's work has been historically categorized by the academy as something distinct from Modernism proper.<sup>50</sup> On this, Alfred Kazin ironically reflects: "Surely the depressed 1930's produced nothing but 'proletarian literature' and other instances of left-wing propaganda?" noting later that a "fashionable critic in the opulent years after 1945 scorned the 1930's as an 'imbecile decade,'" even though the period "saw the best of Faulkner's novels from *The Sound and the Fury* to *The Wild Palms*, Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*... Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*... Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*... Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*" (ix, x).

Michael Denning refines Kazin's sentiments, observing this time in between the hey-day of the High Modernists and Post-Modernism is generally seen as an interregnum... the last hurrah of lost nineteenth-century realism. With few exceptions, we are told, the artists and critics of the left waved the banners of 1848, touting a middlebrow humanist cousin to Stalinist socialist realism. In this story, [this period] appears as a cultural as well as a political failure; if the era belonged to the modernists, and the future—the American Century after the war—belonged to a still unnamed postmodernism, the moment of "social realism" was a lamentable, if understandable, detour. (121)

However, since the triumphant upsurge of "New Modernist Studies," modernist

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<sup>50</sup> New Critical teaching popular in the United States often associated Modernism with a-politicism.

scholarship in recent decades has been kinder to Wright and other leftist writers of the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> Edward Pavlić's *Crossroads Modernism* (2002) is one such text, exploring the many intersections of modernism and African American literature. Credited with expanding critical "understanding of African American literary modernism," we now turn to *Crossroads Modernism* as it offers one of the most comprehensive examinations of "The Man Who Lived Underground" and its explicit debt to modernist technique (Pereira 365). Though innovative in fitting Wright's story into a larger thesis of what comprises a uniquely "Afro Modernism," Pavlić's analysis ultimately sides with earlier readings of Daniels's descent as one of social rejection instead of Fabre's insistence on the story as one expressing the need for community. Thus, Pavlić chooses to read the story through the influence of T.S. Eliot and his concept of "depersonalization." Despite Pavlić's ingenuity in pioneering a theory of "the crossroads"—a theory integral to this dissertation's larger argument—I hope to show his elucidation of the "The Man Who Lives Underground" falls short on two counts: the first being Daniels's supposed rejection of society, and second, that ultimately Joyce's "epiphany" and not Eliot's "depersonalization" is the modernist technique that shapes the narrative.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> In their survey of New Modernist Studies for PMLA, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz explain: "Were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do no worse than light on expansion...quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been reconsidered; in which canons have been critiqued and reconfigured; in which works by members of social groups have been encountered with fresh eyes and ears; and in which scholarly inquiry has increasingly extended to matters of production, dissemination, and reception" (Mao and Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies" 748).

<sup>52</sup> Given black writers' liminal positions in the "cultural field," Jeremy Braddock has argued Joyce was "chosen as an object of identification, and Eliot an object of differentiation" (747).

## Wright at the Crossroads: Pavlić and “Eliotic Depersonalization”

Pavlić provocatively begins his study with the assertion that “[s]everal strains in African-American literature and culture adopt or adapt modernist techniques,” declaring “[t]he black modernisms that compromise *Crossroads Modernisms* have always been there in the work themselves” (xii). Though the supposition that there is such a thing as “black modernism” and “black modernists” in our contemporary critical moment seems rather uncontroversial, Pavlić writes *Crossroads* to address what he sees, at least in 2002, as the frightening “dearth of critical attention to ‘black modernism’” (xiii). Pavlić suggests the reason for this “dearth” is that,

most critics of black literature in the last third of the twentieth century encountered modernism from the professional critics who taught them in graduate school. Not surprisingly, their sense of modernism often differs from that in the texts of writers such as Hurston, Wright, and Baldwin. Placing black writing in the ‘service’ of particular theoretical agendas, most critics underplay black literature’s involvement with modernist issues... These discourses left little in the room for an artistic-centered critical approach to modernism. (xiii)<sup>53</sup>

And in this respect, Pavlić is generally correct.<sup>54</sup> Take, for instance, Houston Baker’s

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<sup>53</sup> Pavlić’s overview of “the sequence of dominant critical approaches to modern black literature goes like this: nationalisms of the late 1960s and early ‘70s, feminisms of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, the vernacular culture/postructuralism/critical professionalism of the 1980s, and the cultural studies/ public intellectual phenomena of the 1990s” (xiii).

<sup>54</sup> For other works who make similar cases to Pavlić before or contemporarily to *Crossroads*’s publication, see Marcus Klein’s *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature* (1981), Craig Werner’s *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impluse* (1994), George Hutchinson’s *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995), and Werner Sollors’s *Ethnic Modernisms* (2002). Pavlić makes mention of both Werner’s and Hutchinson’s important

groundbreaking *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987). Baker invokes Lionel Trilling's definition of modernism as "shockingly personal," asking "every question that is forbidden in a polite society," to which Baker acerbically responds:

It is difficult for... an Afro-American student of literature—one unconceived in the philosophies of Anglo-American, British, and Irish Moderns—to find intimacy [in white modernists']... fawning reliance on an array of images or assumptions bequeathed by a *civilization* that, in its prototypical form, is exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white. (Trilling 327, Baker 6)

Alan Nadel, too, registers this perceived need to keep white modernism and black literature disentangled in his *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (1988), writing:

"Afro-American modernism" is necessarily a contradiction in terms... Modernism was, after all, the argument goes, the invention of fascist, racist, elitists. [Modernists] wrote, furthermore, for an elite readership, creating difficult languages and complicated conventions which rendered their works far less immediately accessible than the classics from which they drew... Such techniques, the argument follows, are inherently antithetical to the goal of speaking for the oppressed or disenfranchised who have limited access to the oppressor's "culture" and, perhaps, ought not in any case desire to emulate it.

(24)

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works, though he notes their studies, taken together, have "not succeeded in redirecting the focus of the discourse" (xv).

Part of the importance of Pavlić's work for Wright studies, then, lies in its overt challenge to this reinforced critical partition between white and black modernism(s). For Pavlić, the "choice between strict attention to the creative visions of the twentieth century black artists and the principles of [high] modernism is a false one" (1). Through "adapting terms from the established vocabulary of 'high modernism,'" Pavlić makes a convincing case that black writers engaged with Anglo, Irish and American modernist techniques in order to make a modernism distinctly "their own," and that, perhaps more importantly, "black culture and modernism have been crucial to each other" (xvi, 2).

Vital to our specific investigation, Pavlić's *Crossroads* is the first to recognize the importance of modernist technique in expressing what Richard Powell has called a "collection of life experiences, social encounters, and personal ordeals, the sum of which promotes a solidarity and camaraderie that creates community," or, more simply, a "notion of collective life-experience" (13). Pavlić rightly acknowledges the limitation of traditional understandings of "mainstream modernist aesthetics," replete with "chaos, madness, and irrational seclusion," calling instead for a recognition of the ways in which black modernists have, in contrast, embraced the "subversive potential of the ability to dissolve one's self into social relations" (10). Pavlić's recognition of the ability to dissolve, however, remains limited only to black modernists and is curiously excluded when analyzing the episodes of synthesis within "The Man who Lives Underground."

Pavlić's theory of "the crossroads" usefully assembles a "symbolic geography" where the individual and community can cohesively meet. As a hybrid space between

Euro modernist techniques and “truly indigenous” African and West Indian traditions, Pavlić’s model of the crossroads is built, in part, on the foundations laid in Komunyakaa’s essay “Crossroads” (1997). For Komunyakaa, the crossroads,

“is a real place between imaginary places—points of departure and arrival. It is also a place where negotiations and deals are made with higher powers. In the West African and Haitian traditions of Legba, it is sanctified place of reflection... The crossroads is a junction... It is this cultural dualism, this ability to be two places at once, to be a shape changer, that strengthens the creative quest... There’s a jagged persistence that documents and duplicates the awkward reality of our contemporary lives and imaginations.” (5-6)

But where Komunyakaa locates “the crossroads” between “points of departure and arrival,” Pavlić situates this mystical junction between concepts of “descent” and “emergence.” Apart from their obvious spatial connotations, Pavlić’s “descent” and “emergence” embody specific theoretical processes for interpreting black literary texts. Pavlić develops his conception of descent from Posnock’s *The Trial of Curiosity* (1991) where modernism’s “search for lost portions of the self” and “liberation from an administered world” is defined as “descendental” (Posnock 110, Pavlić 82). Diving into “nonrational terrains” beneath the self as a means of rediscovery, however, functions very differently for Pavlić and for black modernists as their “descent” is less an escape from Hegelian “systematizing” than from very real “racist and... racialist identity politics” (13, 84).<sup>55</sup> For some black modernists, Pavlić argues, such

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<sup>55</sup> This concept echoes an argument made by Robin McNallie in 1977, wherein “Daniels’ search is also, in large part, a descent into the primordial self” (81).

descendental quests are made in search of “more inclusively democratic vistas,” the result of which is a “creative vantage point” termed the “democratic unconscious” (13). Such a modernist turn inward, or what Pavlić terms “eliotic depersonalization,” is presented as a central to “Afro-modernism,” both a sub-category of black modernism as a whole, and one side of the crossroads (xii).

On the other side lies “diasporic modernism” and its related theory of “emergence.” In opposition to “descent’s” extreme interiority, “emergence” can be understood as “as a return to the social arena of experience and the rational levels of consciousness,” whereby individuals form their own subjectivity within the community (13). Accordingly, diasporic modernism utilizes “modernist modes constituted by social and cultural interaction” to “reimagin[e]... realms in which social interaction and personal mediation [are] not incompatible” (175). Diasporic modernism, then, is both an “exten[sion]” and “critique” of Afro-modernism’s solipsistic withdrawal into the self, a resurfacing from the “democratic unconscious” to express “a vision of democratic possibility that goes beyond what [black writers’] respective historical eras allowed” (xxi, 175, 92). Thus, Pavlić’s “crossroads” becomes a unique articulation of black modernism itself, a fluid space where texts shift between registers of descent and emergence, Afro and Diasporic.

“The Man Who Lived Underground” provides a uniquely apt text for Pavlić’s investigation, as the beleaguered Daniels literally both “descends” and “emerges” from the sewers he has escaped to, “offer[ing] access to two levels of nonrationalized process... the psychological depth emphasized in Afro-modernist quests... [and]

communal performance rituals features in diasporic modernism” (95).<sup>56</sup> While escaping from three corrupt white police officers who have violently coerced a false confession of guilt, Daniels removes a manhole cover and climbs down into the sewers. Pavlić reads Daniels’s descent into the hypogean as paralleling the solipsistic withdrawal into the self. The longer Daniels spends in the gloomy tunnels at a “distance from all social scenes,” the more he undergoes a “profound defamiliarization” from his person (Pavlić 94).

For Pavlić, the most important of the underground sojourns, and thus the very crux of his reading, revolves around Daniels’s visit to a black church. As Daniels wades through currents of slime and waste, a congregation’s mellifluous singing echoes through the fetid causeways. “Strange but familiar,” the sounds can be heard “so clearly that he could feel the pitch and timbre of human voices” (“The Man” 24). Daniels is both “tantalized” and “enchanted” as he follows reverberating “waves of melody” (24). As he grows closer, the hymn’s words become distinguishable, and, like the sirens of old, they magically lure Daniels to their source.

*Jesus, take me to your home above  
And fold me in the bosom of Thy love...*” (24).

Daniels then swings his way onto a section of pipes below the church and peers

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<sup>56</sup> Though Pavlić’s study offers advantages for the particular contours of this investigation—particularly in theorizing the ways black modernists made modernism “their own”—it must be mentioned that the notion of descent into “nonrational terrains” is representative of his contemporaries’ critical readings of the text. Joseph A. Young’s “Phenomenology and Textual Power” (2001) will suffice as an example, as it was written but one year before *Crossroads* publication. In Young’s essay, Daniels’s descent affords him the freedom to “traverse a field of consciousness independent” from the repressive forces of the “aboveground” (73). Young, I must also add, is not listed as a cited reference in *Crossroads Modernism*.

through a small crevice. He sees the gathering is made up of “black men and women, dressed in white robes, singing, holding tattered songbooks in their palms” (24).

Strangely, perhaps even cruelly, Daniels’s “first impulse was to laugh but he checked himself... He felt that he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene, yet he could not bring himself to leave.” (24).

But Daniels does leave, and it is only after an Odyssean mélange of deeds and mishaps that he unwittingly finds himself back under the church’s floor. Though still “queerly blind and deaf” from a fitful sleep on his feet, Daniels again hears the “loud singing coming from the church” (58). He climbs atop the pipes and watches “a young black girl tos[s] back her head and clos[e] her eyes” as she sings a new hymn:

*Glad, glad, glad, oh, so glad  
I got Jesus in my soul...* (59).

Daniels is spellbound: “Those few words were all she sang, but what her words did not say, her emotions said as she repeated the lines, varying the mood and tempo, making her tone express meanings which her conscious mind did not know” (59).

Daniels’s infatuation is not with the singing per se, but with its strange and rhythmic expression of group-feeling. He is witness to a collective experience, observing the instant when “[a]nother woman melted her voice with the girl’s, and then an old man’s voice merged with that of the two women. Soon the entire congregation was singing” (59).<sup>57</sup> Instead of laughing, Daniels decides to “tear himself away,” feeling the

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<sup>57</sup> Though it is only the voices that are explicitly described as being melded, taken in consideration with the first hymn’s “*Fold me in the bosom of Thy love*”, the assembly itself unifies as the young black girl, the woman, and the old man are fused together into one, amalgamated “congregation” (59)

churchgoers are “wrong... He felt their search for a happiness they could never find made them feel that they had committed some dreadful offense which they could not remember or understand” (60).

Pavlić argues these two moments in/under the church are Daniels’s “attempt[s] at emergence” (106). The church’s being “located either in the basement of above-ground space, or in an ‘upper room’ of the underground” provides an obvious dimensional cue, and “intimates the interactive performative space of diasporic modernism” (106). Wright’s imagery, then, “clearly acknowledges the possibility” of Daniels’s diasporic emergence (108). However, Pavlić maintains Daniels’s physical separation (peering through a crack from below) and negative reactions (laughter and pity) betray Wright’s authorial decision to position “the communal” as “offer[ing] no solution” to Daniels’s ostracization, even going so far as to suggest that if Daniels was to join the churchgoers, he would no doubt “stand in the spotlight with his back to the audience” (109).

The community offered in the church, therefore, “contrasts sharply with Daniels’s Afro-modernist underground with its detached irony and tendency to nihilistic dread,” and makes his attempts at emergence both “reckless and futile” (108). “[G]ripped in his underground solipsism,” Pavlić determines that Daniels, and thus Wright, choose a modality of Afro Modernist descent (self) over Diasporic modernist emergence (community).

However, such a supposition makes Daniels’s eventual (re)emergence above-ground seem rather incompatible. After witnessing “the same policeman who had beat him” brutally interrogate and provoke the suicide of a night-watchman (a watchman

for goods Daniels has stolen), Daniels rather abruptly decides “he had to act” and chooses to exit the sewers (“The Man” 64). Though “fear claimed him completely” he “climbed upwards.. and heaved his shoulder against the cover and pushed it off halfway” (65). Daniels pulls himself out into the daylight only to “hear the sound of spirited singing,”

*The Lamb, the Lamb, the Lamb  
I hear thy voice a-calling  
The Lamb, the Lamb, the Lamb  
I feel thy grace a-falling (67).*

Though Pavlić has situated Daniels in an Afro-modernist rejection of the church’s community, Daniels nonetheless attempts to join the church to “tell them... What? He did not know” (67). In an ironic turn, the congregation spurns Daniels over complaints that he’s “act[ing] rowdy in God’s house,” that “[h]e’s filthy,” and that “[h]e stinks” (67). The churchgoers force his exit, and “pushed [him] toward the brick steps” until “the door banged shut” behind him (68).

In a bizarre and ultimately fatal decision, Daniels then chooses to visit the police, incoherently confessing “I’m guilty” and that “[a]ll the people I saw was guilty” (72). The police, however, inform Daniels he is innocent: “let me tell you something for your own good. We don’t want you, see? You’re free, free as air. Now go home and forget about it. It was all a mistake. We caught the guy... He wasn’t colored at all. He was an Eytalian” (74). When Daniels refuses to leave, the police take interest in where he hid and ask Daniels to take them to the sewer entrance. Daniels agrees while a

mood of high selflessness throbbed in him. He could barely contain his rising

spirits. They would see what he had seen; they would feel what he had felt...

He wanted to make a hymn, prance about in physical ecstasy, throw his arm around the policemen in fellowship. (80)

Despite Daniels's elation, "high selflessness," and willingness to reconcile, the policemen ruthlessly shoot him as he lowers himself back into the sewer, sealing the manhole cover overhead to hide evidence of their crime.

"Unable to imagine his part in the communal... exchange," Pavlić insists, "Daniels ironically and tragically attempts to reconnect with the racist above ground world" by "fantasiz[ing] a mystical form of communion in which the above ground world would be able to participate directly in the secluded interiors of his descendental awareness" (109, 110). This striking change of heart, in opposition to what Pavlić had previously asserted was Wright and Daniels's firm decision to remain in the realm of Afro-modernist descent, is insufficiently explained as Daniels's being "[s]eized... by the urge to rejoin the world" (110). But such a seizure seems implausible in the context of Afro-modernist descent, as, through Pavlić's own examples, Daniels chooses time and time again to rebuff the church's community in the name of descendental solipsism. Moreover, though such an "attempt to reconnect with the racist above ground world" can be understood in Daniels's return to the police, it fails to explain Daniels's rejection by the black church itself (a moment which Pavlić does not discuss). In reading the story through Afro-modernist descent, the "mystical form of communion" between "the above ground world" and Daniels's "secluded interiors of...descendental awareness" is irreconcilable. Does not the "fellowship" Daniels seek with the police negate the very notion of "secluded interiors"? Pavlić, unfortunately,

offers no clarification as to how this might function.

I do believe Pavlić's sensing the existence of a "mystical form of communion" is correct; however, his theory of Afro-modernist descent is ultimately unable to account for such reconciliation. Instead, one must look where Pavlić does not—Daniels's short, but important visit to a movie theater. The theater section is a startlingly glaring omission in Pavlić's reading, obliquely referred to but once in a small notation: "The people in the movie theater and church, [Daniels] thinks, had no business denying the undeniable political existential facts" (100). While there is no further explication, it is significant Pavlić associates the theater with the church— an acknowledged sight of communion and emergence.

In between his first and second visits to the church, Daniels blindly stumbles his way through the unlit bowels of a furnace room, following "[f]resh air" and a "faraway sound" to a spiral staircase: "there was no question... he was going to ascend those stairs" ("The Man" 29). Bathed in the glowing red of an EXIT sign, Daniels parts a "black curtain that fluttered uncertainly... and looked into a convex depth that gleamed with clusters of shimmering lights. Sprawling below him was a stretch of human faces, tilted upward, chanting, whistling, screaming, laughing" (30). Wright's following description is quoted at length, as it exhibits the bizarre, yet dazzling narrative patterns we seek to trace:

He stood in a box in the reserved section of a movie house and the impulse he had had to tell the people in the church to stop their singing seized him. These people were laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves. His compassion

fired his imagination and he stepped out of the box, walked out upon thin air, walked on down to the audience, and, hovering in the air just above them, he stretched out his hand to touch them... His tension snapped and he found himself back in the box, looking down into the sea of faces. No; it could not be done; he could not awaken them. He sighed. Yes, these people were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying (30).

The connection between the church and the theater is made quite explicit as, like in Daniels's first sojourn, he feels "the impulse to tell the people to... stop their singing." And yet, the theater presents an entirely different context for Daniels, as it is a multiracial public space. Though Wright takes great care to identify the church's congregation as black ("segment of black men and women," "black palms," "young black girl") the faces staring back up at Daniels are simply and tellingly described as "human." The "black" curtain Daniels parts and passes through, then, indicates his movement from a designated black social space into the multicultural and communal, no doubt alluding to Du Bois's concept of "the veil." Such an allusion is made quite explicit when considered alongside Du Bois's description of the "child of Emancipation" as being "changed" to "the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect... his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, — darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission" (23). Just as Daniels epiphanically imagines himself as stepping out over the people to "awaken" them, so the child of Emancipation's "soul rises before him" in a similar "revelation of.. power"; the "animated shadows" on the screen, recalling the "darkly" projected vision through the obscuring veil's weft and

warp. The description of the audience as “children,” conversely, keys the reader into Wright’s critique. Unlike the child of Emancipation, the “children” of the crowd are either unable or to unwilling to develop the “self-consciousness, self-realization, [and] self-respect” necessary for progressive social transformation.

In fact, Wright’s reference to DuBois may shed further light on the social significance meant to be gleaned from theater scene and the story as a whole. In “Of the Coming of John,” the only work of fiction in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the story’s protagonist, “John,” visits a theater to enjoy Wagner’s “Lohengrin.” His experience is profound, transforming the seated crowd before him into a “myriad of men...so strangely more beautiful than anything he had known” (Du Bois 391). The “high and clear” music of Lohengrin’s swan “lingered and swept through every muscle of his frame” (391). With eyes closed, John clutches the armrests, feeling the brief moment when the music ignites a “movement of power within him” lifting him “aloft again” (392). In the story John also spies on a black church, amazed at the congregation’s unsettling spiritual communion: “the people moaned and wept, wailed and shouted, and a wild shrieking arose from the corners where all the pent-up feeling of the hour gathered itself and rushed into the air” (399). The connection to Daniels is only strengthened as John feels he too has “scorn[ed]... true Religion” choosing, rather, to slip away undetected (399). Later, after John has angrily murdered his white namesake, he resigns himself to wait for his eventual lynching. In the moment before his death, he recalls the intensity of feeling in “that vast concert hall,” and hears “stealing toward him the faint sweet music of the swan” (410). Like Daniels’s recognition that patrons of the movie theater are “children,” so John “pit[ies]” the

oncoming mob and rises to his feet to turn “towards the sea” (411). Du Bois ends the story with a haunting yet telling sentence: “And the world whistled in his ears” (411). The group-feeling shared in the theater by both Daniels and John in concert with their expressed pity for the crowd’s ignorance is importantly directed outside themselves, towards “the world.” Wright’s Daniels, like Du Bois’s John, concerns himself with humanity, not the psychological discoveries confined to the self.

On this score, George Hutchinson notes the “self-professed humanism” and “universalism” of Richard Wright was alive and well during the time “The Man Who Lived Underground” was published in its novella form, suggesting:

When Richard Wright narrates episodes of his youth in *Black Boy* (1945) he doesn’t mean to say that the fear, shame, and hatred that haunted his childhood can only be true for *him*, nor are they only relevant to other African Americans. He writes as an embodied human being to other human beings—who are also afraid, shamed, and hateful for their own reasons—with a faith in the possibility that they will listen and come to a “human” (his term) understanding of his experience and also of themselves, whoever and wherever they are— and that they will be changed by that understanding as he was (so he said) in the very writing of his autobiography of 1945. (6)

Taken in this context, Pavlić’s contention that “[t]he people in the movie theater and church...had no business denying the undeniable political existential facts” rings rather hollow as it mitigates the central role Daniels’s universalist “compassion” plays

in this passage.<sup>58</sup> It is Daniels's earnest empathy for the crowd "laughing at their lives" and desire to "awaken" their "self-realization" that foments his ability to, like Christ, walk over the "sea of faces." His attempt to "stretc[h] out his hand to touch them," undermines any notion of descendental solipsistic rejection, as it is through his own agency that he attempts to connect. Though Daniels finally chooses to leave the crowd, it is his realizing "it could not be done" that forces his hand—not, as the Afro-modernist model would demand, "I'd rather not do it." The crowd's childlike immaturity speaks more to the public's active rejection of Daniels's humanist empathy on all three communal levels: his racial community (the church), the racist community (the police), and the multicultural community (the theater). All three play their part in his eventual murder, as his unique "compassion" and supernatural ability to unite threaten the stability of the existing social structures: "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (84). The "Man Who Lived Underground," then, can be productively re-read as a kind of twisted bildungsroman, where the protagonist, through his reclusion, simultaneously develops his capacity to seek reconciliation with the world around him. It is, thus, the failure of the outside world to accept their mystical leader, their secular messiah, that provides Daniels's story with its pointed social critique. By the public's failing to collectively self-realize under his compassion, systemic oppression is left intact, and like the "whirling" current that carries Daniels into "the heart of the earth," the world above continues to spin on

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<sup>58</sup> In a recent *Journal of African American Studies* article, Malmoun F.I. Alzoubi goes even further in arguing *Black Boy* is a "precursor[r] of a transracial era" and "transnational society" (185).

unchanged (84).

Though Pavlić's "crossroads" provides a useful model framework to map the intersection of Euro modernists and modernists of color, it cannot fully explain Wright's own theorization of collectivity through these epiphanic moments. Such epiphanies are found in many multicultural texts of the 1930s and 40s, before overt postulations of equitable collectivism were replaced by a "'white' bourgeois parochialism... [that was] revived during the fifties" (Hutchinson 5). I now alternatively propose a new model of understanding Wright's text, one which privileges Joyce's epiphanic over Eliot's depersonalization. Indeed, Joyce's mystical use of epiphany affords the needed conceptual slippage to contain both the people and the person, or, as Ellmann has explained: "an interchange of inner and outer reality" (141). In keeping with Pavlić's insight that black modernists made Modernism distinctly "their own," I will attempt to trace Wright's own unique adaptation of Joyce's technique. I call this adaptation "democratic epiphany," wherein a highly compassionate and thoughtful protagonist transcends their singular selfhood to become a mystically paradoxical, "collective individual," thereby transmuting Joycean epiphany into one of political awakening. Accordingly, I contend such "democratic epiphanies" are signaled by three diagetical tropes: corporeal dislocation of the "collective-individual" from the body politic, environmental hysteria, and visual representations of communal amalgamation.

### **"New Worlds for Old" James and The Giant Pork Kidney**

Wright's familiarity with high modernists, particularly T.S. Eliot and Gertrude

Stein, has long been chronicled by devoted biographers. In what has become the definitive Wright biography, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973, 1993), Fabre tells of a young, impressionable, “fresh faced” Dick Wright finding much needed community and kinship amongst a cadre of leftist artists in the Chicago John Reed Club (111). It was here, Fabre writes, that Wright was first encouraged to read the “avant-garde writers of the period: Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot” (111).<sup>59</sup> In subsequent tidy paragraphs, Fabre takes great care to underscore these Modernist High Priests’ influence on Wright’s maturing style, claiming that, despite Eliot’s designation as “decadent bourgeois,” Wright would, at least, “half-consciously” imitate Eliot’s unique tone and rhythm. Wright’s prolonged and determinative interest in “experiments with words,” Fabre asserts, can be credited to a providential discovery of Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* on a southside library shelf (Wright as qtd. in Fabre 112).

Joyce, for all of his stature as a giant of Modernism, gets a mere honorable mention after both Eliot and Stein. Fabre submits, in the almost laconic manner of a footnote: “[Wright] read *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, which he discussed at length with several members of the club” (111). Hazel Rowley’s more recent *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2001) condenses Fabre’s insights, noting: “Wright loved the more experimental use of language and technical innovations he discovered in James Joyce, Stein, and the poetry of T.S. Eliot” (103). In her 1968

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<sup>59</sup> Wright names a similar list in this essay “Blueprint For Negro Writing” in 1937: Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro writer (103).

biography, Constance Webb follows suit, limiting her mentions of Joyce to a few lines in passing reference. And yet, Fabre, Rowley, and Webb's superficial reportage of Joyce's influence on Wright's life and work is not an aberration. It is, rather, representative of the standard treatment. Even in abridged middle-grade biographies of Wright, such as Debbie Levy's recent 2008 publication, James Joyce's mentions are limited to a single page, crowded and without distinction like in *Unfinished Quest*, amidst the likes of Eliot, Stein, Faulkner, Proust, and Cummings (58).

And yet, we know Joyce's influence outweighs what its often presented as being. Wright's first written and posthumously published novel *Lawd Today!*, defended by some, forgotten by others, is overtly indebted to Joyce's masterwork *Ulysses*.<sup>60</sup> In his 1986 essay for *Studies in American Fiction*, Yoshinobu Hakutani would take up a sustained analysis of Joyce's influence in *Lawd Today!* noting:

Externally the book resembles James Joyce's *Ulysses*... the action is restricted to the classical unity of time and place.... Both [protagonists] Jake Jackson and Leopold Bloom are psychologically and sexually estranged from their wives; both have self-doubts and are socially frustrated. They suffer various nightmares and fantasies, go to bars with their friends, and meet prostitutes. (165-166)

It is, by Joseph B. Entin's account, Wright's "most formally experimental work of fiction, a mix of gritty naturalism and avant-gard techniques," in essence, "a black

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<sup>60</sup> Joseph B. Entin writes: "Although dismissed by some critics as an 'apprentice' novel, the text represents an ambitious effort to fuse black vernacular and high modernism, Cab Calloway and Gertrude Stein, the dozens and Dada-esque dreamscapes" (232).

working-class rewriting of Joyce's *Ulysses*" (232). Beyond what could be categorized as Wright's adolescent attempt to rip-off a literary genius, Joyce's influence is described as being foundational to the way in which Wright conceived of his creative process. "He talked about it not in terms of mystification but as writing know-how," Ralph Ellison reflects in "The Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" (1961), "You must read so-and-so.... You have to go about learning to write consciously.... You must learn how Conrad, Joyce, Dostoevsky get their effects" (73-75).

Joyce presents himself as an interesting and obvious figure for leftist American writers and writers of color, as he was, himself, a product of colonial rule. Though Joyce's own position as a colonial subject can hardly be said to approximate the experiences of Blacks in the United States, he would have provided a closer model than most. As Keith Booker has argued,

the English, for hundreds of years, tended to view their presumed superiority to the Irish in largely racialist terms. Ireland, it is becoming clear from recent historical scholarship, served as a sort of colonial laboratory in which the English developed many of the racist stereotypes they would later use to justify their colonial domination of the nonwhite peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. (12)

Recent work by Jeremy Braddock corroborates Booker's observation, noting Joyce, in particular *Ulysses*, was "correctly understood [by writers of color] as critically representing the conflicted dynamics of the specifically minority literary resistance" (745). *Ulysses*, as Braddock documents, was a crucial model for black modernist expression, becoming a "form of cultural capital trafficked rhetorically and materially

among Harlem and other intellectuals in the 1920's and early '30s' (747). Indeed, we know from Wright's own reflections that while participating in the John Reed Club and Southside Writer's Project, Joyce's *Ulysses* was passed from hand to hand and "influenced...the Negro writers" (Wright as qtd. in Fabre *Unfinished Quest* 167). It is no surprise then that Joyce's status as a subaltern colonial subject and sometimes socialist, combined with the unapologetic democratic humanism of Leopold Bloom, the Everyman, would no doubt provide an enticing paradigm for a young generation of American modernists enchanted by literature's social potential.

We find what would become the model of Wright's social fusion in Bloom's surrealistic intermingling with Dublin during the climactic "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses*. Carla Cappetti has used similar language to Joyce critics in describing the hallucinatory qualities of "The Man Who Lived Underground," drawing attention to the "novella's complex rendering of time," impeding the "reader's effort to understand the story logically and chronologically" (44-45). "[I]n order to read the story at all," Cappetti adds, "the reader is forced to move against the narrative current in the effort to grasp fragments of... dissolving memory" (45). In "Circe," as in "Of the Coming of John" and "The Man Who Lived Underground," the theater as affective collective space is utilized. Besides Joyce's composing "Circe" in the form of a play, Ellmann notes the "episode awakened Joyce's most extreme methods, not less extreme for being couched in terms of the music hall or vaudeville" (141).

As Bloom follows a very drunk Stephen Daedalus through Nighttown, Dublin's sordid red light district, he is led to the doorstep of Bella Cohen's infamous brothel. There, a prostitute named Zoe Higgins bids Bloom to come inside, as Stephen

has entered just moments before. While Bloom fondles her breast and inhales a gust of Zoe's warm garlicky breath, he slips into an abrupt, profound, hallucination. Bloom, in space of two pages, rises through the hierarchal ranks from a lowly alderman, to the mayor of Dublin, to "emperor-president" and "king-chairman," imaginary positions of authority imbued with the powers of Christ and the duties of "the world's greatest reformer" (*Ulysses* 393). Out of the dark streets that edge the recesses of Bloom's imagination, a crowd spills and gathers to listen to the now "famous Bloom." Bloom assumes the posture of a great orator, coloring his words with the energy and fervor of a political firebrand. "(Passionately)," Joyce indicates in a provided stage direction, Bloom proclaims "[t]he poor man starves while they [the colonizers] are greasing their royal mountain stags or shooting peasants and phartridges in their purblind pomp of pelf and power. But their reign is rover for rever and ever and ev..." (391)

Before Bloom's speech is finished, his sentence is severed by an ellipsis, blending and bridging his words into the next parenthetical stage direction given by Joyce "(Prolonged applause)" (391). What's to follow is absurd, impossible, and volatile—presented compactly in the space of a long italicized paragraph. I will not quote the passage in its entirety for sanity's sake, but will provide selections to provide you with the flavor of language—a flavor, no doubt, a young Wright would have equally savored upon his first reading.

Venetian masts, maypoles and festal arches spring up...All the windows are thronged with sightseers, chiefly ladies... Boys from high school are perched on the lampposts, telegraph poles, windowsills, cornices, gutters, chimneypots, railings, rainspouts, whistling and cheering... A fife and drum band is heard in

the distance playing the Kol Nidre...After them march the guilds and trades and newspaper canvassers, law scribes, masseurs, vintners, trussmakers, chimneysweeps, lard refiners, tabbnet and poplin weavers, farriers, Italian warehousemen, church decorators, boot jack manufacturers, undertakers, silk mercers, lapidaries, salesmasters, corkcutters, assessors of fire losses, dyers and cleaners, export bottlers, fellmongers, ticketwriters, heraldic seal engravers, horse repository hands, bullion brokers, cricket and archery outfitters, riddlemakers, egg and potato factors, hosiers and glovers, plumbing contractors” (392).

Amidst this bedlam, Bloom is then depicted as “ascend[ing] and stand[ing] on the stone of destiny” (393). Above the roiling throng, he ushers in a “Paradisiacal Era,” a new Bloomusalem (portmanteau for “Bloom and Jerusalem”) for which its creed shall be: “New worlds for old. Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile... esperanto the universal language with universal brotherhood...Free money, free rent, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state... Mixed races and mixed marriage” (395, 399-400). Though Bloom’s humanitarian mission may seem silly, if not disingenuously idealistic, we must remember to consider this utopianism in the context of its original genesis, that is, in Bloom’s stump speech made against the British colonizers, who “shoo[t] peasants and phartridges.” It is a chaotic idealism in the face of colonial injustice, and as such, brazenly resistant.

Such a moment, divine and fulgurant, has been defined by Joyce scholars like Zach Bowen as one “long epiphany of self-recognition” though, truthfully, there has been little to no critical consensus on what a Joycean epiphany *is* (112). The question

plagued Joyce critics as early as 1946 and has continued through the decades, peaking in the early 70s with what has since been dubbed the “great PMLA epiphany debate.” The discussion has ranged from William York Tindall’s argument that each story in and of itself constitutes an epiphany to Robert Scholes’s classification of epiphanies as “trials” meant to “tempe[r] the development of artistic thought (77). Still others have centered the dispute on whether a universal truth is learned by the character, or if such an insight is true only for character’s own fictional subjectivity. Ellmann, Joyce-expert-extraordinaire that he is, only manages to hazily define Joycean epiphanies as “sudden, unlooked-for turns in experience,” affording little in the way of theoretical consensus or specificity (xvi). Morris Beja’s influential *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (1971) makes the case epiphany is a “sudden spiritual ‘manifestation’—a showing forth, an illumination, a revelation” (15). For Beja: “An epiphany may be prepared for over long periods of time; but when the experience does come, it is not gradual but immediate” (14). For many years, the kicked-up dust settled messily on Florence Walzl’s broad and widely used definition: “[Epiphany] may mean revelation or illumination in certain literary and technical senses” (152).

However, it is perhaps best to equip our study with the most recent work on Joycean epiphanies—Sangam MacDuff’s *Panepiphanal World* (2020). In his thorough study explicitly devoted to this storied subject, MacDuff defines Joycean epiphany as “not a revelation of God, nature, or the mind but of the human spirit embodied in language...an immanent humanist revelation,” attributing its linguistic aesthetics and structural formation directly to that of Revelation: “And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number

of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands (1-5, 5:11)

Importantly, MacDuff's definition incorporates the involvement of surrounding multitudes, drawing much of his argument from a copy of Revelation hand-written by Joyce himself.<sup>61</sup> MacDuff's relation of Joycean epiphany to the masses finds a model not only in Joyce's own writing, but in Bowen's own "Joyce and the Epiphany Concept: A New Approach" (1981). Bowen keenly makes the case for understanding epiphanies as the "sharing of experiences," "transforming one life into another," a textual manifestation of "transubstantiality itself" (112). Thus, Stephen's climatic epiphany of the girl on the beach "becomes an amalgamation of all the images of female and all of the women who have occupied Stephen's conscious and subconscious throughs throughout the course of the book" (110). And in "Circe," when Bloom and Stephen's common "identity merges," they, together, "finally realize that everybody is everybody else" (113). Though it is doubtful Wright considered these esoteric semantics of epiphany, it will suit the purposes of our investigation to sally forth on the trail Bowen and MacDuff have roughly cut, considering epiphany in relation to multitudes and with individuals merging with said multitudes. Indeed, and most importantly, we find precedent in Joyce's own writing, where the two highest "values regarding epiphany" are: "the epical form...wherein [the artist] presents his image in mediate relation of himself to others; [and] the dramatic form...wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to others" (Bowen 111, *Portrait* 214).

From the small portion of *Ulysses* discussed above, we can begin to identify

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<sup>61</sup> See MacDuff, pages 7-11.

some to the primary conditions necessary for a realized epiphany. As mentioned in the previous section, the first we may call “corporeal dislocation.” As Bloom greets the turbulent throng below, he is depicted as rising above, “ascend[ing] and stand[ing] on the stone of destiny.” At this remove, Bloom is simultaneously in privileged physical position above the crowd, and yet, of it. The second condition we may call “environmental hysteria.” In addition to the exhaustive list of laborers who are parading, there are mentions of soldiers working security: “The Royal Dublin Fusiliers, The King’s Own Scottish Borderers, the Cameron Highlanders and the Welsh Fusiliers,” punctuated by a “fife and drum band... in the distance playing” (391). The mania is so much that, disastrously, “a part of the walls of Dublin, crowded with loyal sightseers, collapses” (395). The third we shall identify as “scenes of communal amalgamation.” In this light, it’s important to consider that Joyce methodically takes the time, though only over the space of a few pages, to raise Bloom from a plebian stump-speaker to an exalted reformer. Here, Joyce consciously makes Bloom a man of the people, elevated, quite literally on the “stone of destiny.” Such merger, however, would not be complete without a turn to the whacky, as Bloom is also depicted as raising futuristic public housing for all of Dublin’s citizenry: “a colossal edifice with crystal roof, built in the shape of a huge pork kidney, containing forty-thousand rooms” (395). A thoughtful reader of *Ulysses* will remember the pork kidney, with its “fine tang of faintly scented urine,” was Bloom’s breakfast earlier in “Calypso”: “Kidneys were in his mind as [Bloom] moved about the kitchen softly... Thursday: not a good day either for a mutton kidney at Buckley’s. Fried with butter, a shake of pepper. Better a pork kidney at Dlugacz’s” (45-46). The people’s

dwelling for New Bloomusalem are, thus, now in him and of him, making Bloom paradoxically both the *collective* and *individual*. Through his heightened humanism, Bloom, like Daniels's distinctive "compassion," fulfills the criterium for a "collective individual," a leader separate yet integrally of the masses. Such a profound democratic moment makes *Ulysses*, in Lionel Trilling's estimation, "unique among the modern classics for its sympathy with progressive social ideas" (468).

Later, Bloom rescues Stephen from a thrashing at the hands of two ornery British soldiers. It is at this instant, Ellmann argues, that Bloom and Stephen, together, "approached the state which Joyce announced to Linati was 'fusion'" (150). This moment of fusion, not only between Bloom and Dublin's citizenry, but between Bloom, Dublin's citizenry, and Stephen the artist-hero, is visited again in the next chapter, "Eumaeus." In the gloom of a cab driver's shelter, Bloom reflects, "[t]hough they didn't see eye to eye in everything...a certain analogy there somehow was, as if both their minds were travelling, so to speak, in the one train of thought" (*Ulysses* 536). It will be no surprise, then, that in Joyce's early schema sent to Linati the "technic" listed for "Ithaca" is that of "fusion" (Ellman 186) [See **Figure 6**].

### **In the Name of Better Days Not Yet Come: Daniels and the Dead Baby**

Having established the three diegetical tropes in the selections from "Circe," I shall now revisit and apply them to the theater scene in "The Man Who Lived Underground." However, more than identifying what could be construed as a simple reproduction of Joycean epiphany, I will argue that importance of Wright's use of this modernist technique lies in his own articulation of "democratic epiphany"—wherein a

moment of fulgurant, hallucinatory beauty, collective possibility is momentarily recognized. By scrutinizing the text with Joyce-tinted lenses, we will further discover elements of the “complex unity” along with the “hope and passion” Wright theorized in his early essays.

In the character of Daniels we find our “collective individual,” as he is not only the facilitator of the transcendent epiphany, but demonstrates, time and time again, his extra-ordinary “compassion,” “high selflessness,” and desire for “fellowship.” He is, by virtue of having “ascended” the stairs, simultaneously “above” and outside the audience, corporeally dislocated from the serried masses in the “convex depth” below. The “stretch of human faces,” which manifestly evoke a surrealistic elongation of human features, is depicted as “tilted upward, chanting, whistling, screaming, laughing.” Such a radical sweep in emotion, moving from the spiritual with “chanting,” to the sexual with “whistling,” to the horrifying with “screaming,” to the joyous with “laughing,” provide the reader with a kind of sensorial whiplash, perhaps playfully nodded to by the image of their heads being “tilting upward.” The following description of the audience as “shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves” only serves to solidify the ubiquitous hysteria inside the theater and augurs their eventual rejection of Daniels as collective individual. The use of “tilting upward,” additionally, operates as a textual clue to Daniels and to the reader, demarcating his position as the crowd’s focal point of attention. The last feature, that of “communal amalgamation,” comes when all eyes are on Daniels as he steps “out of the box” and “walk[s] upon thin air,” simultaneously “hover[ing] over” and “stretch[ing] out his hand to touch” the people. Wright’s repeated description of the

spectators as “these people,” as a collective “audience,” and as a “sea,” render them visually as one entity — a singular mass to be awoken. The Joycean epiphany is, thus, imbued with a political direction, repurposed to illuminate the possibility of a collective action in an otherwise dark and dreary social reality — a reality constituted by institutional oppression.

However, Daniels is unable to impart his epiphanic discoveries to the crowd and fails to awaken the masses into becoming a “multitude.” His humanist empathy is summarily turned away by the church, the police, and the theater. Yet, such a cursory understanding of these rejections is not enough to claim, as Carl Russell Brignano has, that “The Man” is fundamentally a study in nihilism (228). Brignano’s observations should draw attention to the felicity of his argument, as he contends “optimism” can be found in almost all of Wright’s work *except* “The Man Who Lived Underground” (228).<sup>62</sup> Ironically, understanding the story as one of measured hope actually bolsters Brignano’s own claim about Wright’s entire literary corpus. The tragic tenor Brignano and other critics seem to hear is emitted not from Daniels’s perilous misfortunes, but from Daniels’s epiphanic awakening. Daniels’s democratic epiphany is simultaneously the moment where he is compassionately — surrealistically — suspended above the crowd and his realization that collective action is needed. The “guilt” Daniels feels, and sees in everyone is, thus, not of existential pessimism, but the world’s complicity in passively perpetuating systemized oppression instead of embracing collective

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<sup>62</sup> See Brignano’s *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (1970). Brignano suggests Daniels’s life, at the end of the story, is “collapsed with a blast of despair” (153).

alternatives. The multitude is not yet ready to become multitude.

In one of the most analyzed sections of “The Man Who Lived Underground,” Daniels has a moment of self-reflection and dimly tries to decipher the significance from his stopovers along his underground quest:

he remembered the singing in the church, the people yelling in the movie, the dead baby... He saw these items hovering before his eyes and felt that some dim meaning linked them together, that some magical relationship made them kin. He stared with vacant eyes, convinced that all these images, with their tongueless reality, were striving to tell him something... (“The Man” 51)

The scene itself affords an obvious outline for the story’s complex unity, not only in explicitly recalling Daniels’s adventures, but by presenting them as “images,” no doubt manifesting ideas formulated earlier in “Personalism.” Critics have interpreted the scene as a kind of catalogue of despair, a thread to weave together seemingly disparate moments of defeat, perhaps no more so than Mildred W. Everette. In her influential essay “The Death of Richard Wright’s American Dream” (1974), Everette investigates the mentioned “images” in the passage, making a case for how each should be interpreted as nihilistic. For Everett, the church, corroborated by Daniels’s cruel smile and the congregation’s rejection, is rendered “spiritually dead, their hymns meaningless mouthings” (322). The baby corpse Daniels finds tangled in trash is construed as a metaphor for “meaningless[ness],” representative of his imminent death which, itself, ultimately “signifi[es] nothing” (319). The theater scene, like the church and the baby, educes futile death as the audience is described as being plagued with a damning “mental deadness” (323).

Though it is not cited in her essay, one may hope Everette based her argument about the church scene(s) at least in part on Wright's own comments about the church around the time of "The Man's" composition. In "Blueprint," Wright dedicates a significant portion of the third section to his thoughts on the Negro church.<sup>63</sup> Wright credits the church with forming a crucial part of Negro culture "which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action" (99). For Wright, the early church represented a "revolutionary struggle" for "human rights" (99). It was, at least in its early form between the years "1820-60," the fertile ground for culture, collectivity, and social progress. Wright does level a critique, noting that after this early iteration, "religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial" (99). Wright continues: "But even today there are millions of American Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe, whose only relation to society and man... comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation" (99).

In this light, Daniels's cruel smile and the church's rejection can be better interpreted. His "impulse...to laugh" and feeling that "he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene" can be explained as Daniels's sardonic insight into the congregation's purposefully drugging themselves with a snake-oil "antidote for suffering and denial." His ultimate rejection by the above-ground congregation and the theater crowd is derived from their inability to accept a new radical alternative to their "sense of a whole universe," their fundamental understanding of the relationship

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<sup>63</sup> See "A Whole Culture" in "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

between “society and man.” A recent article by Julia Istomina makes a similar point as she argues the churchgoers are “dangerous to the process of social change as the people who institutionalize social and racial inequality” (119). The church’s facilitation of collective experience, their “melding” and “melting” is therefore misdirected. Far from meaningless mouthings, Wright chastises not the creation of the “community itself” but “the racist system” and religious “way of life that was forced on black people” (Hakutani 88). The expression of this collective affect, after all, is first described as “tantaliz[ing]” and “enchant[ing]” Daniels when is at his most frightened in the putrid dark.

I hope to have already addressed the theater scene sufficiently, and will therefore pivot, by way of conclusion, towards reading Daniels’s discovery of the baby corpse.

While Daniels is trudging along in the slime after his first visit to the underground church, he stumbles upon a “strangely familiar image” that both “attracted and repelled him” (“The Man” 26). In the faint light from a distant manhole cover, Daniels finds the “tiny nude body of a baby snagged by debris and half-submerged in water” (26). Daniels stands over the dead child, seeing how the “water blossomed about the tiny legs, the tiny arms, the tiny head, and rushed onward” (26). Though its eyes were “closed, as though in sleep; the fists were clenched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped black in a soundless cry” (26). Eventually, Daniels works up the courage to free the child from its tangles, reaching “forward slowly with the soggy shoe of his right foot and shov[ing] the dead baby from where it had been lodged...seeing the little body twisting in the current as it floated from sight...hearing

the water speed in the somber shadows” (26).

Everette is correct in suggesting the dead baby portends Daniels’s own eventual death, as the descriptions are eerily similar:

The water flowed past him, blossoming in foam about his arms, his legs, and his head. His jaw sagged and his mouth gaped soundless... The current spun him around. He sighed and closed his eyes, a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth (83-84).

Moreover, the “strangely familiar image” evokes the feeling that Daniels is somehow witnessing his own ghostly visage in the infant’s face, alluding, perhaps, to the apparition of Rudy (Bloom’s son who died as babe) in the final lines of “Circe.” However, the parallel between both the deceased child and the haunting end of the story is more complex than Everette’s superficial contention that death merely “duplicates the baby in the man” (323). Attention must be paid to its posture. It is telling that Wright describes the baby as miming a kind of embattled resistance: “the fists were clenched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped black in a soundless cry.” In this context, the parallel to Daniels’s death is made more significant, as he is killed after attempts to awake the masses and challenge their limited “sense of a whole universe” with collective possibility. It is this potential to disrupt the systems of oppression and order that provokes Lawson’s decision to execute Daniels so as to avoid any more of his kind “wreck[ing] things” (84). One cannot escape the obvious reference to Christ, with the “blossoming” around “arms, his legs, his head” mimicking the stigmata and no doubt evoking Joyce’s depiction of Bloom as “Bloom

Christ” (“The Man” 83, *Ulysses* 414).<sup>64</sup> The image is further strengthened by Wright’s addition of: “his jaw sagged and his mouth gaped soundless,” echoing artists’ historical renderings of The Passion (“The Man” 83). Of course, his body’s being carried into the “heart of the earth” after he has been sacrificed, also recalls Jesus descent into hell after his crucifixion (83). By drawing the connections to protest, collectivity, and Christ, both Daniels and the baby’s intermingled death cannot be rendered “meaningless.” Quite the opposite. Their/his death is an act, a sacrifice, a symbol to rouse the masses in embracing a collective alternative to the systems of power that forced Daniels into the sewer in the first place.

Wright himself seems to have purposefully soften an overtly pessimistic outcome, as the first draft’s last paragraph was radically altered. The original ending reads:

He was part of the water now, as he rushed along in the dark; he was part of the stones, a part of the entire insensible world; the world that had no companionship, no compassion for the longing (?), no mercy for human life.

He was buried in the eternally tragic heart of the world (“First Draft”).

Tellingly, the “insensible” nature of the world, the lack of “companionship,” the dearth of “compassion” is excised in the final version to better accentuate the tempered hope represented in the protesting babe and sacrificial Christ. Thus,

---

<sup>64</sup> When asked if he is “the Messiah ben Joseph or ben David,” Bloom “darkly” replies in the affirmative “You have said it” (403-404). He is then asked to “perform a miracle” and subsequently “walks on a net, covers his left eye with his left year, passes through several walls, climbs Nelson’s Pillar, hands from the top ledge by his eyelids, eats twelve dozen oysters (shells included), heals several suffers from kings evil... turns each foot simultaneously in different directions, bids the turn back, eclipses the sun by extending his little finger” (404).

Daniels's mulling-over the "dim meaning" of the various images' "magical relationship" cannot be one of despair, but of awakening— imbued with the dangerous knowledge of how overcome.

That Joyce influenced "The Man Who Lived Underground," there can be no doubt. This interrogation has been but a toe-dip into much vaster, unknown waters. However, it is perhaps, in the end, Daniels's *difference* from Bloom that is demonstrates Wright's prophetic skill as an artist. As we have seen, Daniels, like Bloom, is one of the many, an Everyman raised above the crowd. Daniels, like Bloom, is transfigured into a deity, a veritable "Bloom Christ." Daniels is, like Bloom, a character of supreme compassion, one who dares reach his hand in "compassion" out to strangers. Yet Daniels, unlike Bloom, is never raised to become "emperor-president" and "king-chairman." He is murdered by the police, a stuck-out nail brutally hammered into oblivion by the racist powers that be. Unlike Bloom, Daniels does not make it back to his home and wife. He is fated, instead, to be a sacrifice in the name of better days that have not yet come.

It is a story, in all its absurdity, that still rings true today.

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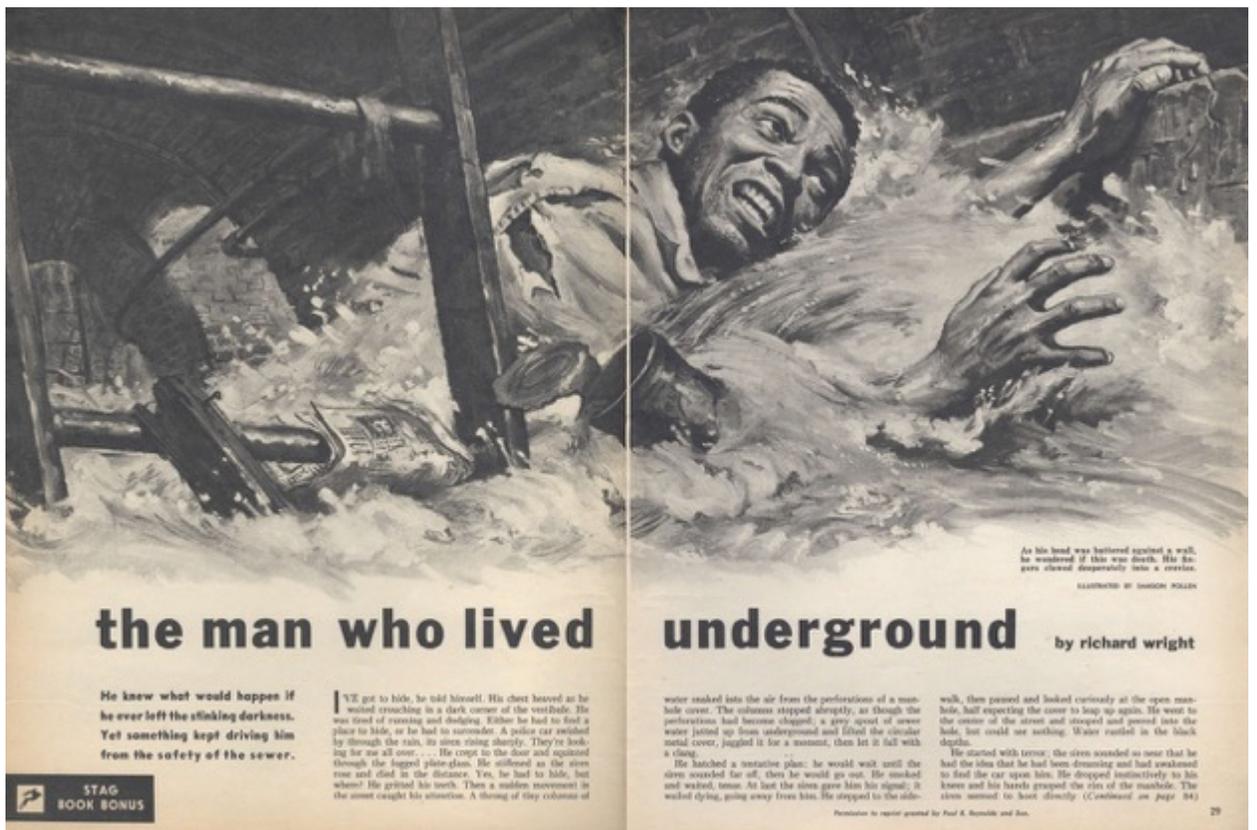
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Center Fold, *Stag*, October Issue, 1956. Beinecke Library JWJ MSS 3, Box 43, Folder 554

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| <i>Titolo</i>  | <i>Ora</i>  | <i>Colore</i>                           | <i>Persone</i>   | <i>Tecnica</i>                       | <i>Scienza, Arte</i> | <i>Senso (Significato)</i> |
|--|-------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| III. MEZZANOTTE<br>(Fusione di Bloom e Stephen)<br>(Ulis. e Tel.)          |             |   |  |                                      |                      |                            |
| 1(16) Eumeo  | 12-1        | —                                       | Eumeo<br>Ulisse<br>Telemaco<br>Il Cattivo<br>Pastore<br>Ulisse<br>Pseudangelo      | Prosa<br>Rilassata                   |                      | L'Imboscata<br>Indigena    |
| 2(17) Ithaca   | 1-2         | stellare<br>lattea                      | Ulisse<br>Telemaco<br>Eurycleia<br>I Proci   | Dialogo<br>Stile pacato<br>Fusione   |                      | La Speranza<br>Armata      |
| 3(18) Penelope   | ∞           | stellare<br>lattea<br>poi<br>nuova alba | Laerte<br>Ulisse<br>Penelope   | Monologo<br>Stile<br>Rassegnato      |                      | Il Passato<br>Dorme        |
|  |             |   |  | NOTTE ALTA                           | —                    | ALBA                       |
|  |             |   |  | ↓                                    |                      | ↓                          |
|  |             |   |  | Ulisse (Bloom)                       |                      | Telemaco (Stephen)         |
| <i>Title</i>   | <i>Time</i> | <i>Colour</i>                           | <i>Persons</i>   | <i>Technic</i>                       | <i>Science, Art</i>  | <i>Sense (Meaning)</i>     |
| III. MIDNIGHT<br>(Fusion of Bloom and Stephen)<br>(Ulysses and Telemachus) |             |   |  |                                      |                      |                            |
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| 2(17) Ithaca   | 1-2         | starry<br>milky                         | Ulysses<br>Telemachus<br>Eurycleia<br>The Suitors                                  | Dialogue<br>Pacified style<br>Fusion |                      | The Armed<br>Hope          |
| 3(18) Penelope   | ∞           | starry<br>milky<br>then<br>new dawn     | Laertes<br>Ulysses<br>Penelope   | Monologue<br>Resigned Style          |                      | The Past<br>Sleeps         |
|  |             |   |  | DEEP NIGHT                           | —                    | DAWN                       |
|  |             |   |  | ↓                                    |                      | ↓                          |
|  |             |   |  | Telemachus (Stephen)                 |                      |                            |

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Elimann, Richard. Ulysses on the Liffey, Oxford University Press, 1986. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornell-trial/detail.action?docID=273325>. Created from cornell-trial on 2020-06-18 09:34:40.

“Linati Schema,” 1920. *Ulysses on the Liffey* (1986)

The aim of drama to involve the audience in the action, and the history of theatre is simply the history of greater or lesser triumph in...audience participation.

--Erwin Piscator, "The Theatre of the Future" (1942)

This is a voice to which the white world, the so-called civilized world, will have to listen more and more as time passes. I do not mean to this particular young Chinese poet, but to the movement which he voices. The exploited races of the world are awakening and demanding the rights of human beings. Here is a young Chinese student whom American authorities sought to deport and deliver to the executioner's axe at home. What he has written is not perfect poetry, but it is the perfect voice of Young China, protesting against the lot of the under-dog.

--Upton Sinclair, Forward to H.T. Tsiang's *Poems of the Chinese Revolution* (1929)

**But I am a Nut no More: "Democratic Epiphany" in *H.T. Tsiang's Hanging On Union Square***

From his dingy cell atop Ellis Island's rocky shores, poet, playwright, novelist, and future Hollywood actor H.T. Tsiang would compose a short two-line poem about the patinaed monument just across the water. Perhaps channeling Ezra Pound's famously brief "In a Station of the Metro" (1911) or William Carlos William's evocatively sparse "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923), the nameless poem pays "direct treatment" to the Statue of Liberty's literal and figurative stance towards the detainees awaiting deportation:

"Statue, turn your ass!

Let us pass!”<sup>65</sup>

Though the couplet is written with obvious jest, its underlying message is far from farcical. When considered in tandem with Tsiang’s eighteen-month long incarceration for allegedly violating the Johnson Reed Act of 1924, these comical lines smuggle a very real and sobering social critique.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the little poem may act as a kind of distillation of Tsiang’s artistic praxis as a whole—challenging the pervading systems of authority while simultaneously goading the literary tastemakers of his day.

Yet, despite Tsiang’s detention and successive years of obscurity, poverty, and rejection, the “Poet Laurette of Ellis Island” has continued to posthumously rabble-rouse through his literary works (Ferrand 74). His self-published novel, *The Hanging on Union Square: An American Epic* (1935), once sold by hand on street corners and in communist meetings, was reissued last year by Random House as a part of their Penguin Classic’s series, indelibly marking Tsiang’s arrival on the American literary scene some fifty years after his death.

Though criticism on Tsiang’s oeuvre has grown exponentially during the past decade, there is still remarkably little on his second, and now most eminent novel, *The Hanging on Union Square*. The narrative follows the misadventures of Mr. Nut, an oddball with genuine aspirations of making his fortune in Depression-Era America. During a hellish walkabout on the frosty streets of Manhattan, Nut becomes politically

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<sup>65</sup> See Pierre Ferrand’s *A Question of Allegiance* (1990), 73-75. According to Zhaoming Qian’s *Orientalism and Modernism* (1995), William Carlos Williams’s library included copies of Tsiang’s *China Red* (1933) and *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), both “inscribed to WCW from the author” (Qian 180).

<sup>66</sup> The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was passed by congress to limit the flow of Asian laborers into the United States.

radicalized, taking it upon himself to not only end capitalism, but usher forth a utopic social revolution. Though contemporary scholars have identified many of *Hanging's* diverse cultural influences, none have adequately explored the novel's engagement with American agitprop theatre. In this chapter, I investigate the ways Tsiang skillfully adapts agitprop's four core dramaturgical tenets to more effectively articulate his radical vision of "democratic epiphany." Indeed, reading *Hanging* with an eye to agitprop theatre will not only challenge established critical assumptions about the novel's "crude" style, but situate Tsiang's audacious novel into a larger multiethnic literary tradition of American Modernism in the interwar period. However, before studying the technical intricacies of Tsiang's work, it will be helpful to briefly survey his life, as the twists and turns of Tsiang's own personal dramas often feel stranger than his fiction.

### **Always the Agitator: The Life and Times of H.T. Tsiang**

Hsi Tseng Tsiang was born in 1899 to a poor family in the village of Qi'an, Tongzhou District, China. Though orphaned at the age of thirteen and responsible for a brood of younger siblings, Tsiang would prove an excellent student, clever enough to earn scholarships to Tongzhou Teachers' School in Jiangsu Province and Southeastern University in Nanjing ("Afterword" 226).<sup>67</sup> As a young scholar, Tsiang would develop a penchant for troublemaking, often using class breaks to publicly

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<sup>67</sup> His father, a grain store worker, died when Tsiang was just nine. His mother, a maid, would pass four years later. For more on Tsiang's early life, see Floyd Chueng's "Afterword" in Kaya Press's 2013 edition of *The Hanging on Union Square*.

denounce the socio-cultural issues of his day such as foot binding and ancestral worship. His first arrest would come at age of sixteen for organizing a demonstration against then Chinese President Yuan Shikai. Thanks to a headmaster's entreaties, Tsiang was released and allowed to finish his schooling, eventually earning a B.A. in political economy in 1925.<sup>68</sup> After failing to emigrate to the Soviet Union in 1926, Tsiang ventured across the Pacific to the United States, enrolling as a graduate student at Stanford University.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst in the Bay Area, Tsiang would edit *Young China*, a local newspaper affiliated with the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang (KMT). However, Tsiang would soon grow tired of the periodical's fascist leanings, departing later in the term to his start own leftist bilingual periodical, *Chinese Guide in America*. Always the agitator, Tsiang would subsequently renounce his formal association with the Kuomintang, a decision that would lead to a physical attack on his person by a throng of ardent KMT supporters ("Afterword" 226). For his incitement of mob violence and general troublemaking, Tsiang was expelled from Leland Stanford in the spring of 1927 and detained by immigration authorities for violating his student-exempt status. After paying the authorities \$3,000—a sum furtively raised by sympathetic "Chinese friends"—Tsiang was released from prison (Fowler 127-128). Yet, physical assault,

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<sup>68</sup> Tsiang was frustrated by President Shikai's acquiescence to Imperial Japan's infamous Twenty-One Demands. See Chueng's "Afterword," page 226. According to Hua Hsu, Tsiang took courses in English, and "acquired a relatively decent grasp" of the language ("Remarkable" 3).

<sup>69</sup> Though the limitations set the Johnson-Reed Act (1924) were in full swing, Tsiang was allowed to enter the country under a legal provision in the National Origins Act (1924) that made exceptions for students.

expulsion, and arrest would not deter Tsiang from further perturbing both the Chinese community and the American government. During the winter of 1928, Tsiang would organize anti-KMT protests up and down the West Coast. Fittingly crowned “leader of the radicals,” a *Los Angeles Times* article dated February 27, 1928 reports Tsiang was arrested by the LAPD for protesting the arrival of “Prof. Chow Loo,” a “member of the executive committee of the Kuo-Min-Tang” (“Chinese Meet” A9).

Seeking friendlier coasts, Tsiang would trek across the country and enroll at Columbia University in the fall of 1928. He would make ends meet by washing dishes at the Howdy Club, a Greenwich bar on 47 West Third Street, which, in addition to nightly stripteases and occasional gunfights, billed itself as “The Village at its strangest... not for the squeamish” (“Current Entertainment” 10).<sup>70</sup> A few stops north on the Red Line, Tsiang would take courses in law, economics, and history, receiving personal encouragement from eminent professors like Ashley Thorndike, Mark Van Doren, and John Dewey (“H.T Tsiang” 59, “Afterword” 227, McDougall 54). New York City’s cultural milieu would prove a catalyst for Tsiang’s literary yearnings, as he, though often in lieu of his studies, began to compose and publish radical poetry. In May 1928, Tsiang’s poems “Shantung” and “May 30<sup>th</sup>” would appear, respectively, in *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, with three more to follow in July and August.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Floyd Chueng, “H.T. Tsiang: Literary Innovator and Activist” 64 (2011). Also, see Lost Womyn’s Space (<http://lostwomynsspace.blogspot.com/2011/08/howdy-club.html>). On the website, Lisa E. Davis observes “The Howdy Club is the earliest club I know about that hired lesbians as entertainers—strippers, singers... and chorus boys who might serve the first round of drinks, then join the floorshow” (“Howdy Club”).

<sup>71</sup> “Shantung” was published by *The Daily Worker* on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1928. “May 30<sup>th</sup>” was published by *New Masses* on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1928. “Gum Shan Ding” was published by *The Daily*

Immersed in the flourishing proletarian art scene, Tsiang would cross paths with the likes of Mike Gold, Edwin Rolfe, Joseph Freeman, and Langston Hughes [See Figure 7].<sup>72</sup> Later in 1929, just six months after having “penned his first poem—in English or Chinese,” Tsiang would self-publish *Poems of the Chinese Revolution*, a collection of nine poems complete with an endorsement (of sorts) by Upton Sinclair:

This is a voice to which the white world, the so-called civilized world, will have to listen more and more as time passes. I do not mean to this particular young Chinese poet, but to the movement which he voices. The exploited races of the world are awakening and demanding the rights of human beings. Here is a young Chinese student whom American authorities sought to deport and deliver to the executioner's axe at home. What he has written is not perfect poetry, but it is the perfect voice of Young China, protesting against the lot of the under-dog. (“Remarkable” 4, *Poems* 3)

*Poems* would not bring Tsiang the acclaim he craved, though one poem from the collection, “Rickshaw Boy,” would eventually be published “facing a poem by Langston Hughes... in a short-lived African American literary journal, *The Voice of Tomorrow*” (Miller 68). Additionally, composer Ruth Crawford Seeger would set “Sacco, Vanzetti” and “Chinaman, Laundryman” to music, performing “Sacco, Vanzetti” at Carnegie Hall on March 6, 1933, and “Chinaman, Laundryman” at the Mellon Gallery in Philadelphia on March 27, 1933 (“H.T. Tsiang” 61). Despite these

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*Worker* July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1928. “Shanghai” was published by *The Daily Worker* August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1928. “Sacco, Vanzetti” was published by *The Daily Worker* August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

flashes of minor success, Tsiang would still face humiliating rejection from his literary peers. A 1933 write-up in the *Washington Post* details Tsiang was “unceremoniously” removed from an open poetry gallery in Washington Square Park (“‘Village’ Pegasus” 2). “But even in that untrammelled atmosphere censorship reared what has been technically designated as its ugly head,” the column reads, “H.T. Tsiang, youthful Chinese radical... attempted to exhibit his ‘Poems of the Chinese Revolution’” and was evicted on charges of displaying and distributing “propaganda” (“‘Village’ Pegasus” 2).

Tsiang would follow *Poems* with his first self-published novel, *China Red* (1931). A strange blend of the epistolary and the revolutionary, the narrative chronicles the correspondence between two young lovers, Chi-Ku-Niang and Sheng-Chin-Yeu (the latter a fictionalized version of Tsiang himself).<sup>73</sup> Tsiang’s next novel, *The Hanging on Union Square: An American Epic*, would be self-published in 1935. With little to no interest from the major publishing houses, Tsiang hawked the novel on city streets and at political rallies, selling copies at major discount to “fellow travelers” and the unemployed. However, Tsiang’s endless (some would say relentless) hustle would quickly irk those in the leftist community, with *New Masses* even going so far as to publish a small editorial to address the issue: “[Tsiang] has made himself a familiar and now unwelcome figure, at radical gatherings where he sells his books,” viciously adding, “[a]s it happens, Mr. Tsiang is not much of a writer,

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<sup>73</sup> While Chi stays in China, Sheng dares to cross the Pacific to study at Stanford University where he becomes radicalized and publishes a “group of political essays disguised in story form, criticizing the inner affairs of the Chinese Nationalist Party” (*China* 65).

and his career as a revolutionist is such as to hinder rather than to help” (“Between Ourselves” 30).

For his third novel, *And China Has Hands* (1937), Tsiang was able to find a commercial publisher in Robert Speller Publishing Corporation—his first and only. Though the novel was marketed as a voyage into the exotic realm behind the counter of a Chinese laundry, the book would flop and force Tsiang, yet again, to self-publish his next project.<sup>74</sup> His last and final monograph, *China Marches On* (1938), is a dramatic reworking of the renowned Hua Mulan legend. The narrative follows Mu-Lan Chang (Tsiang’s version of the heroine) as she leads an elite group of Chinese troopers to combat the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, inspiring her comrades to “Fight till death/ Every One!” (*China Marches* 19).

Tsiang seems to have devoted almost all of his energy and funds into publishing and distributing his work, letting his registration with Columbia University lapse for almost two full years.<sup>75</sup> In the winter of 1940, the authorities would again come for Tsiang, this time for feasibly violating, in addition to the Johnson Reed Act, a combination of “The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, The Alien Immigration Act of 1917, and the Anarchist Act of 1918” (“Afterword” 238). While imprisoned on Ellis Island, Tsiang would write to a truly astonishing number of public figures, urging

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<sup>74</sup> Included in the original dustcover, the promotional blurb reads, in part, “And China Has Hands is the story of a Chinese laundry-man in New York, his adventures in business, racketeering, gambling and—love! Quite possibly you have been in the front part of a Chinese laundry; now, with this book, step past the counter and into another world beyond” (*Hands*).

<sup>75</sup> Tsiang would claim he was sick during this extended period, and therefore unable to attend his classes. See Hua Hsu’s “The Remarkable Forgotten Life of H.T. Tsiang” in *The New Yorker*.

them to advocate on his behalf. Among politicians and minor bureaucrats, Tsiang elicited vouchers of support from a coterie of East Coast literati including Bruce Bliven, Archibald MacLeish, John Haynes Holmes, Lewis Gannet, and Waldo Frank. On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Frank would publish “The Case of H.T. Tsiang” in *The New Republic*, calling his readers’ attention to “the plight of H.T. Tsiang, Chinese poet, patriot, student and champion of social justice” (605). Gannet would even write Eleanor Roosevelt, stating that although he had “never been much impressed with the quality of Mr. Tsiang’s literary work,” he had taken a personal interest in the young writer’s case (Gannet qtd. in *Floating* 161). Tsiang’s greatest champion would be Rockwell Kent, the socialist artist and illustrator whose haunting sketches for the 1930 edition of *Moby Dick* helped propel the novel back onto best seller lists.

Tsiang seems to have written Kent out of the blue, padding his introductory letter with saccharine admiration: “For many years I saw your wood cut, because of your thin lines and I thought you were a delicate person./ Lately when I saw your picture printed in the paper, your eyes are so bright and as a whole you seem to be very tough” (Letter, Dec. 23). Attempting to secure Kent’s support, Tsiang promises to send “some clippings about the real reason why I get in trouble” (Letter, Dec. 23).

Yet, in the following weeks and months, Tsiang would send Kent more than clippings, forwarding a deluge of printed works, poems, articles, and even a lewd cartoon.<sup>76</sup> In a letter scribbled onto a lengthy reel of toilet paper, Tsiang makes

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<sup>76</sup> In his essay “H.T. Tsiang’s Proletarian Burlesque” (2011), Aaron Lecklider notes that in a letter dated December 7, Tsiang attached a sketch of Kent sporting “a remarkably tumescent endowment” (93). Tsiang would also send a copy of his poetry collection *The Peach* which has remained unpublished.

coquettish overtures to his advocate whom he would soon refer to as either “The Artist” or “Father”: “your pictures give me the good feeling like you taking eye-bath... your eyes as if something caressing or some sort I have no words to express” (Letter Sept. 25, Letter May 12). To this message scrawled on his government-issued stationary, Tsiang appends a strange equation, “ $4+8=11$ ,” a calculation of the number of hairs on Kent’s “shinely balled” head (Letter Jan. 18) [See Figure 8]. When Kent’s personal correspondence slowed, Tsiang’s flirtation would extend to Kent’s secretary and wife Shirley Johnstone, whom Tsiang playfully referred to as “Shirley Temple” (Letter March 9).<sup>77</sup>

Kent worked diligently to secure Tsiang’s release, using what literary celebrity he possessed to sway the institutional powers that be, including Elenore Weinstock of the National Committee for People’s Rights, Major Lemuel B. Scofield of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and Attorney General Robert H. Jackson (Letter Jan 10, Letter March 14, Letter Jan 10). Tsiang’s discharge would come in the summer of 1941 after Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin of Montana introduced HB 4982, a bill that directly canceled Tsiang’s deportation order [See Figure 9].

A few weeks later, after failing to borrow one thousand dollars from his new friend and patron, Tsiang visited the Kent’s secluded farm in Ausable Forks, New York.<sup>78</sup> In a message to Shirley Johnstone, Tsiang describes his time in Ausable Forks

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<sup>77</sup> In a letter dated September 7, 1941, Tsiang makes mention that other men find “Mrs. Kent” “beautiful” (Letter, Sep. 11).

<sup>78</sup> Tsiang’s telegram to Kent reads: STAY. BOND ONE THOUSAND CIVIL LIBERTIES TO FURNISH REST. MAIL. THANKS (Letter, July 3<sup>rd</sup>).

akin to being “intoxicated,” promising he will “chew slowly” on his “once in a life time” experience (Letter Sept 3) [See Figure 10]. However, Tsiang’s intoxication with Kent’s friendship would lead to intemperance as he continued to send both Rockwell and Shirley anything and everything, including the ingredients for chop suey and firecrackers (Letter Sept 11, Letter Sept 25). Tsiang’s excessive correspondence was not just limited to Kent and would soon prove aggravating to those who lent even their vaguest support. In October 1941, Bruce Bliven warns Tsiang against such incessant badgering, writing: “you might even do yourself harm if you continue to solicit letters of introduction that were no longer necessary, as I am sure you will understand” (Letter Oct 3). But Tsiang would not understand, and continued to push all connections he had to see his books in commercial print. Various publishers, some of whom were Kent’s personal friends, would write to tell of Tsiang’s “increasing wildness and confusion” (Letter Oct 20). Kent, now having to generate numerous letters of apology, would attempt to explain Tsiang’s erratic behavior as due to his inherently “emotional” and “unstable” nature (Letter Oct 23).<sup>79</sup> Alas, after Tsiang received a formal rejection from John Day Company, Kent was forced to dole out what Tsiang would later call, “a hard whipping”:

Realize that in these terrific times, when all worth-while people are devoted all of their energies to the advancement of causes for the common good, you, H.T. Tsiang, are doing nothing beyond trying to

---

<sup>79</sup> On October 9<sup>th</sup>, Tsiang would send a rambling letter to the Editor-in-Chief of John Day’s home address, disclosing information about lawyer’s fees and suggesting marketing plans for his future novel (Letter Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>).

enlist people in the defense and promotion of H.T. Tsiang. Your work suffers from this. And you will suffer from it in your personal relations and in your relations with me simply because, nowadays, we are all too busy to be much concerned... The text time you turn to me—and I hope you will turn again—it must be on behalf of China, not on behalf of yourself. (Letter Oct 25)

Tsiang, rather unbelievably, would respond by asking for three more letters of introduction (Letter Oct 26).

With no friends, and New York's revolutionary climate quickly chilling, Tsiang would retreat to Los Angeles, taking bit parts in Hollywood films such as *The Purple Heart* (1944) and *Ocean's Eleven* (1960) as well as television shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. Tsiang would continue his oddball ways, performing one-man adaptations of the *Hanging on Union Square* and a leftist version of Hamlet provocatively titled "Wedding at A Nudist Colony" which Hollywood stars Vincent Price, Gregory Peck, Orson Welles, Rita Hayworth, and Alfred Hitchcock would come to see ("Remarkable" 9, *Floating* 199).<sup>80</sup>

In the end, perhaps the most dedicated students of Tsiang's exploits were the FBI. Hua Hsu claims Tsiang's surveillance file is, in itself, "an admirable piece of scholarship" (*Floating* 201). "Tsiang himself never penned so straightforwardly comprehensive an account of his life and time," Hsu writes, "[t]here are sad observations of minor debts, low-paying jobs as a busboy, poor health, poor

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<sup>80</sup> During productions of "Wedding at A Nudist Colony," Yorick's skull supposedly replaced by a tin can.

attendance as a student, and poor grades” (201-202). Though, if there is any solace to be found in Tsiang’s unhappy fate, it is that he stayed true to his eccentricities. Tucked away in the pages of lengthy report, an informant “‘of known reliability’ describes a meeting of the Hollywood Communist Club where Tsiang made a desperate appeal for members to buy tickets to a one-man show he was staging” (Floating 202).<sup>81</sup>

H.T. Tsiang died in Hollywood on July 16, 1971. His obituary in *Variety* describes Tsiang as “the author of five or more novels, his best known... ‘The Hanging On Union Square,’” mentioning also that Tsiang had, at least in his later days, “claimed to be the nephew of Chiang Kai-Shek” (“Obituaries” 64). H.T. Tsiang is buried in Evergreen Cemetery, just off the 60 Freeway in Boyle Heights. His gravestone incorrectly lists his birth year as 1906.

### **“For What is Any Critic to Do?”: A Brief History of “Tsiang Studies”**

In May of 2019, Random House added four books by Asian Americans to their Penguin Classics Series, garnering media attention from *Vox*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Nation*, and even NPR’s *Fresh Air*.<sup>82</sup> The text’s addition was some thirteen years in the making, the result of a 2006 mandate issued by executive editor

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<sup>81</sup> In a report from the Los Angeles FBI field office dated September 10, 1951, Tsiang is mentioned at having been “observed at a Communist Party and Communist Party Front meetings in Los Angeles” and known to be “[r]egarded by local Chinese sources as harmless ‘character and crackpot’” (qtd. in *Floating* 201).

<sup>82</sup> See “Penguin Classics Adds Four Books by Asian Americans to the U.S. Canon” in the *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2019; “How to Publish Classics Books that aren’t just by Dead White Men” in *Vox* May 21, 2019; “H.T. Tsiang, the Flaneur of Socialist Fiction” in *The Nation* January 15, 2020; and “Love, Disappointment Course Through 4 Asian American Classic Novels” on NPR’s *Fresh Air* May 28, 2019.

John Siciliano to “diversify the Penguin Classics internationally” (Maher “Penguin Classics”). Considered “a significant barometer of what comprises the Anglophone literary canon,” the addition of *The Hanging on Union Square* to this “venerable list” has generated renewed critical interest in Tsiang’s strange yet powerful work (Hong “Adds Four”). The re-released books feature glossy cover illustrations complete with introductions and editor’s notes by prominent Asian American scholars.<sup>83</sup>

Penguin’s praise of *Hanging* as being “absurdist, inventive, and suffused with revolutionary fervor... a work of blazing wit and originality” glows in stark comparison to the work’s initial reception by the literary critics of Tsiang’s day (“The Hanging”). In her 1935 review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Eda Lou Walton rhetorically queries, “for what is any critic to do with a man who so completely mixes up Chinese symbols and American slang, fantasy and complete seriousness, with a writer who tells a long, fairly connected story, in a series of little symbolic scenes, tiny paragraphs like tiny Chinese poems?” (9). She continues, mixing racial insensitivity with blatant discourtesy: “the Chinese author is naïve, not desperate and hardboiled. When he talks of flop houses, of street life, of perversions, he does so with true Chinese reticence... Mr. Tsiang is no thinker. He is as naïve and yet as cunning as any little child might be” (9). Yet, for all her offensive remarks, Walton does concede “[h]ere is one of the most amusing books the reviewer has seen in some time,” describing Tsiang’s “childlike fantasy” as “moving and...wildly fantastic” (9).

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<sup>83</sup> The “Introduction” for Penguin’s *The Hanging on Union Square* is written by Hua Hsu. The “Afterword” is written by Floyd Chueng.

Writing for the *New Republic*, Kenneth White makes a slightly more nuanced evaluation, elucidating that “the brutal gaiety of the book, the intentionally naïve humor gain it more effectiveness than might be found in a dozen soggy novels about the same situations,” though, he too ultimately wonders if *The Hanging on Union Square* is “more of a cartoon than a novel” (343-344).<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, the labeling of Tsiang’s work as “childlike” would follow him all the way into the early 1980s when Asian American literature burgeoned into its own autonomous discipline. Elain Kim’s field-defining *Asian American Literature* (1984) merely brushes over Tsiang, dedicating two paragraphs to one novel, frankly describing *And China Has Hands* as “roughly written” (109). Kim does, however, credit *Hands* with being “the first fictional rendition of the bachelor society in English by a Chinese immigrant,” a recognition that is no doubt responsible for the lopsided amount of critical work devoted exclusively to *Hands* (109). David Palumbo-Liu, in his equally important *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999) follows Kim’s lead, critiquing *Hands* for its “rather crude prose style of social realist fable” while acknowledging Tsiang’s ability to “defin[e] the function of China in the diasporic and hybrid imagination” (57).

In between these landmark texts, Tsiang’s works would find greater appreciation in Alan Wald’s short essay, “Introduction to H.T. Tsiang” (1996). Where previous critics carefully checked their praise with an admission of Tsiang’s “roughly”

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<sup>84</sup> A review in *New Masses*, written July 16, 1935, provides the highest praise, though, also the shortest. “THE HANGING ON UNION SQUARE, by H.T. Tsiang” is “[a]n interesting experimental novel about the unemployed” the article reads, “[p]erhaps the first novel with a proletarian theme written in expressionistic technique” (“Brief Review”).

hewn style, Wald is the first (perhaps ever) to unqualifiedly acclaim Tsiang as “among the most innovative and idiosyncratic writers drawn to the United States Communist cultural movement of the Great Depression,” adding, “Tsiang...ranks as one of the more productive Asian American authors of the imaginative literature in English of the interwar period” (341). In the years to come Julia Lee (2005), Chris Vials (2009), Floyd Chueng (2011), Aaron Lecklider (2011), Hua Hsu (2016), and Joshua Miller (2017) would build on Wald’s appeal for Tsiang’s importance, unraveling Tsiang’s delicate interlacing of “experimental modernism” and “Chinese literary structures unfamiliar to U.S. readers” (Vials 123).<sup>85</sup>

Yet, the impetus for this study comes not from the established body of Tsiang criticism, but from an observation made by journalist Nawal Arjini. In her 2019 article “Flaneur of the Proletariat” for *The Nation*, Arjini plainly observes, “although it’s written as a novel, *The Hanging on Union Square* hews more closely to the conventions of drama,” noting “[p]oetic interludes conclude its first three ‘acts,’ and each has a refrain, repeated at the beginning of each scene” (Arjini). Indeed, Arjini cogently identifies what’s often proved difficult to square about Tsiang’s text— the seeming incoherence of its many forms. Drama, poetry, and communist propaganda all comingle in the body of a single novel with little in the way to elucidate Tsiang’s approach. Though such a configuration has left many critics flummoxed, I contend this varied array of forms and techniques can be elucidated through Tsiang’s

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<sup>85</sup> See Julia Lee’s “The Capitalist and Imperialist Critique in H. T. Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands*” (2005), Richard Jean So’s “Chinese Exclusion Fiction and Global Histories of Race: HT Tsiang and Theodor Dreiser” (2006), and Chris Vials’s *Realism for the Masses: Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (2009)

underexamined relationship with radical theatre. By investigating Tsiang's engagement with agitprop performance, Tsiang's text not only divulges the reasoning behind *Hanging*'s peculiar structure, but provides the keys to decipher its notoriously shocking climax.

### **“The Birthcry of the Thirties”: Agitprop Theatre’s Radical Influence**

On a dreary January night in 1935, the Civic Repertory Theatre's stage was overrun by an electrified audience. Above stomping boots and clapping hands, shouts of “STRIKE!” erupted over a mass of swarming spectators and, for a brief and glorious moment, social revolution seemed imminent. The exhilarated assemblage was the first to witness Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, a one act play feverishly written over the course of three days in response to a citywide taxi strike. Harold Clurman, who was among the elated spectators, would later describe the audience's reaction in his part history, part memoir, *The Fervent Years* (1945). “The first scene of *Lefty* had not played two minutes,” he excitedly details,

when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience towards the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one. Line after line brought applause, whistles, bravos, and heartfelt shouts of kinship... The audience, I say, was delirious. It stormed the stage, which I persuaded the stunned author to mount.

People went from the theatre dazed and happy: a new awareness and confidence had entered their lives.” (147-148) [See Figure 11]

Odets, the “stunned author,” would later recall his own opening night experience in very similar terms:

The audience stopped the show after each scene; they got up, they began to cheer and weep... from the stage to the theatre and back and forth the identity was so complete, there was such at-oneness with the audience and actors, that the actors didn’t know whether they were acting and the audience didn’t know whether they were sitting and watching it, or had changed position. (83)<sup>86</sup>

Heavily influenced by agitprop techniques, Odets’s “agitational masterpiece” would eventually move uptown to the Longacre Theatre on March 26<sup>th</sup> to better accommodate the crowds who hungered to see the show that was said to be “the birthcry of the thirties” (Saal 64, Clurman 148).

Four months later, *The New Yorker* would find H.T. Tsiang outside the Longacre, selling shoddy copies of *The Hanging on Union Square* to those in line along West 48<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>87</sup> Sent to find if rumors about the eccentric “self-contained

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<sup>86</sup> The first-hand accounts from *Waiting for Lefty*’s opening night are astounding. Cast member Ruth Nelson would later recollect “and when they couldn’t applaud anymore, they stomped their feet. And this was an old theater, a wooden theatre, you know, and here are these of feet stomping on.. all I could think was ‘My God, they are going to bring the balcony down!’” (qtd. in David Barbour and Lori Seward. “Waiting for Lefty” 40).

<sup>87</sup> In Tsiang’s FBI surveillance file, Clifford Odets states he had known Tsiang personally, mentioning the quirky writer was “one of the finest, sweetest and most Christian-like men he has ever met” (*Floating* 203).

literary unit...[who] writes, publishes, sells, and delivers his books” were true, the exposé’s reporters were immediately greeted by having copies of *Hanging* thrust into their hands (“Novelist” 10).<sup>88</sup> Though no one likely made the connection between *Waiting for Lefty* and *The Hanging on Union Square* that day, Tsiang’s cheaply bound novel was drawn from the very same roots in agitprop theatre, seeking desperately to foment its own “tidal wave,” to produce its own “joyous fervor,” to reach outside its pages to express a glorious moment where both his fictional characters and faithful readers successfully merge to “become one.”<sup>89</sup>

That drama influenced *The Hanging on Union Square* is well established. In almost all of the academic studies on *Hanging*, at least some reference (though often in passing) is made to the workers’ theatre movement that flourished throughout Depression-era New York City. In his essay “H.T. Tsiang’s Proletarian Burlesque” (2011), Aaron Lecklider briefly mentions that Tsiang “immers[ed] himself in the world of avant-garde drama and absorb[ed] the tenets of epic theater” (104). Likewise, Joshua L. Miller lists “street performance theatre” as one of the many literary genres *Hanging* thoroughly “smash[ed]” (68).<sup>90</sup> Dedicating three paragraphs in his extensive

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<sup>88</sup> Tsiang tells *The New Yorker* that while he composed *Hanging*, he “lived in a Montclair chop-suey palace run by his friend... who supplied all necessities for creation: a typewriter, an occasional dish of chow mein, and plenty of chinse brandy” (“Novelist” 10). The articles unnamed authors, to their credit, do mention they took the time to read *The Hanging on Union Square*, though they only “sort of enjoyed it” (“Novelist” 11).

<sup>89</sup> In his thorough account of 1930’s drama, Morgan Himmelstein notes “the real source of [Waiting for Lefty]... was the agitprop” (38).

<sup>90</sup> Others include “allegorical characters... stream-of-conscious narration, and absurdist satire” (Miller 86).

afterword, Floyd Chueng confidently affirms that Tsiang “undoubtedly borrowed” from the agitprop play, underscoring the novel’s use of “terse, repetitive language that aims not at telling a traditional story but rather at revealing a critical perspective on reality and calling audience members to action” (232-233).

Though Chueng’s contention that Tsiang “undoubtedly borrowed” from agitprop is, I believe, correct, Tsiang’s first documented involvement in the realm of radical theatre would better be classified as agitprop adjacent. Broadway’s Playbill Archives reveal Tsiang was cast as “second boatman” in a 1930 production of Soviet playwright Sergei Tretiakov’s *Roar China!* (1926), a gritty tale about Chinese dockworkers who rise up to challenge a British gunboat captain [See Figure 12].<sup>91</sup> Though Tsiang is not explicitly mentioned, Leon Dennen in his review for *New Masses* applauds the “superb” acting of the “untrained Chinese cast,” adding “[e]very mispronounced English word only carries added conviction” (16).<sup>92</sup>

Given Tsiang’s interest in communist political organizations and leftist theatre, it would have been difficult—perhaps nearly impossible—for the struggling leftist author/actor to not cross paths with at least some of the over “400 agit-prop groups in America” who performed throughout the early 1930s in union halls, at political rallies, and on bustling street corners (Cosgrove 210). Indeed, *Hanging*’s aforementioned book reviews only strengthen Tsiang’s connection to the dramatic form, as agitprop

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<sup>91</sup> According to Broadway’s Playbill Archives, *Roar China!* ran a total of seventy-two performances at the Martin Beck Theatre on W 45<sup>th</sup> street from October 27 till December 27 1930 (“Roar China”)

<sup>92</sup> Dennen’s article also mentions *Roar China*’s debt to agitprop by using “black-outs” and a “curtain-less stage” (16).

plays were often demarcated by their being “loosely constructed of episodes” (Walton) and “offer[ing] satiric cartoons instead of characters” (White) (Himmelstein 9).

Agitprop (a portmanteau of agitation and propaganda) was the name given to a particular style of Soviet influenced street theatre brought to the United States by Russian and German immigrants. Though a foreign method of drama, agitprop would grow to become “the dominant style of American political theatre from about the late 1920s... to about 1935... a period roughly corresponding to the most militant phase of American class struggle,” a period, also, in which Tsiang would compose and self-publish the bulk of his literary oeuvre including *The Hanging on Union Square* (Saal 57). Agitprop troupes were highly mobile and often comprised of dedicated amateurs, relying not on decorated stages or detailed props but sheer audacity. In his brief history of the movement, agitprop playwright Ben Blake reminisces about how players “would turn up at labor meetings, rallies for the unemployed, and the like, give one or two of their agitprop plays for fifteen or twenty minutes on stage if there was one, or on speakers’ platform, or even on the floor if there was no platform” (15). Pieces would often consist of “mass recitations with very little scenery and simple, symbolic costumes, deliberately calculated for mobility and adaptability for the playing environment” (15). Though Blake concedes agitprop plays were “crude in plot and characterization and full of revolutionary cliché’s” they efficiently and effectively delivered “a hard hitting directness of statement that would often strike off flaming sparks of emotion in the beholder” (15). Engagement with the audience was valued beyond all else with “actors speak[ing] directly to the audience” and “call[ing] on the audience to participate in the show” (Himmelstein 9).

Two of the most prominent agitprop troupes were German-speaking Proletbühne and the English-speaking Worker's Laboratory Theatre who, together, "formed the nucleus of New York's expanding agit-prop movement" (Cosgrove 203). The Proletbühne, guided by artistic director John Bonn, was strongly influenced by German agitational revues, absorbing "their phenomenal fusion of satire, music, jazz-gymnastics...and propaganda" (202). One of their most popular performances, *Scottsboro* (1931), dramatized the infamous incident only weeks after it occurred in Alabama. At their street shows, the Proletbühne players, garbed in black, would enclose the loose crowd of curious onlookers, chanting their lines in ominous rhythm.

*1<sup>st</sup> player:* Attention!

*2<sup>nd</sup> player:* Attention, workers!

*3<sup>rd</sup> player:* Friends!

*4<sup>th</sup> player:* Fellow workers!

*5<sup>th</sup> player:* Comrades!

*All six:* ATTENTION!

*1<sup>st</sup> player:* Hear the story — of the nine Negro boys — in Scottsboro, Alabama.  
(Blake 16)

Frightened and thrilled, the audience would watch in amazement as the "players would crouch forward, and in a half-whisper that conveyed all the horrors and pathos of the plight of the victims," and "chant the refrain that kept recurring throughout the piece":

In Scottsboro  
In Scottsboro  
Murder Stalks the streets  
In Scottsboro  
In Scottsboro  
Death haunts the cells. (16)

Though *Scottsboro* was written and performed in German, the play "never failed to stir any audience before whom it was presented," a testament to "the dramatic power

of the Prolet-Buehne, to their ability to convey the dramatic idea through emotion and rhythm” (16). The mass recitations and pulsing chants were described by Federal Theatre Project Director Hallie Flanagan as “a direct, terse, hard hitting phraseology, a machine gun repetition, a sharp, type analysis with no individual characterization and a climax often ending in a mass demonstration” (914). Indeed, at the end of *Hanging*’s first “act,” Tsiang slyly winks at agitprop enthusiasts, explicitly mentioning “Scottsboro” when a black communist graciously aids Mr. Nut from being beaten to death by police officers (*Hanging* 53). Much like the Proletbühne’s stirred audience, Nut’s thrashing is a moment of profound awakening and unity as he notices: “the blood of the colored race and the blood of the white race that fell on the cement pavement were of one color” (54).

Tsiang would also have been likely familiar with the Worker’s Laboratory Theatre (the other half of agitprop’s New York nucleus) through their monthly *Worker’s Theatre Magazine* (1931-1933). Though poorly mimeographed, *Worker’s Theater* was a treasure trove for struggling leftist artists, often publishing free scripts for agitational plays and providing coaching for actors and writers who sought to be more involved in radical drama.<sup>93</sup> [See Figure 13]. In a matter of two years, the small periodical would grow into readership of 3,500 and rename itself *New Theatre* (1933-1937), drawing illustrious contributors like theatrical designer Mordecai Gorelik and

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<sup>93</sup> An article in the inaugural issue of *Worker’s Theatre* reaches out to young leftists, “If you are a worker in a shop, a factory or a mine, where the struggle for existence makes one day as dark as the other; if you are oppressed by the iron heel of capitalism, and you want to cry out in protest—organize a dramatic group... Organize dramatic groups and write to us. Ask us for advice. Ask us for plays, tell us of your problems and we will help you solve them. We may be able to help” (“Organize Dramatic Groups” 3).

communist firebrand Mike Gold, who, as mentioned earlier, Tsiang likely knew personally [See Figure 14].

*Hanging*'s ties to the world of radical drama are further bolstered by Tsiang's adaptation of *The Hanging on Union Square* into a short play for Erwin Piscator's famed Dramatic Workshop at the New School.<sup>94</sup> Tsiang's playscripts in Piscator's unpublished papers reveal agitprop's direct influence, with Tsiang choosing to cut Mr. Nut's serialized journey down to a single, hard-hitting act. Ornamented with last minute edits and excisions, Tsiang's manuscript bears the hallmarks of agitprop theatre, using the "blackout" instead of a curtain and dressing players "in black; to show that the play as a world which we live in at present, is rather dark" ("One Hour In Heaven" ) [See Figures 15 and 16]. However, Tsiang's revised playscripts tell only part of the story. To fully account for the ways in which agitprop directly influenced the composition of the novel, one must inspect the ways in which Tsiang skillfully employed its core dramaturgical methods. Theatre historian Ilka Saal's *New Deal Theatre* (2007) provides a valuable tool for such examination by identifying the four major tenets of agitprop theatre. To better situate our consideration of democratic epiphany and its attendant techniques, it will be crucial to explore the ways in which Saal's tenets of "community" setting, "typage," "repetition," and "montage" each operate within *The Hanging on Union Square*.

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<sup>94</sup> A renowned agitational director and pioneer in epic theatre, Piscator would integrate German agitprop techniques into his teachings, passing a dedication to social justice along to star pupils Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte, and Tennessee Williams.

**“Reds, Socialists, Anarchists”:** Community Setting in *The Hanging On Union Square*.

By intentionally utilizing the street as a performance space, Saal asserts agitprop tore down “the barrier between stage and auditorium, reality and fiction” to more effectively create a genuine “sense of community” (54). The result “is one of great immediacy and urgency,” further enhanced by the play’s presenting “as life itself to the audience and, in this manner, enabling their spontaneous psychological and emotional identification” (64-65). Tsiang, too, would attempt to present his work as “life itself” by using the actual parks and sidewalks in and around Union Square as his setting—only a few blocks, coincidentally, from where *Waiting for Lefty* would originally debut. Tsiang was himself a neighborhood denizen, often frequenting the local hangouts where “artists, writers, bohemians, and a mixed bag of cranks and eccentrics” would socialize. Author Sam Bluefarb remembers Tsiang would often,

find a table in a parlor-like space, as far away from the crowd as possible, and go to work revising a manuscript. Tsiang was the prototype of the wild-eyed radical burning with revolutionary zeal. A thatch of black hair threaded with gray hung down over a furrowed brow as he peered through thick-lens glasses at the manuscript he was correcting. (Bluefarb)

Nestled between Broadway and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, New York’s Union Square came to “symboliz[e] democracy” and “democratic action” in the national consciousness, a place “from which one could address not only New York, but he whole of the United States, and perhaps even the world” (Merwood-Salisbury 540, “Afterword” 229). In

fact, Union Square was intentionally designed to facilitate such a purpose. After a rally protesting the attack on Fort Sumpter overcrowded the park in 1861, “Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux...redesigned the square to meet the public requirement of mass-meetings” (Merwood-Salisbury 541, Arjini). From the Civil War onwards, Union Square would become synonymous with mass demonstrations, hosting the very first labor day parade on September 5, 1882, which boasted over 10,000 participants (Chan). During the 1930s, Union Square became a “hot zone of working class radicalism,” a destination for “socialists, communists, and anarchists” (Lecklider 100, Bluefarb “Notes”). Albert Halper, whose 1933 novel *Union Square* Tsiang likely borrowed from heavily, describes “weekly leftwing parades” as being “frequently ended with clubbing by the police” (79).<sup>95</sup> Indeed, when proposed as a site for Mr. Nut’s public hanging at the end of the novel, a concern is raised due to there being “too many Reds, Socialists, Anarchists, and what not around Union Square” (*Hanging* 193).

It’s important that Tsiang begins Nut’s odyssey in a local Fourteenth Street cafeteria, as it immediately situates the reader in a neighborhood of New York naturally associated with leftist activity. Act 1, Scene 1 opens on Mr. Nut bemoaning his poverty, unable to pay his “ten-cent check” (*Hanging* 9). Too prideful to take a loan, Mr. Nut is expelled from the premises and, as discussed above, mercilessly

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<sup>95</sup> Halper recalls “On Saturday Mornings I could see the mounted cops in the side streets, bunched together, resting, healthy-faced, chatting cheerfully before the afternoon’s action” (79). In her article “Flaneur of the Proletariat,” Nawal Arjini notes both Tsiang’s and Halper’s protagonists “wander around the same few blocks of Manhattan, encountering similar character archetypes along the way” (“Flaneur”).

pummeled by a duo of police officers. Nut's subsequent realization that "Communists were not necessarily bad people" leads him on a journey towards greater social consciousness, flinging him from mass gathering to mass gathering in and around Union Square, each growing both in intensity and size. After Nut's squabble with the police, he witnesses a crowd of "Communists and sympathizers" outside his love interest Miss Stubborn's tenement, many of them wearing "placards under their overcoats" (102). In front of the building, "on the snowy, smudged pavement, there were beds, tables, mattresses, chairs, cooking utensils, papers, clothes, and other things" (103). With her sick mother "shivering and trembling" in the doorway, Stubborn climbs atop a table and addresses the onlookers: "look at that that sick woman. She is my mother. Do you think I lie when I say she's sick—sick in this snow and cold? The landlord is killing her!... Are you sure that some day you won't be like our family? Maybe it will be you. Maybe you! Maybe all of you! You! You! You!" (103-104). The crowd is invigorated by Stubborn's passionate speech. A disembodied voice begins to shout "Down with Capitalism!" (104). Seduced by the revolutionary ardor, Nut joins the multitude, and, together, they manage to fight off the police and "mov[e] the furniture back into the building, and up to the rooms from which it had been taken" (105). By merging with the "sympathizers" in a spontaneous moment of collective action, Nut realizes "the eviction had been stopped" (105).

Later in the day, Nut discovers another mass demonstration after trailing a curious throng of "shabbily-dressed people marching in the street" (152). Mr. Nut is instantly "attracted by [their] placards" and "deeply impressed by the slogans" which read "Ten Dollars Weekly Cash Relief for Each Unemployed Couple!," "Three

Dollars for Each Dependent!,” “Seven Dollars Cash Relief for Single Workers!,” and “Stop Wage Cuts- Make Bankers Pay!” (152-153). Nut quickly learns the parade has been started in response to Stubborn’s mother’s passing and her father’s subsequent suicide. At the head of the parade, the corpses of Stubborn’s parents are splayed on mattresses, their wan carcasses jouncing above the enraged demonstrators. Nut pushes his way to the front to join Stubborn as the parade descends upon City Hall. A “Russian Brat” manages to climb atop the building “like a monkey” and erects a hurriedly crafted “Red Flag” (155-156). Yet, as swiftly as it is formed, the mass soon dissipates, a false start to the eventual revolution Nut will bring about at the end of the novel.

In addition to Union Square’s association with mass gatherings and political demonstrations, it was also likely associated with subversive sexual lifestyles. In his essay, “H.T. Tsiang’s Proletarian Burlesque” (2011) Aaron Lecklider importantly documents Union Square’s function as a haven for the queer community, “a robust urban sexual underground... a cruising ground for men seeking same-sex affairs” (100). Lecklider contends that Tsiang’s work embraces “elements of performance and perversion to challenge, assault, and bait readers,” noting that Tsiang himself perhaps embodies a “possibly queer sexuality” (94). Prior to his participation in the parade and eviction, Nut is plunged into a number of urban queer spaces operating “outside normative sexual behaviors” (94). After a frigid night of wandering the streets, Nut is invited in by a young poet whose hair “was richly oiled and...carefully scissored along his neck” (*Hanging* 64). “His eyebrows were poetically arranged” Nut observes, and his lips “were painted and his tongue went out just little bit and made his mouth more

noticeable. As he walked, his body waved to and fro, his hips swayed left and right. It reminded Nut of a willow in a windy spring” (65). Nut is initially unsettled by the displayed pictures of “men without any clothes on,” but decides to stay to eat and drink his fill. After the young poet makes sexual advances, Nut scrambles to leave. “*I wish your taste would be like mine*” the poet coos farewell as Nut stumbles out into the cold, “*We could just be sixty-nine*” (68).

Out in the elements again, Nut then meets an old man who “had the appearance of a professor... somewhat Max-Eastman-ly” (71). Nut’s new acquaintance turns out to be a communist book reviewer crippled by financial hardship. He invites Nut to spend the night with him in his bed, huddled together for warmth. Nut agrees, but is soon awoken by the man’s erection pressed firmly into his back. The man apologizes, confessing he can’t help “getting excited” after reading “those sexy, hot novels” (73). After the old man starts to vigorously masturbate, Nut jumps from the sheets and escapes back into the night.

Nut then sneaks his way into a “small and mysteriously decorated night club” in the basement of a building (85). On the brightly lit stage, “a young girl with absolutely nothing on” approaches “a swivel chair with no back,” and manages to pick up a dime “[w]ithout using her hands. Without using her feet. Using but one thing” (86). Accused of hiding a magnet in her vagina, the entertainer is outshined by a “Miss Digger” who manages to perform the same trick with a rolled “five-dollar bill” (87). Nut is eventually chased away by bouncers, satisfied he had obtained a “free show” (89).

Though Tsiang may be “baiting readers” into controversy and shock, he

nonetheless provides a brave and unflinching portrayal of 1930s urban sexual countercultures. By choosing Union Square as his stage and theatre, Tsiang's setting would not only appear as obviously familiar to fellow New Yorkers, but likely evoke a sense of community with those he wished to rally, both queer and communist. One cannot help but feel Tsiang, at least in this respect, was uniquely ahead of his time. Yet, Tsiang's own characters would not draw on such complex socio-sexual resonances, instead falling in line with a simpler, more efficient "Manichean delineation of good and evil" (Saal 65).

#### **"Yes, He was a Worker,": Characterization and "Typage"**

After reading *The Hanging on Union Square*, communist intellectual Granville Hicks would write to Tsiang: "I am a good deal interested in what you have tried to do, though I do not feel that the attempt has been wholly successful. As I understand it, your aim is to write a kind of Communist Pilgrim's Progress. This seems to me a rather surprising aim, but what you have done shows that the idea has possibilities" (*Hanging*). Hoping it would help sell more copies, Tsiang published a portion of the note in *Hanging's* front matter. Under the selected blurb, Tsiang confesses: "Since I didn't attend high school in this country, I read 'Pilgrim's Progress' after receiving G.H.'s letter" (*Hanging*). Though one can see how the allegorical characters Hypocrisy, and Obstinate, and Christian could feasibly map onto the metaphoric characterization of Mr. System, Miss Stubborn, and Mr. Nut, Tsiang almost certainly drew his influence from the "standard agitprop technique...[of] typage," or, "the stereotypical portrayal of characters" (Saal 65). Saal notes "typage," "which has a long

tradition in medieval morality plays, *commedia dell'arte*, and melodrama,” primarily functions as a way to simplify “characters to basic sociological or moral functions” (65).

Mr. System is a symbolic representation of capitalism as a whole. Owning almost every business mentioned in the book (including Stubborn’s rundown tenement), Mr. System is the clear villain, an “elephantine hunk of purplish flesh” with a “guttural voice,” who smokes a “Havana cigar” (*Hanging* 34, 145). When not pressuring his female employees to succumb to his “lustful maneuvers,” Mr. System indulges in outright nationalism, finding fault with Russia, England, France, Japan, and China for not facilitating strictly laissez faire economies (34). Latin America, on the other hand, “is safe—at least for the time being” (145). Saal notes that agitprop often made use of such “simplicity of characterization” particularly with villains, reducing them to “mere caricatures” to better “facilitate audience identification” (65). Through such overt description and props, one cannot help but picture Mr. System as a cartoonish robber-baron with a large money sign on his vest, which, as we have seen with agitprop, was likely exactly the point [**See Figure 17**].

Likewise, Miss Stubborn is portrayed as an idealistic activist, steadfastly dedicated to her noble cause. A militant iteration of the flappers from the prior decade, Stubborn is depicted as boyishly good looking, with short hair and a Lenin pin fastened to the lapel of her leather jacket. Extremely intelligent and an ardent feminist, Stubborn fights to “become ‘She’ ... To love whom she want[s] to love and to express her love” (*Hanging* 171). Her dreams of attending college, however, are dashed against the wreckage of Black Tuesday, forcing her to take multiple low-wage jobs to

support her unemployed parents. In short, Stubborn is the positive ideological influence for Nut, who wins the “confidence of her union, her shop-committee...her Party Unit” for the simple fact that “she [is] a good Communist” (99).

Mr. Nut, despite looking “nut-like,” is named Nut for his naïve belief that he will one day thrive in a capitalist system. Despite “his commonality with the dispossessed, Mr. Nut at first clings to the bourgeois ideology of upward mobility,” believing “Yes, he was a worker. Now. For the time being! But how could they tell that he would not, someday, by saving some money, establish a business of his own?” (“Afterword” 235, *Hanging* 14). When a young communist (who later is later revealed to be Stubborn) pejoratively calls Nut “a Mister,” “a Boss,” “a Capitalist,” “a Business Man,” Mr. Nut misunderstands the insult “and shout[s] for joy” (16). Echoing the protagonist of another modernist epic, Nut is represented as a kind of oblivious “everyman,” a wanderer who, in spite of his good intentions, seems to rub people the wrong way.<sup>96</sup> However, unlike Bloom’s identification as a Jew in Dublin, Nut is “ethnically unmarked,” a citizen who, like many others, has come upon hard times during the Great Depression (“Afterword” 228).<sup>97</sup> It is only after his journey of political awakening that he is able to shed his “nut-like” qualities, self-confidently

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<sup>96</sup> Nut’s misunderstanding of Stubborn’s castigation is reminiscent of Bloom’s awkward interaction with the funeral attendees in “Hades.”

<sup>97</sup> Though it is briefly mentioned he is of “Anglo Saxon, Teutonic, and Yankee” origin, Floyd Chueng has read Mr. Nut as “ethnically unmarked” (*Hanging* 54, “Afterword 228). In her chapter “Transpacific Modernisms,” Denise Cruz follows suit, suggesting “Tsiang’s elimination of racial and ethnic markers responds to a literary market that eagerly consumed texts authored by white Americans about Asia and Asians” (7).

declaring to the world “I was a Nut. But I am a Nut no more” (*Hanging* 205).<sup>98</sup> Sadly, the book ends before Nut is awarded a new, more enlightened, name.

### **“Paper Bullets” and “Dramatic Machine Guns,” Repetition as Technique**

Saal’s third principle of agitprop is the form’s reliance on “repetition.” The language in “[e]ach episode reiterates,” Saal avers, to make “the same point over and over again: Don’t take it anymore, do something!” (67). Tsiang’s famed drama instructor, Erwin Piscator, would compare the use of repetition in agitational revues to “the wielding of iron hammers pounding out the same message” so that “it could escape no one” (Saal 67, Piscator 82). In effect, the repeated use of specific phrasing and messaging operates as a kind of “dramatic machine gun,” always striving to keep the audience in its line of fire (Watts qtd. in Saal 67).

Tsiang begins his experimentation with repetition early in his poetry, conversing with such diverse literary figures as the “decadent Gertrude Stein” and British poet Thomas Hood (*Hands* 41).<sup>99</sup> Tsiang’s poem “Chinaman, Laundryman” is one example, using agitprop techniques to goad his reader into action.

“Chinaman”!  
“Laundryman”!  
All you workingmen!”  
Here is the brush  
Made of Marxism.  
Here is the soap  
Made of Leninism.

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<sup>98</sup> In his letters to Rockwell Kent, Tsiang often refers to himself as a “Nut.”

<sup>99</sup> In Tsiang’s cameo appearance in *And China Hands*, he mentions “his chief literary influence is the decadent Gertrude Stein” (41). See Chueng’s “Chinaman, Laundryman.”

Let us all  
Wash with the blood!  
Let us all  
Press with the iron!  
Wash!  
Brush!  
Dry!  
Iron!  
Then we shall have  
a clean world. (*Poems* 8)

The recurring words, particularly the verbs (Wash! Brush! Dry! Iron!), act like Piscator's described hammer strokes, beating, beating, beating out a rhythm reminiscent of the mechanical sounds echoing through fields and factories. Under Tsiang's mallet, seemingly benign domestic actions are mobilized through a collective demand, imbued with a violence that seems to portend a future battle. Thus, "Let us all/ Wash" is intensified into "Let us all/ Wash with the blood!" Playing with its homonym, "Iron" takes on a mechanical resonance, transmuting the instrument of laundry into the building block of industry "Let us all/ Press with the iron." Here, repetition functions beyond mere emphasis by also channeling the aural qualities of a distinctly revolutionary din. Each word in this rhythmic pattern functions as a kind of "paper bullet" for the "dramatic machine gun" to not only be aimed the listener's ears, but at the imagined hordes of greedy capitalists (*China Red* 90).

Indeed, repetition may be the most immediately noticeable attribute of *Hanging*'s distinctive language style. The poetic refrains placed at the beginning of each act are likened by Arjini to "repetitive ditties" perhaps "meant to be put to music or read in a call-and-response with the reader" (Arjini). Chueng argues that Tsiang "self-consciously includes terse, repetitive language" to better "revea[l] a critical

perspective on reality,” arguing further that while “some critics have misunderstood Tsiang’s repetitive language as a humorous indication of his naiveté or lack of fluency in English, we can recognize it as being motivated by a sharp political mind” (“Afterword” 233).

Let us then consider, for instance, the way in which Tsiang is both in conversation with, and strategically drawing from, the linguistic patterns of American agitprop. In the first edition of *Worker’s Theatre*, a script for the play “Unemployed” is included as material to be used by the nascent radical theatres spreading “in every town and community in the country” (“Dedication” 3). The play begins with a barrage of repeated lines emphasizing the worker’s plight.

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| 1 worker | I am hungry.  |
| 2 worker | My family is hungry   |
| 3 worker | I want to work  |
| 4 worker | I want a job  |
| 5 worker | Won’t somebody give me a job?   |
| 1 worker | I am hungry, why can’t I have food? I see lots of food in restaurants. I am cold, why can’t I have a coat? I see many clothes in clothing stores. (“Unemployed” 12) |

Similarly, Tsiang begins his novel with recurring linguistic play on his destitution.

Money makes money; no money makes no money.  
Money talks; no money, no talking; talking produces no money.

He is worrying; he has no money.  
He is crying, he has lost money.  
He is smiling; he made money. (*Hanging* 9).

“Unemployed” ends with a direct appeal to the audience, again using repetition to heighten the play’s unambiguous messaging. The parenthetical stage notes indicate the workers are to “each in turn com[e] forward” and “poin[t] his finger to the audience,”

reciting following lines before “they begin to sing the Internationale” with audience in an act of solidarity (“Unemployed” 16).

|          |                                       |
|----------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 worker | We must organize!                     |
| 2 worker | We must organize and fight!           |
| 3 worker | We must organize and fight for wages! |
| 4 worker | Work for wages                        |

This direct address to the audience bears remarkable similarity to Tsiang’s own refrain placed at the begging of each act, flavored with Hallie Flanagan’s described “pathos” and “machine gun repetition,”

It’s under this system!  
It’s under this system!

Mr. System  
Beware:  
The Hanging  
On  
Union Square!... (Hanging 110).

Though not quite the Internationale, the lines read, as Chueng affirms, “very much like the script for a mass recitation” (“Afterword” 233). The repeated use of simple diction (hungry, job, money) and phrases (we must organize!; it’s under this system) make obvious both the play and novel’s political message. Stirred by the reports from the syntactic hammer, the audience cannot help but be roused to “do something!” However, as we shall see, the full emotional affect fomented by *Hanging*’s “machine gun” repetition is greatly dependent upon Tsiang’s dexterous use of “montage,” the final and perhaps most crucial tenet of agitprop theatre.

### **“Beyond the Limits of Man”; Tsiang and Montage**

By interspersing “series of small, individual episodes” within Nut’s larger narrative arch, Tsiang purposefully “augments the militant rhythm of the play, building dramatic suspense, moral argument, and emotional involvement toward a grand climatic finale” (Saal 66). Saal’s last distinctive tenet of agitprop is that of “montage,” a term invented and theorized by radical theatre and film director Sergei Eisenstein. In his essays “Montage of Attractions” (1923) and “The Structure of Film” (1939), Eisenstein develops his notion of montage, positing theatre’s “basic material derives from the audience: the moulding of the audience in a desired direction (or mood)” (“Montage” 30). In essence, each interrelated episode should conclude with an “attraction,” an “aggressive moment...that subjects to the audience to emotional or psychological influence” (30). These aggressive moments are often presented as overt moments of shock or violence, ranging from instants where “eyes are gouged out or arms and legs amputated” to “the situation of a drunkard, who, sensing his approaching end, pleas for protection and whose pleas are taken as a sign of madness” (30). With exposure to each successive attraction, the spectator “senses himself” growing “united and fused” with the diegetic world before them (“Structure” 161). For Eisenstein, these “attractions” are best complemented through the use of “unorganized customary flow of speech” or “*rhythm*; prose that is also prosaic in its forms” (168). Eventually, if the director (or author) is skilled enough, the audience is pushed to an intense moment of pathos. For Eisenstein,

Pathos shows its affect — when the spectator is compelled to jump from his seat. When he is compelled to collapse where he stands. When he is

compelled to applaud, to cry out. When his eyes are compelled to shine with delight, before gushing tears of delight... In brief— when the spectator is forced “to go out of himself”...into ecstasy. (166)

During this ecstatic experience, the audience’s affective response can exceed its normal limitations, trespassing “beyond the limits of man, radiating out into the surroundings and environment of a personage,” provoking a moment of “frenzy” (169). Taken together, these montage techniques can be said to represent a “*formula of development*” transforming a disparate audience comprised of individuals into “*a collective and social unit, consciously participating in its development*” (172). Thus, each “compositional link” in the work “as a whole” is thereby “infus[ed] into the content’s very theme—the revolutionary explosion” (173). However, despite Eisenstein’s lofty goals to push “beyond the limits of man,” Saal takes great care to question whether this mystical event was ever meant to have social implications outside the theatre space, noting: “[Eisenstein] always made clear the affect, even in its most sweeping moment, always remained part of a theatrical experience, of a visceral spectacle” (66).

Much like the “one-ness” felt at Odets’s opening night, Tsiang’s montage of episodes are assembled in Eisensteinian fashion to ignite that moment of ecstasy “when the spectator is forced ‘to go out of himself.’” We have already visited a number of these montage episodes, including Nut’s beating at the hands of the police, his involvement in Stubborn’s eviction, his participation in the parade, and his sexual escapades with the poet, the book

reviewer, and peep show. Each respective chapter has ended in an emotionally charged attraction—either shock, pity, unity, or arousal. However, in Nut’s perhaps most disturbing episode, Tsiang again stimulates his readers with an attraction of terror.

In Act 2, episode 15, Nut meets a gangster who is prowling the street looking for “rabbits.” Thinking the mobster is hunting varmints, Nut offers his services in exchange for “[t]hirty-five cents an hour” (*Hanging* 75). Nut soon learns the man is “Alphonse, alias Alphonse Brown, alias Al Scarface, alias Toothbrush-Mustache, alias Kingfish, alias Number 40866,” though Nut is directed to call him “Mr. Ratsky” (75). In a bizarre and unsettling scene, Mr. Ratsky invites Nut back to his abode and demands Nut strip naked: “Take off your hat! Take off your overcoat! Take off your coat. Take off your shirt! Take off your trousers. Take off your underwear! The room is warm, it’ll do you no harm. Stay where you are without moving!” (77). When prompted by a bell, Nut is commanded to step into a mysterious “inner room.” Though apprehensive, Nut is compelled to follow Ratsky’s every direction, lured by the criminal’s “slow and solemn voice” that is mysteriously described as being “full of magic” (77). Tsiang builds the scene’s suspense by piling a sequence of short, one line paragraphs.

He opened the door.  
Nothing was there, just an empty room.  
Nut stopped.  
The bell rang again.  
Nut moved forward again.  
The dim light turned to green, then blue. (77)

In a matter of moments, a “tall, slim figure” emerges from a coffin, wearing a “high

clown's hat" with "red, black and white" faceprint (77). The costumed demon then raises his arms and wags his tongue, as if "he was ready to catch Nut and eat him up" (77). The frightening figure is of course, Ratsky. Nut helplessly responds by "screaming and crying and almost fainting" (77). What follows is equally, if not more, chillingly grotesque. After Nut collapses to the floor with dread, Ratsky divulges his desire to hack "women's heads off and cut off their breasts," to make "hills" of their parts and "then shoot them into the Atlantic Ocean; or use them for pavements and let millions of my Khaki Shirts step on them. Murder! Kill!" (78). Lamenting he has to use men for torture because "women are too weak," Ratsky reveals his insatiable lust to "pull off [men's] hair! To taste their blood!" adding "Every hair of a man is like a woman's. Every drop of a man's blood is like a woman's. Torture! Kill!" (78). Ratsky then begins to strike Nut's huddled body until he "screamed and begged" (78). In desperation, Nut punches Ratsky's stomach, which, to his surprise, Ratsky thoroughly savors. For his time and fighting spirit, Nut is compensated fifty dollars. Though a tidy sum for the down-and-out Mr. Nut, *Hanging's* protagonist angrily tears his stipend to bits in a fit of embarrassment and rage.

Tsiang, like Eisenstein, adopts an "aesthetics of astonishment and confrontation," harassing the reader into a frenzied state through attractions of shock, pity, unity, arousal, and terror (Saal 67). Through his use of community setting, typage, repetition, and montage, Tsiang has prepared the reader for a moment of ecstatic pathos— the climactic hanging on Union Square. However, more than being merely a "novelized version of agitprop," Tsiang's masterwork demonstrates literary innovation in its own right ("Afterword" 233). By deliberately choosing the written

over the performed, the experimental novel over the street play, Tsiang builds himself a limitless stage for his players to strut, an imagined world where his characters can transcend the physical limitations of reality and actually merge with one another. Imbuing radical theatre with the limitless possibilities narrative, Tsiang creates a fictive space for agitprop's brazen ideals to be actualized, all the while fuzzing the lines dividing genre and form. By considering the ways in which Tsiang's "revolutionary explosion" fulfills our stated criterium for democratic epiphany, we begin to understand the ways in Tsiang's avant-garde text situates itself alongside those by the likes of Richard Wright and John Steinbeck within the larger tradition of interwar Multitude Modernism.

### **“A Forgotten Man , A Little Man, An Average Man, A Worker” : Tsiang’s Democratic Epiphany**

In *Nut*, we have our “collective individual,” a highly compassionate protagonist who will foment the surrounding mass’s democratic epiphany. Throughout the narrative, the awkward and flawed Nut always manages to provide aid to those in dire need. Besides helping Stubborn’s family thwart their eviction, Nut gives his last penny to a destitute “Southern fellow” who has come to the city to find menial work (*Hanging* 62). Nut learns the man is a cent short of having the necessary funds to stay the night in a Bowery flophouse. Seeing the Southerner “hadn’t slept for two nights,” Nut decides to gift his only monetary reserve, telling the man “I’ve just found a penny in my pocket. Take it and go sleep” (61-62). The fellow smiles through a shiver and thanks Nut for providing “real Block Aid!” (62).

However, Nut's altruism is best demonstrated through his actions in Act 2, chapter 18, an incident meant to solidify the reader's perception of Nut as fundamentally compassionate. That this particular event is of utmost importance is evidenced in the two Piscator manuscript drafts. The brief episode is the only one in the novel Tsiang chose to keep throughout the *Hanging's* various excisions and revisions, forming the narrative crux of the one act play. At 5:30 in the morning, with little hope of finding a place to lay his head, Nut hears "a baby crying" and sees a "woman peeping from the hallways of an old, dirty, dark building" (91). Thinking the child has taken ill, Nut plods through the snow and "volunteer[s]" to take the child to the hospital (93). The woman denies Nut's offer and, instead, begins to make a newspaper bed on boxes and crates. Desperate for enough money to purchase a "basket of rotten bananas," a "basket of solid bread," and "a candle for [her] Saint," the woman offers to prostitute herself for twenty-five cents. Nut begins to cry, "sentimentally overflowing," and decides to give the coat off his back so the woman can sell it at the flea market for the money she needs. (95). The desperate woman is adamant she will not "take something for nothing," and shoves Nut's coat back into his hands. Though it will mean Nut will have to face the bitter cold, Nut quickly throws "his coat into room" before fleeing down the stairs (96).

It is in fact Nut's realization that he has, for years, knowingly participated in the exploitive capitalist system that drives him to suicide. While castigating himself for having been one of the obstinate "Masses" who are "Asses," Nut comes upon Union Square's flagpole. Distraught and hopeless, Nut decides he will hang himself as a symbol for the starving unemployed. After stacking a loose pile of rocks for his

stand, Nut slips his hastily fashioned noose around neck and kicks away the stones. While desperately gasping for air, Nut is suddenly rescued by Mr. Wiseguy who believes Nut's death presents an unexplored financial opportunity. Wiseguy, as his name belies, is a grifter and con artist, a trusted crony for Ratsky and System. In a satirical turn that echoes Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Wiseguy, Ratsky, and System devise a scheme to profit from Nut's suicide while simultaneously reducing the nation's unemployment crisis.

"Do you know," Mr. Wiseguy asks his wicked companions, "how many persons are willing to pay big money to go to Sing Sing Prison and see an execution?" (181). Mr. System readily admits, "I am one of those persons" and urges his henchman to continue (181). While smoking a cigarette with "the air of a Messiah," Wiseguy details his scheme:

We're going to have some poor fellow hang on Union Square and get Society to come and see him. That is a game. The rich man will get some pleasure and the poor man will get a few cents. The general situation will be bettered... according to the law of supply and demand, the more unemployed workers there are, the more persons will voluntarily hang themselves. And the more people that hang themselves, the fewer unemployed there will be. As there come to be fewer and fewer persons willing to hang themselves (because of the decrease of the number of unemployed) the higher the price of a ticket to see the hanging will become... It all comes to this: we shall make money... and the country will regain prosperity." (182)

Nut is coerced via contract into agreeing to be the first person hung for profit, though he begins to cook up a plan of his own: [Nut's] eyes, however, were expressing deep thoughtfulness. He was acting nuttily as a soldier off for war. But he was thoughtful as a soldier when he turns his gun" (191).

The promoted execution secures endorsements from the "North Atlantic Rope Corporation," the "Worst Suit Company," the "Roast Tobacco Company," the "Mild Tobacco Company," the "Real Tobacco Company," the "World Newspaper Syndicate," and the "the biggest institution of learning in the world," who, in exchange for a "Ph.D., L.L.B., M.M.C., Y.Y.Z" and sizeable endowment, promise to build a "Nut Hall" devoted to "teach the unemployed the trade of 'How to Hang Profitably'" (198). After having successfully marketed the hanging, the Square is transformed into a grand amphitheater.

The Flagpost in the center of the Square was arranged like the conning-tower of a battleship. The stage was three feet and nine inches from the top. The top of the Flagpost was green—like a Christmas tree on Christmas Day... From the top of the Flagpost, a rope ran down. A loose knot was at the end of the rope... Not only was radio apparatus attached to the stage, but also a television mechanism to enable the world to see Him. And, surrounding the stage, things were so arranged that the members of Society who had come were able to see Him without using opera-glasses. And the places near the stage, according to the law of Supply and Demand, had by now become unobtainable.

(201)

The square is imbued with special metaphysical importance, described as being triangulated by the surrounding “Empire State Building,” “Tammany Hall,” and “Riverside Church,” “a new Trinity” of “Business, Politics and the Holy Spirit” (201). The event’s global significance is further amplified by the by park’s transformation into a facsimile of the earth, complete with “water tanks” on grassy spaces so that the “Square was a land and was a sea” (201). To the right of the decorated Flagpole, the “land and sea” is populated by the many “the diplomatic representatives of the Foreign Powers”, while “editors of newspapers of the whole world” prepare to relay the nights events to the furthest reaches of the earth. The “cheap buildings” around the Square are transmuted into vantage points for the masses, “theater-boxes of Society” (203).

Tsiang takes care to create an omnipresent sense of turmoil, including “Army and Navy Bands,” and the roar of “motors and propellers of airplanes” throughout the scene’s narration (201). Below the circling planes, a parade is described as being led by “many and many bands” who’s legions of “drums beat rhythmically” (202). This aura of chaos permeates the countless spectators’ emotions: “On the sidewalks, children were screaming. Woman Fainted. ‘Here’s a kiss!’ a movie-crazy girl called ‘Hello, Dr. Nut’ (203). Nut, lowly layman that his is, is made divine, not only through Tsiang’s capitalization of the pronoun “Him” (a first for the novel), but from a congregation of “Fat, old, pearl-necked ladies” who hail “‘*He is coming! Our Lord!! Amen!*’” (202).

At the stroke of midnight, Nut is ushered to his makeshift gallows while “All of Society” rises to witness. Mr. System introduces the night’s program with boilerplate nationalism,

this country is a land of freedom. And our philosophy is based on Individualism. And our motto is Profit for everybody. So today... Dr. Nut is doing his bit! Of his own free will, he is hanging himself on Union Square... His hanging is real. For he will really hang. No fake business here. Honesty is the best policy! What is more important is, that this hanging is a symbol.

For it will give inspiration to the rest of the unemployed. (204)

Amidst the bedlam of shouted “bravo[s]” and “hurray[s],” demands for a speech are made by “Society.” Knowing the entranced spectators “like action” Wiseguy convinces System to allow the doomed man to speak his final words. Nut is finally given his moment. Standing on the platform, noose hanging before him, Nut addresses the world:

I am Forgotten Man , a Little Man, an Average Man, a Worker,

A Nut.

“Be good and starve is the order of the day!

Prey on others or become a prey!”

I was a Nut. But I am a Nut no more.

I, a Forgotten Man, a Little Man, an Average Man, A Worker

— will this time—double cross you, Mr. System—the

Exploiter, the War-maker, the Man-Killer.

Here is your neck. This is your rope. (205)

The final two lines, an unadorned couplet of sorts, read:

Nut turned his gun.

Nut double-crossed Mr. System.

The ending is abrupt, if not frustratingly so. If not for THE END printed in large, bold lettering at the bottom, the attentive reader would surely be tempted to turn the page to see what trick Tsiang has up his sleeve. Perhaps author Gary Shteyngart's reaction expresses the sudden ending's effect best: "I finished H. T. Tsiang's masterpiece a few hours ago and I'm still not sure where I am and what day this is. My mind has been picked apart and reassembled. I need a drink" ("The Hanging"). Hints gleaned from the Piscator manuscripts bear no further explication as to Nut's intended fate. One version has the hero "stretch his neck, happily to the knot of the rope" while "millions cheer," while the other ends with "Mr. System in the air hanging and swinging," as Nut celebrates ("Heaven", "Hanging" 29). The decision to exclude a tidy ending speaks to a kind of potentiality, the possibility that the now unified "Society," catalyzed by Mr. Nut, will become "a multitude."

Though *Hanging's* conclusion feels as though it has come too soon and too abruptly, the absurd final chapter deftly operates as a kind of microcosm of the larger agitprop influenced structure. The setting is not only in Union Square, but functions as an unsettling diorama of the world and its populations, simultaneously provincial and impossibly colossal in scale. "Typeage" is taken to a new extreme, moving beyond Mr. System and Mr. Nut, to encapsulate "All of Society" into a single entity (*Hanging* 203). Repetition is found not only in Nut's last speech (I am Forgotten Man, a Little Man, an Average Man, a Worker), but in the repeated description of Nut's wild "eyes expressing deep thoughtfulness" like a "soldier when he turns his gun" (203). Rhythm is cited outright, the rhyming of "day" and "prey" paired with the parade's pulsing

drum beat as it snakes through the plaza. Montage is shrunk and recalibrated to perform in a matter of pages, sliding attractions of noise, processions, Christlike imagery, impending death, and reversal of fortune almost as quickly as the new paragraphs are presented.

And yet, in the span of five short pages, Tsiang's fantastical conclusion also manages to fulfill our stated criterion for democratic epiphany. Nut, having climbed to the stage above the teeming crowd and all Society, is corporally dislocated from the surrounding mass, not only raised above but positioned in the eye of the coursing turmoil. The environmental hysteria is clearly evoked through raucous thrum of the "many and many bands," the voices of the parade, and the deafening roar of the "motors and propellers of airplanes" in the sky. The crowd cannot help but display a range of extreme emotional outbursts, with "children...screaming," "women fainting", and "pearl-necked ladies" praising. In its frenzy, communal amalgamation is achieved as the dissonant cheering and shouting become disembodied, a single riotous voice for the countless bodies that watch from the cheap buildings and stir underneath the raised stage. The formation of a multitude appears imminent, bolstered by Tsiang's reference to the crowd as "All of Society," their last action, "Unite! Fight!" (203, 204). The bizarre final scene is agitprop turned carnival, an experiment in stretching straightforward political messaging to its absolute narrative limit. It is both maddening and fantastic, a perfect end to a brave work of unsettling originality.

"The best horse you can bet on," Tsiang managed to create his own agitational masterpiece three decades before the Asian American movement would come into its own, almost fifty years before the first major work of Asian American literature.

Tsiang was equal parts innovator and oddball, a unique soul who dared challenge a political system that refused to see him as a citizen and confronted a publishing industry that valued the opinions of white missionaries over his own. Rejected, ignored, and almost forgotten, it is, ironically, Tsiang's very marginality that makes his perspective invaluable for better understanding the complexity of interwar American literature. Like an artifact that sheds new light on history, Tsiang's magnum opus unsettles the long-embraced narrative formulas meant to define his work. Neither wholly "social realist fable" nor "childlike" fantasy, Tsiang's daring masterwork defies definition, exploding the boundaries of what literature can do and be. However, the ramifications of *Hanging*'s brazen ingenuity expands beyond its importance to Asian American literature, postulating an expression of democratic epiphany not solely indebted to the inherited tradition of high modernism. Where Wright embraces Joyce, Tsiang integrates agitprop, both lending their unique voices and influences to conceive of a literary movement wherein transcendent collectivity is possible. *The Hanging on Union Square* will continue to bewilder readers and cause controversy, but whatever creative merit it may or may not have, it is a work now necessary for scholars of American literature to take notice.

Figures

Figure 7:

**Who are the Poets that will read at Red Poets' Night?**

Here are a few:

*Michael Gold,  
Joseph Freeman,  
Robert Wolf,  
James Rorty,  
Henry Reich, Jr.,  
Langston Hughes,  
famous Negro Poet,  
A. B. Magil,  
Herman Spector,  
William Weinberg,  
Adolf Wolff,  
Martin Russak,  
Edwin Rolfe,  
David Gordon,  
Lola Ridge,  
Arturo Giovannitti,  
Moïse Nadir,  
H. Leivick,  
H. T. Tsiang,  
and many others.*

Which means that the best revolutionary poets of various nationalities will appear December 28 and read from their own work.

**3rd ANNUAL — INTERNATIONAL —  
RED POETS' NIGHT  
DANCE BACCHANAL**

JOHN C. SMITH'S NEGRO BAND

Manhattan Lyceum  
54 E. 4th St.

Friday  
DECEMBER  
28  
1928

75c

TICKETS ARE NOW ON SALE AT THE BUSINESS OFFICE OF THE DAILY WORKER, 26-28 UNION SQUARE, N. Y.

A Daily Worker advertisement for the third annual Red Poets' Night and Dance in December 1928.

Figure 8:

My dear Mr. Kent:

It would be a surprise to you  
to receive a letter from me  
to be written on this tissue paper  
I'm writing this now is in the  
bed room a Negro and myself  
He is sleeping now.

I use the light in the toilet  
It is very very clean, and I made  
it very comfortable, because  
I put lots of blanket together  
made a chair, and put also  
blankets on the stool as a reading  
table, now I'm writing on it

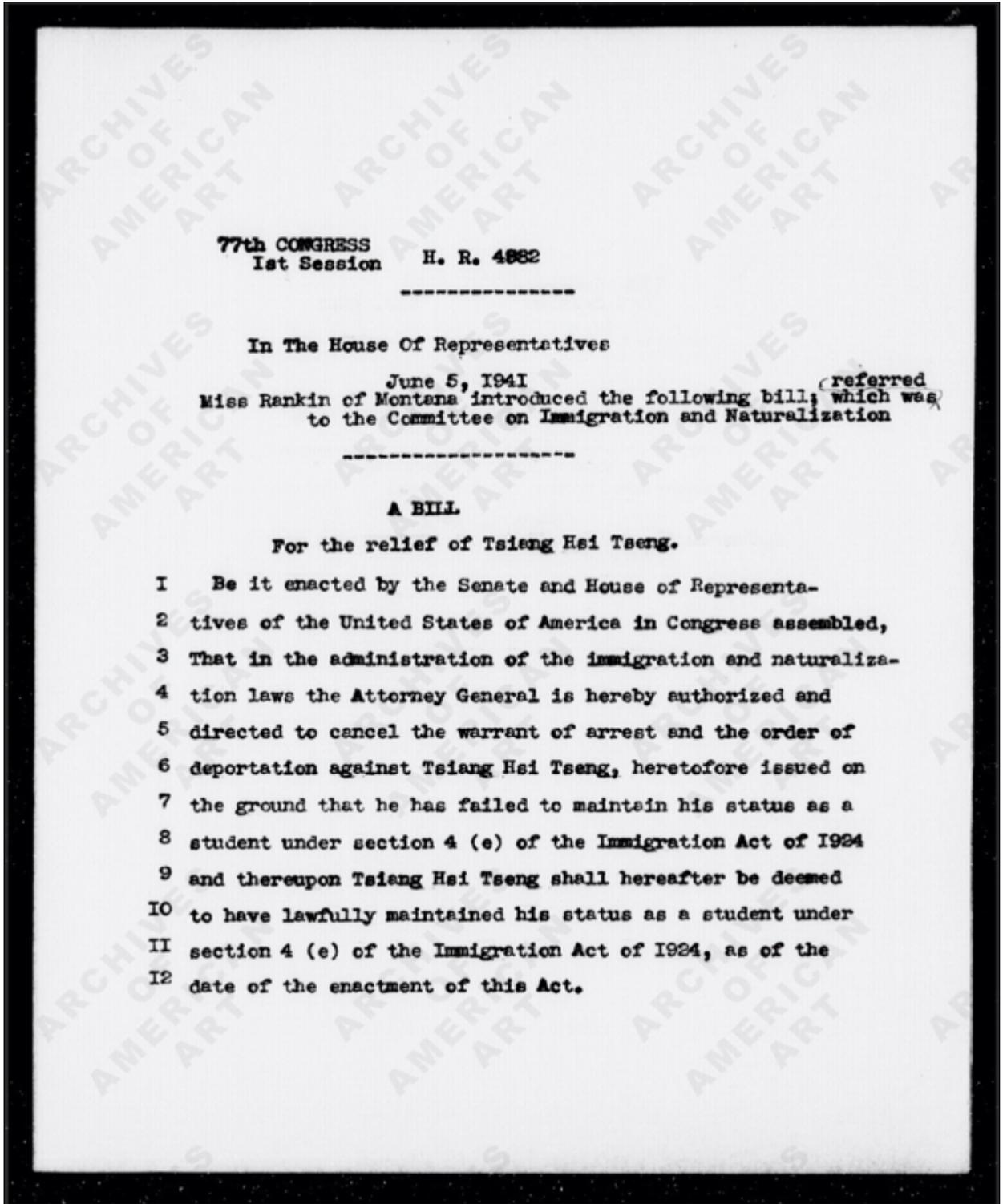
So there is no other paper  
available.

And I'm afraid, if I wait  
till tomorrow, the very thing I  
want to write will drain  
away: So excuse me!

when first I got your book  
I was looking at all these pictures  
your pictures  
give me the good feeling

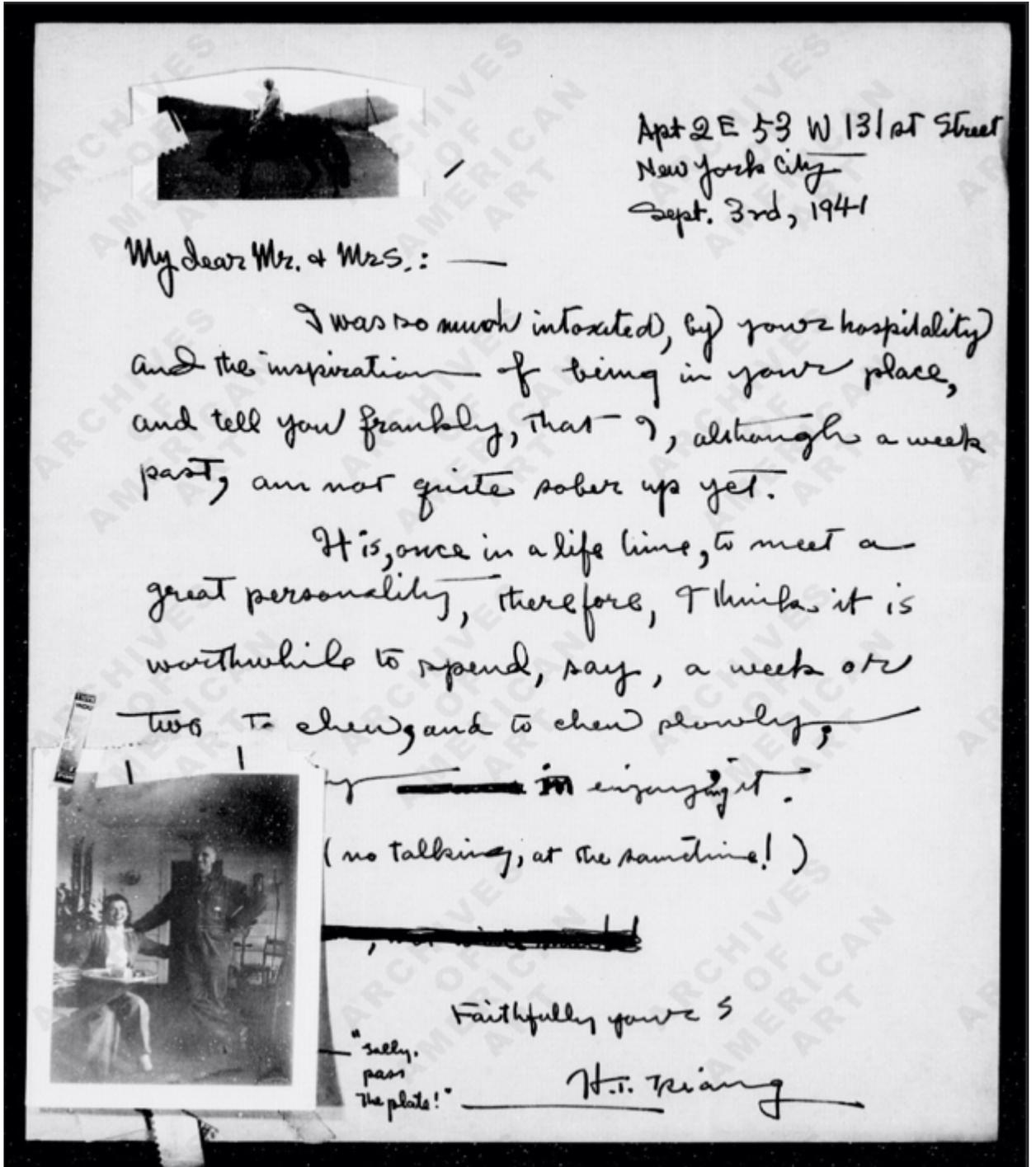
Letter to Rockwell Kent dated January 19, 1941. Rockwell Kent Collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 9:



H.R. 4882, 1941. Rockwell Kent Collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 10:



Photographs and Letter to Rockwell Kent dated September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1941. Rockwell Kent Collection, Archives of American Art.

**Figure 11:**



Scene from *WAITING FOR LEFTY* by Clifford Odets, 1935.

Figure 12:

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Alex. A. Aaron &amp; Vinton Freedley's<br/><b>GIRL CRAZY</b> Musical Comedy<br/>Willie Howard Ginger Rogers William Kent<br/>ALVIN Thea., W. 52 St. Mats. Wed., Sat.</p> <p>The Queen of Comedies<br/><b>LYSISTRATA</b> The hit you hear about<br/>44TH ST. THEATRE, W. of B'way<br/>Evs. 8:40. Mats. Wed. and Sat. 2:40<br/>200 Balcony Seats \$1 for all performances</p> <p>SAM H. HARRIS Presents<br/><b>ONCE IN A LIFETIME</b><br/>By MOSS HART AND GEO. S. KAUFMAN<br/>MUSIC BOX THEATRE, West 45th Street<br/>Evs. 8:30. Mats. Thurs. and Sat. 2:30<br/>A Smash Hit—But No Price Increase<br/>Nights \$1 to \$3.85. Matinees \$1 to \$2.50</p> <p>EDGAR WALLACE'S SENSATIONAL HIT<br/><b>ON THE SPOT</b><br/>CRANE WILBUR ANNA MAY WONG<br/>EDGAR WALLACE'S FORREST THEATRE<br/>49 W. of B'y. Evs. 8:50. Mats. Wed. &amp; Sat. 2:30</p> <p><b>LENORE ULRIC</b><br/>IN HER MOST SENSATIONAL ROLE<br/><b>PAGAN LADY</b><br/>"Alluring at all times."—Eve. World<br/>48th St. The. Phone B'ry. Evenings 8:50<br/>E. of B'way 1 0178 Mats. Wed. &amp; Sat.<br/>ALWAYS 237 GOOD SEATS AT \$1.00</p> <p>A Theatre Guild Production<br/><b>ROAR CHINA</b><br/>GOOD SEATS AT BOX OFFICE<br/>Martin Beck Thea., 45th, W. of 8th Ave.<br/>Evs. 8:50. Mats. Thurs. and Sat. 2:50</p> <p><b>STRICTLY DISHONORABLE</b><br/>with TULLIO CARMINATI<br/>Mats. Tomor. &amp; SAT. Best Seats \$1-\$2.50<br/>AVON, W. 45 St. Evs. 8:50. Prices \$1 to \$3.85</p> | <p>LOEW'S WILLARD, Woodhaven. . . . . BUSTER KEATON, DOUGHBOYS; Cliff Edwards</p> <p><b>THIS WEEK ONLY</b><br/>The Actor-Manager, Inc., Present<br/><b>RUTH DRAPER</b><br/>in her ORIGINAL CHARACTER<br/>SKETCHES, including her latest ones<br/>Brooklyn Little Theatre<br/>172 St. Felix St. Evs. 8:30. Mat. Sat. Only 2:30</p> <p>Brooklyn ACADEMY of Music<br/>METROPOLITAN OPERA COMPANY<br/>Tues., Nov. 11, at 8:15, <b>MIGNON</b><br/>Bori, Sabanleeva, Swarthout; Gigli, Rothier,<br/>Bada, D'Angelo, Ananian, Mayer, Hasselmann.<br/>KNABE PIANO USED EXCLUSIVELY</p> <p><b>Paramount</b><br/>MAURICE CHEVALIER<br/>in "Playboy of Paris"<br/><b>RUDY VALLEE</b><br/>In Person!<br/>Stuart Harris—Stage Revue!</p> <p>MATINEE 25¢ TILL 2 pm<br/><b>FOX</b> FLAT AVE. &amp; HEVINS ST. BIGGEST SHOW IN BROOKLYN<br/><b>THE BIG TRAIL</b><br/>Raoul Walsh's<br/>24 Week 32 ROXYETTES<br/>Fanchon &amp; Marco's "SMILES" Idea</p> | <p><b>LOEW'S METROPOLITAN</b><br/>SULTON - SMITH &amp; LIVINGSTON STS<br/>King Vidor's <b>'BILLY THE KID'</b><br/>Wallace Beery—John Mack Brown<br/>3 RITZ BROS.—Sol Gould—Oths.</p> <p><b>MAJESTIC</b> THIS WEEK<br/>John Drinkwater's Comedy Hit<br/><b>BIRD in HAND</b><br/>Direct From 500 Times in Manhattan<br/>Next Week Seats Now<br/>Prior to B'way BILLY ROSE presents<br/>Fannie BRICE—George JESSEL<br/>in "SWEET and LOW"</p> <p>BRANDT'S Church &amp; Flatbush Tel. BUC. 6000<br/><b>FLATBUSH</b><br/><b>LYA de PUTTI</b><br/>In the Farce 'MADE IN FRANCE'<br/>Comedy Hit<br/>Nat. Wk: Sam H. Harris' 'Oh Promise Me'</p> <p>BRANDT'S Jamaica Av. &amp; 173rd St. Mats Wed. &amp; Sat.<br/><b>CARLTON-JAMAICA</b> with JOANNA ROOS<br/>'SCHOOLGIRL'<br/>Nat. Wk: Sam H. Harris' "June Moon"</p> <p>RKO <b>MORAN &amp; MACK</b> in Present<br/>ALBEE HELLER DYND &amp; CO. - other BUD with<br/>WHEELER &amp; WOOLSEY<br/>in 'HALF SHOT AT SUNNIES'</p> |
|---|---|---|

A Theatre Guild Production

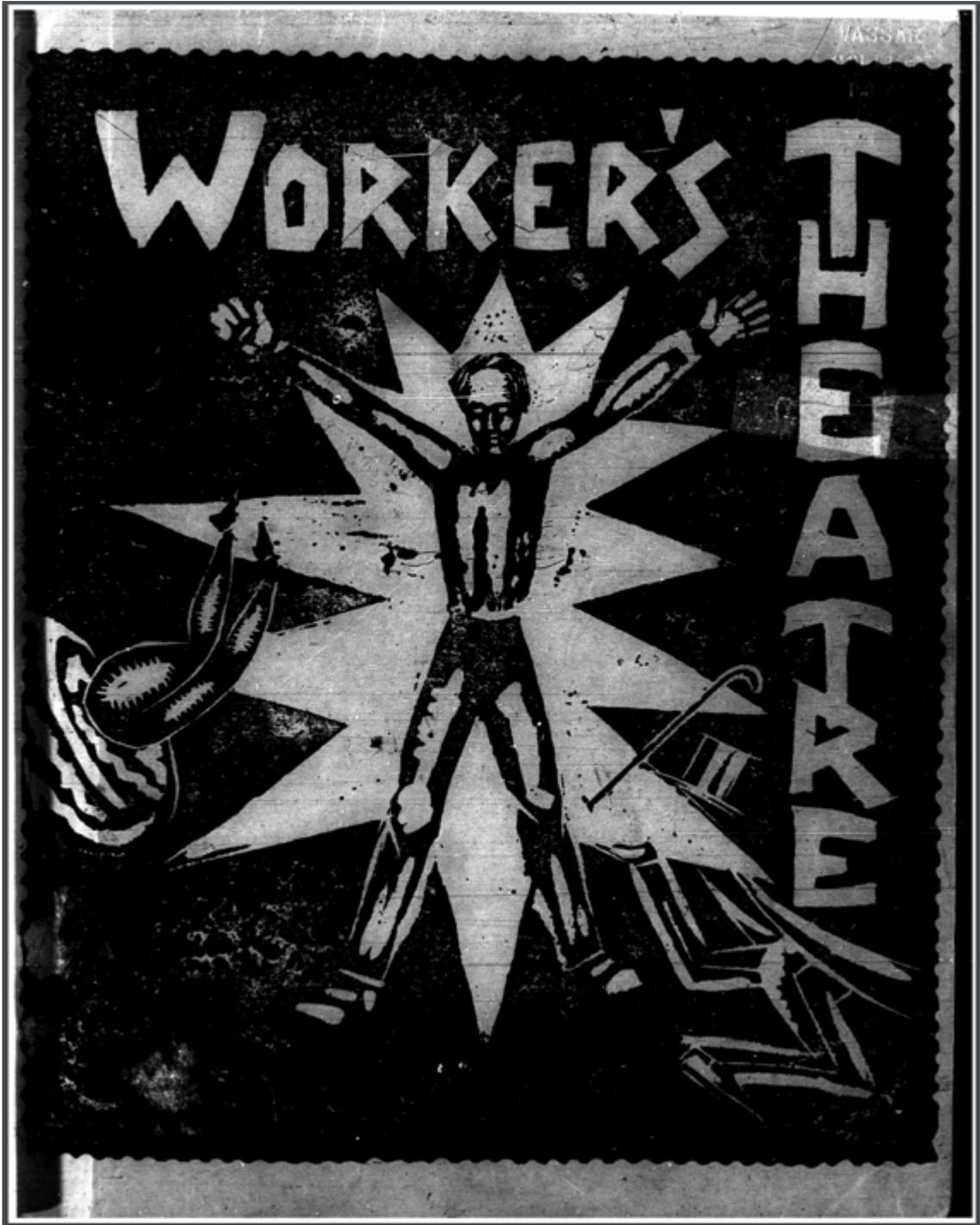
# ROAR CHINA

GOOD SEATS AT BOX OFFICE  
Martin Beck Thea., 45th, W. of 8th Ave.  
Evs. 8:50. Mats. Thurs. and Sat. 2:50

**STRICTLY DISHONORABLE**

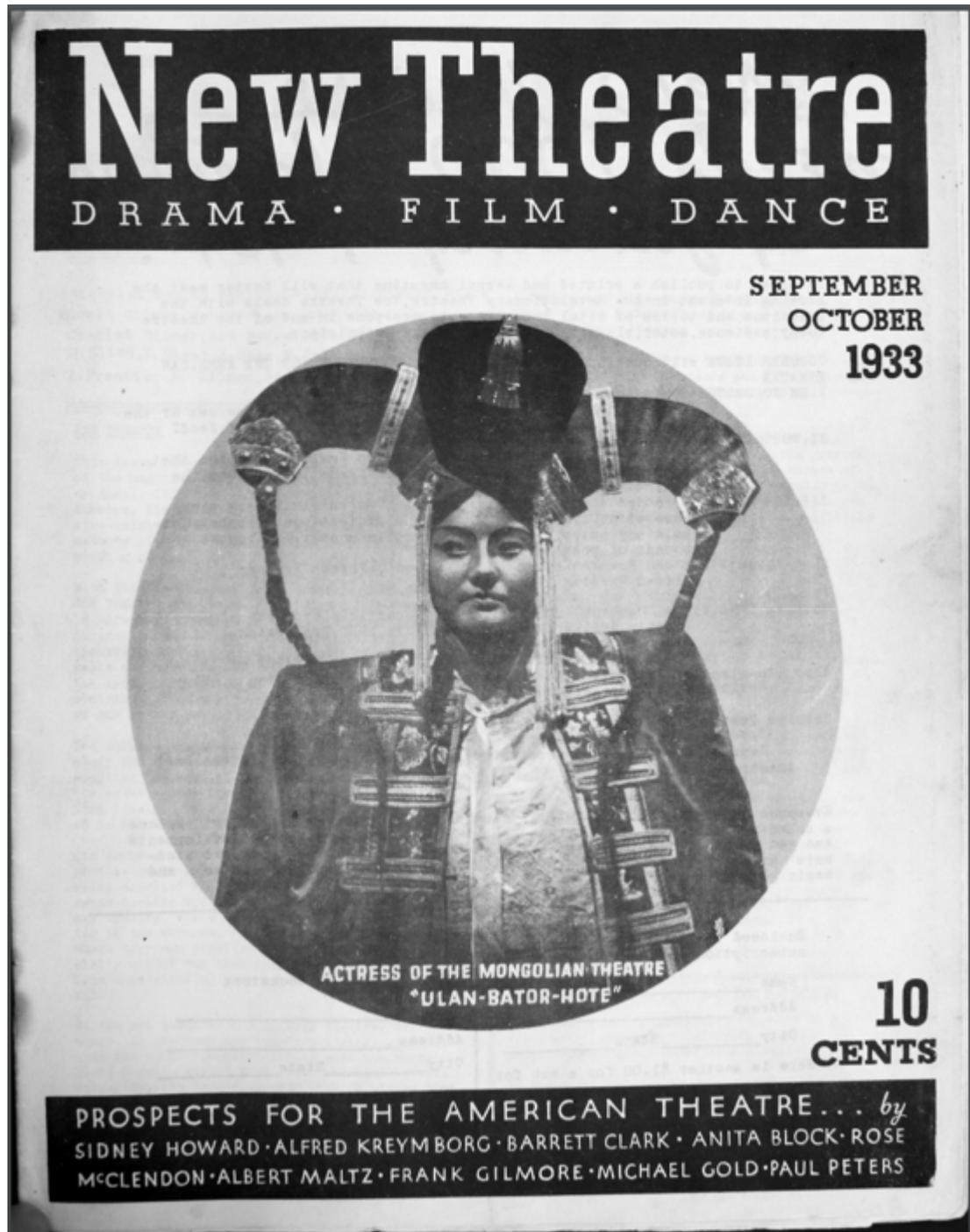
Advertisement for *Roar China*, 1930

Figure 13:



Cover of Inaugural Issue of *Worker's Theatre*, 1931

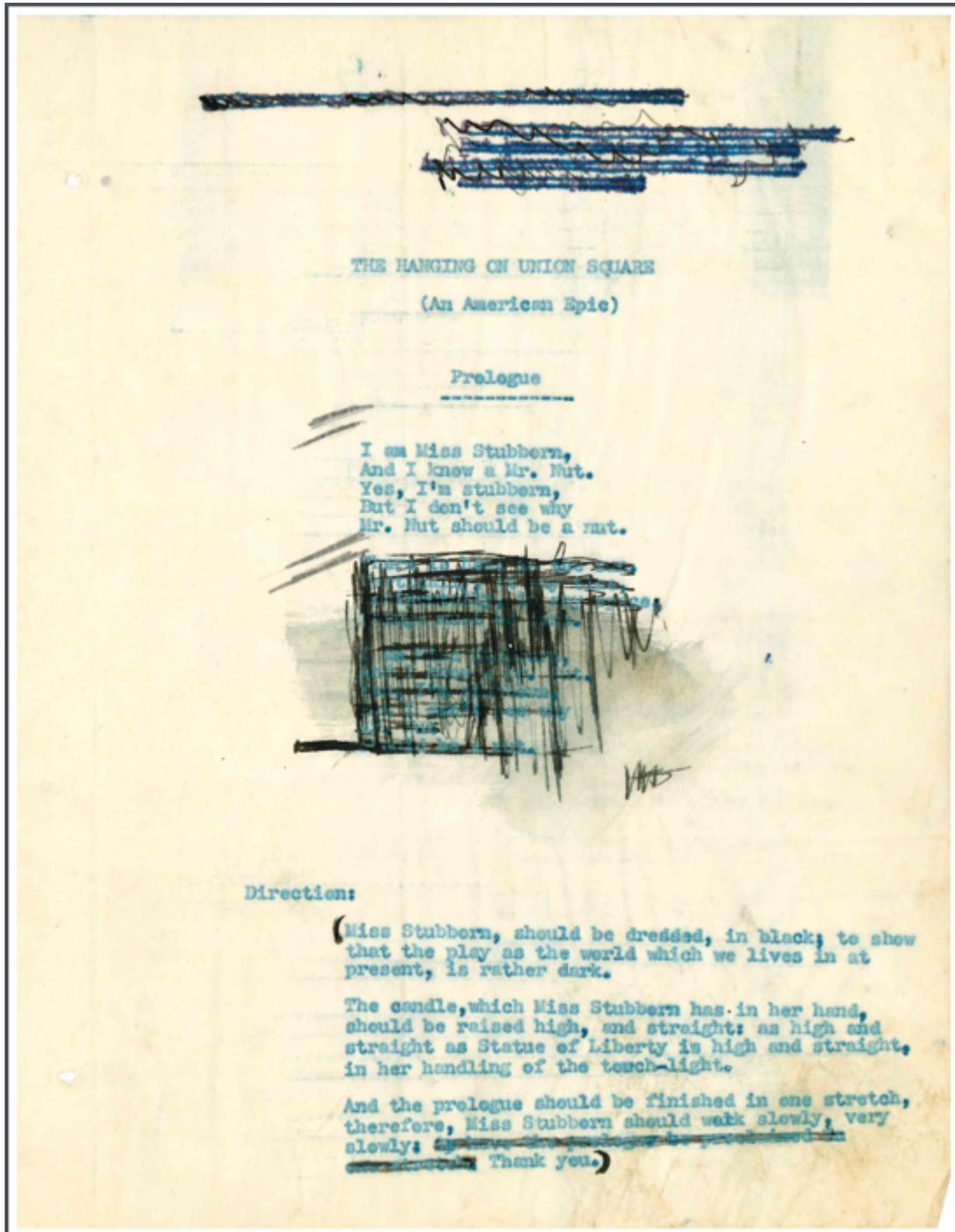
Figure 14:



Cover of Inaugural Issue of *New Theatre*, 1933



Figure 16:



Unpublished Manuscript of *The Hanging on Union Square*, Erwin Piscator Papers

Figure 17:



Agitprop Troupe Circa 1934

“Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to reform (or pause and reflect).”

--Mark Twain, *Notebook*, 1904

“And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.”

--John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*

**“A Man in a Group isn’t Himself at All”:  
Revisiting Steinbeck’s Phalanx Theory**

(An article-length version of this chapter has been published in the *Steinbeck Review*)

**“The Rolling Might of this Thing”: Phalanx and Multitude**

While writing what would become *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck was granted a “pistol license.”<sup>100</sup> Four years later, when Steinbeck relocated across the country from Pacific Grove, California to Palisades, New York, the now-famous writer again applied for a permit to carry a concealed firearm, registering two Colt revolvers for the purposes of “self-defense.” That Steinbeck felt he needed to protect himself comes as no surprise, as stories of death threats haunt his personal letters and

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<sup>100</sup> See Steve Hauk’s “Steinbeck Armed: (A Colt Revolver) With the Truth.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2008, pp. 90–96.

continue to color the local legends of Central California. One incident, related to Pacific Grove resident and writer Steve Hauk, recounts the events of a lazy Sunday afternoon in the late 1930s. Steinbeck, who often shied away from hometown visits, had been tempted back to Salinas for a picnic with high school classmates.<sup>101</sup> Though the day began pleasantly, Steinbeck's cheerful outing was interrupted when a "white pickup truck" careened onto the grass, "scattering" the unsuspecting park-goers from their baskets and blankets (92). According to an eyewitness account,<sup>102</sup> two men jumped out of the vehicle. One pressed a gun to Steinbeck's chest, warning the author to "stop what he was writing or else" (92).

Confrontations like this seem to have plagued Steinbeck throughout his life, ranging from threatening phone calls to FBI surveillance. Many locals were upset by the unflattering ways Steinbeck portrayed the insular villages of the San Joaquin Valley, though, as Rick Wartzman has argued, their threats were equally attributed to "the deep divide between Far Left and Far Right in California during the Great Depression and of the... role that Steinbeck played in this schism" (1). In a letter to Elizabeth Otis dated July 20, 1939, Steinbeck divulges an understanding of his place within this political division, writing:

The vilification of me out here by the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the Okies hate me

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<sup>101</sup> In his seminal biography, Jackson Benson classifies Steinbeck as a "near-recluse who knew a lot of people" (*True Adventures* 68).

<sup>102</sup> In his essay, Hauk mentions this story was told to him by "a handsome Salinas woman named Lilly," who, if both Hauk and Lilly are to be believed, was a classmate of John Steinbeck (92).

and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. This made all the papers. Tom Collins says that when his Okies read this smear, they were so mad they wanted to burn something down... I'm frightened at the rolling might of this thing. It is completely out of hand." (*SLL* 188)

Unfortunately, Steinbeck's position betwixt both sides of the rupture has endured, following the writer beyond the grave and into the literary journals. Although Steinbeck was only "mildly political in life," the California native has been variously "denounced by the right because he was on the left, by the left because he was not left enough, and, on occasions, by the right and the left at the same time" ("Political Glass" 45).<sup>103</sup> Much of this controversy can be distilled down to a recurrent tension in the works of this disquisition's focus, that is, the role of the individual in relation to the crowd. Some critics, such as Charles Wilson, cite Steinbeck's fundamental mistrust of mass political movements and the groups they spawn as essentially "destructive" (128). Others, like the aforementioned Rick Wartzman, underscore Steinbeck's belief in social collectivism, characterizing the author as a lower case "c" communist (4).

Steinbeck represents a unique challenge to this study. No other writer examined in this dissertation has so explicitly theorized the behavior of human assemblages, what Steinbeck would come to call the "phalanx" or "group man." Intentionally or unintentionally, Steinbeck's "phalanx theory" forces readers of his fiction to consider depictions of group behavior through his own concepts and terminology. Accordingly,

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<sup>103</sup> On this subject, Simon Stow has so cleverly stated: "Capitalists called [Steinbeck] a communist, communists a capitulator" (Stow 9).

any attempt to understand Steinbeck in terms of “democratic epiphany” and “multitude” must first be comprehended in relation to, and in concert with, his notion of “the phalanx.”

Given this examination of Steinbeck will need to make sense of two distinct yet related theoretical models (Steinbeck’s and my own), I propose welding on an conceptual adaptor of sorts to better yoke “the phalanx” to our preestablished criterium of “democratic epiphany.” I will reinterpret Steinbeck’s phalanx theory as it appears in his fiction in terms of “phalanx potential.” Understanding the phalanx through potentiality, that is, its ability to either *become* destructive or constructive, not only frees Steinbeck’s concept from zero-sum designations (collectivism as only good or bad) but affords needed flexibility to map the ways Steinbeck’s relationship to group behavior evolves from text to text. However, this broadened notion of “phalanx potential” is more than just a semantic extension of Steinbeck’s original theory. I argue “phalanx potential,” and thus, the way Steinbeck overlays his phalanx theory onto his works of fiction, fundamentally relies upon the efficacious leadership of the “collective individual.” While Steinbeck’s earlier works, namely, “The Vigilante” and *In Dubious Battle*, present a critical view of the dangers and destructive possibilities unharnessed phalanxes present, his later works, namely, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*, offer a more redemptive and productive view on the potential of these collectives. I hope to demonstrate that the reason for this progression lies in Steinbeck’s treatment of the “collective individual” and their ability to foster a multitude through realized moments of democratic epiphany.

This chapter will be undertaken in three parts. First, attention will be paid to the role of the individual in relation to mass political movements. Steinbeck, in many ways, is the least “left” of the writers we have examined, though, I will contend, no less radical. Through better contextualizing Steinbeck’s suspicion of mass politics, collective potential is cut loose from rigid party lines and reconstituted as a tool to safeguard one’s local community. Second, I will focus on the details of Steinbeck’s phalanx theory. To do this, a significant portion of this exploration will be devoted to charting the evolution of Steinbeck’s thought surrounding phalanx, from its origins as a biological thesis to its function as a recurrent narrative construct. The third and most extensive section will be devoted to careful reading of a selection of Steinbeck’s major texts, with special attention paid to the ways in which phalanxes either fail or succeed under the auspices of a collective individual.

### **Steinbeck’s Revolution: Individuality and Locality**

In a short 1954 essay written for *Le Figaro*, Steinbeck impudently proclaims, “I am a very dangerous revolutionary” (“Revolutionary” 89). Though the statement is made in defense of a peculiar brand of individualism and not “revolution” in a classically Marxist sense of the word, Steinbeck’s unique inability to be channeled into established schools of political thought did make him “dangerous,” and does make him “revolutionary.” Like no other American writer in his time, Steinbeck was simultaneously perceived as threatening to “capital, communists, school boards, and library patrons up and down the country” (Stow 8). His ability to draw fire from both political trench lines is admirable, if not, at times, seemingly contradictory. As Simon

Stow aptly summarizes:

Steinbeck was a staunch critic of capitalism but despised its state-centered alternatives; he championed community but feared the mob; he embraced his nation's wars but mourned their cost; he celebrated American ingenuity but criticized the society it created; he advocated for humanitarian intervention but recognized its costs to indigenous peoples; he sought solace and insights in nature but lamented the cruelties it inflicted on humanity. (9)

Most critics will agree (or concede) that Steinbeck was an ardent defender of individualism. In the words of Steinbeck's biographer Jackson Benson, "[a] fairly accurate way of describing Steinbeck, perhaps even more accurately than a New Deal Democrat with middle-class values, is as an independent who valued individuality...He wanted to be an individualist; he admired individualists; yet he also had a strong social conscience and a strong sense of right and wrong" (*True Adventures* 719-720). Indeed, Steinbeck's own words from the above-mentioned essay in *Le Figaro* reinforce Benson's remarks: "The individual human brain working alone is the only creative organ in nature" ("Revolutionary" 89-90). Espousing the deific qualities of the "individual human brain," Steinbeck glibly continues: "Herein is my revolt. I believe in and will fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction" (90).

Though Steinbeck's advocacy of the individual smacks of the parochial conservatism now synonymous with mid-century American politics (indeed, Steinbeck refers to the "so-called masses" as "more lumpen than ever"), the piece is, in actuality,

an attack on political establishments (90). Steinbeck writes to “inform both the extreme right and that pseudo right which calls itself left that they are both wrong,” adding, “[a]ny semblance of the emergence of the individual is instantly crushed and the doctrine of party and state above everything has taken the place of the theory of liberated men” (89-90). Though one can attribute some of Steinbeck’s tone to a cantankerousness that would regularly flavor his later writings, it is crucial, I think, to designate the actual target of his critique. If one attends to Steinbeck’s language, the enemy of the thoughtful individual is not the *intention* behind political thought—Steinbeck cherishes “inspection, criticism, and rearrangement”—but rather their *institutions*, the imperfect manifestations engendered by those thoughts (90). It is, rather, the “doctrine of the party,” and the “state” Steinbeck sees as antithetical to individual creativity, not the impulse behind radical thinking.<sup>104</sup>

To Steinbeck’s credit, his overt mistrust of institutions—particularly political institutions—is consistent throughout his life. In a 1936 letter to Louis Paul, Steinbeck describes his distaste for the communists in California, not for their beliefs *per se*, but for their will to blindly follow: “I don’t like communists either, I mean I dislike them as people. I rather imagine the apostles had the same waspish qualities and the New Testament is proof that they had equally bad manners” (*SLL* 120). However, this “dislike” of communists for having “waspish qualities” did not preclude Steinbeck from, at least for a time, accepting the general principles of Marxism. “There is little

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<sup>104</sup> On this score, Charles Williams has argued: “Steinbeck’s analysis of communism and its repressive character ignores the actual political context, goals, and power struggles that determined Communist Party practices and that differentiated communism from other forms of radical politics and working-class insurgency” (132).

question in my mind that the principle of private ownership as a means of production is not long with us,” Steinbeck pronounces in a 1939 interview, “[t]his is not in terms of what I think is right or wrong or good or bad, but in terms of what is inevitable” (qtd. in *Obscene* 194-195). This sentiment would be crystallized in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), with Steinbeck going so far as to allude to the eventuality of an armed insurrection by the proletariat:

And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands, it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds all through history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. (*Grapes* 324)

Steinbeck’s belief in the potentiality of collective action extends beyond the pages of his fiction, as the writer aligned himself with several leftist organizations throughout the 1930s, many of whom were captained by card-carrying communists. One such organization even named itself after the writer. With Steinbeck serving as the chairman, “The John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization” was formed to help unionize California’s many vulnerable agricultural laborers (*Obscene* 97–98). As Wartzman has documented, the “efforts of the Steinbeck Committee” would spread outside the orchards and fields, “embolden[ing] the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America.” (4).

By virtue of chairing a radical labor organization, Steinbeck cannot be said to

despise groups entirely. For Steinbeck, the formation of The John Steinbeck Committee was, importantly, in response to a localized problem, a problem Herb Klein and Carey McWilliams would famously call “organized terrorism in agriculture” (“Cold Terror in California”). Steinbeck’s San Joaquin Valley, the nostalgic backdrop for much of his early work, had been embroiled in seemingly endless violence. Associated Farmers, a well-funded land owner’s organization, brutally managed their orchards with an iron fist, arming rightwing vigilante groups with bats, knives, and guns to police migrant workers. Combined with this authoritarian control, California agribusiness flexed their political muscle, passing on an onslaught of legislation to prevent striking and unionization. The migrant pickers, without much in the way of legal or physical recourse, were cheated and displaced, regularly forced to the brink of starvation. Consequently, what was once ostensibly a labor conflict quickly decayed into a humanitarian crisis. In a letter to Otis dated February 1938, Steinbeck describes the direness of the situation, pledging to do what he can to remedy the worsening situation:

I must go over into the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. In one tent, there are twenty people quarantined for smallpox, and two of the woman are to have babies in that tent this week. I've tied into the thing from the first, and I must get down there

and see it and see if I can't do something to help knock these murderers on the heads. Do you know what they are afraid of? They think if they are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize, and that is the bugbear of the large landowner and the corporation farmer. The states and counties will give them nothing because they are outsiders. But the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders. I'm pretty mad about it. No word of this outside because when I have finished my job, the jolly old associated farmers will be after my scalp again. (*SLL* 158)

Though the letter's tenor is relatively informal (the inclusion of "bugbear" certainly makes it so), its underlying message is akin to that of a political manifesto.

Characterizing the abusive control of "large landowners" and "corporation farmers" as "fascist," Steinbeck implicitly draws a line in the political sand, choosing not only to combat capitalist tyranny but to defend human dignity. There is, in Steinbeck's decision to "do something to help knock these murderers on the heads," a palpable concern for his immediate locality ("I've tied into the thing from the first"), a desire to rescue of the "interior valleys" of his youth and imagination from fascist control.

Indeed, Steinbeck's need to take action in response to specifically local conflicts offers the necessary cipher to decrypt his distinctive belief in the proper application of collective action. Studying Darwinian social thought at Stanford, and again with friends in the 1930s, Steinbeck and his intellectual circle would come to deny,

the existence of eternal and universal principles of right and wrong.

They instead believed that every local human community devises a unique code of conduct for biological reasons, as a way to cope with immediate, visible threats... to avoid extinction, human groups endlessly tinker with their cultural inheritances, without totally jettisoning their pasts. Humans always retain some of the beliefs and prescriptions of their forebears, for these provide time-tested moorings from which to face the world. (Zirakzadeh 608)

Steinbeck would call this awareness of local conditions “non-teleological thinking,” rejecting the rationale of universal social progression in favor of an outlook which “celebrates normative diversity and views revisions of normative beliefs as natural and healthy” (608). Steinbeck’s mistrust of mass political movements and political institutions, then, can be located in his disbelief that global political agendas could be made to fit local circumstances. Thus, the importance of the individual in relation to their surrounding community becomes paramount. Capable agents, sensitive and intelligent enough to attend to their local populace, are charged with discovering “the threats to the communities’ survival that the local environments pose” and guiding “the communities’ experiments with incremental cultural change as a way to alleviate suffering” (608). Through this application of Darwinian thought, Steinbeck attempts to free the notion of human progress from party dogma and transcendental logic, making social aims hyper-flexible and embedded in specific community issues. In a letter to his good friend Carlton. A. Sheffield, Steinbeck would more precisely outline the contours of his thinking, writing:

The world is sick now. There are things in the tide pools easier

to understand than Stalinist, Hitlerite, Democrat, capitalist confusion, and voodoo. So I'm going to those things which are relatively more lasting to find a new basic picture. I have a conviction that a new world is growing under the old, the way a new fingernail grows under a bruised one.

I think all the economists and sociologists will be surprised someday to find that they did not foresee nor understand it. Just as the politicians of Rome could not have foreseen that the social-political-ethical world for two thousand years would grow out of the metaphysical gropings of a few quiet poets. I think the same thing is happening now.

Communist, Fascist, Democrat may find that the real origin of the future lies on the microscope plates of obscure young men, who, puzzled with order and disorder in quantum and neutron, build gradually a picture which will seep down until it is the fibre of the future. (*SLL* 194).

Curiously, the key to understanding the "future," the teeming "new world [sic] growing under the old one" lies not with the economists or sociologists, nor with the Communists, Fascists, or Democrats, but the "obscure young men" who fiddle with "microscope plates." Like an organism on a glass slide, the qualities essential for Steinbeck's "collective individual" now sharpens into focus. Only those with the requisite patience, intelligence, and individuality are capable of discerning the new worlds to come. Subsequently, as the keeper of this precious knowledge, the

individual must take on the responsibility to shepherd their respective community towards a successful future.

Indeed, Steinbeck's ability to graph structural concepts from nature onto political thought is prescient, especially when considered in relation to Hardt and Negri. Steinbeck's role of the individual within the community is an uncanny reflection of Hart and Negri's concept of "nodes" within a network. As a unique entity unto themselves, each individual must respond to local conditions, be they organizational or environmental. Each community, in turn, forms a kind of node cluster unto itself, part of a larger supralocal grid. Additionally, "cultural inheritances," as a form of immaterial labor, bear a striking resemblance to Hardt and Negri's concept of "the common." The fragments of knowledge passed down from humans who inhabit a prior geographical space make living sustainably comprehensible, and living justly possible. Given these similarities, it is no mistake Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh's conclusions on non-teleological thinking reads as though it were stripped from a Hardt and Negri manuscript, emphasizing Steinbeck's ultimate vision for "a geographically dispersed revolution" (615). Indeed, there is something undeniably revolutionary about Steinbeck's work. Evinced by a 1939 book review for *The New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman writes: "[i]f only a couple of million of overcomfortable people can be brought to read it, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* may actually affect something like a revolution in their minds and hearts" (81). Though Steinbeck was misunderstood during his life and is remains misunderstood today, the elements of what has contemporarily been reconfigured into radical political thought can be found in Steinbeck's considerations of the individual. Though *The Grapes of Wrath* did not

spark the revolution Fadiman portends, it's message may be realized in a revolution yet to come.

### **“We May in Time Come to Know Something”: Steinbeck’s Phalanx Theory**

In 1933 John Steinbeck wrote “Argument of the Phalanx,” a short essay exploring the relationship between the individual and the group. According to Steinbeck:

We have thought of mankind always in terms of individual men. We have tried to study men and movements of men by minute investigation of individual men units. We might as reasonably try to understand the nature of a man by investigating the cells of his body. Perhaps if we observe the phalanx, knowing it is a new individual, not to be confined within the units which comprise it, if we look back at the things it has done in an attempt to correlate and analyze its habits under various stimuli, we may in time come to know something of the phalanx, of its nature, of its drive and its ends, we may even be able to direct its movements where now we have only great numbers of meaningless, unrelated and destructive phenomena (“Argument of Phalanx” 3).

Steinbeck’s “phalanx theory” reiterates many of the themes and theories explored in this study’s preceding chapters. Echoing the ideas of Le Bon, Canetti, and Hardt and Negri, Steinbeck’s understanding of the crowd encapsulates many of the hallmark attributes common to crowd theory, including nodes within a network (“men units”), a composite social body (“a new individual”), and its capacity for devastation

(“destructive phenomena”). In many ways, Steinbeck’s sustained thought on group behavior crystalizes the ethos of the interwar period, simultaneously calling for greater knowledge about mass phenomena (“we may in time come to know something of the phalanx”) and embracing its ability to be leveraged for social potential (“we may even be able to direct its movements”). However, Steinbeck’s “phalanx theory” has remained something of a controversial topic in Steinbeck studies, unearthing questions about the author’s political loyalties, philosophical allegiances, and overall beliefs in the feasibility of social progress.

In his seminal *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (1973), Richard Astro notes that Steinbeck borrowed the term “phalanx” from Roman legion battle formations in which the soldier units resembled “high domed turtles because of the manner in which they carried their shields above their heads” (63). This historical example of melding the disparate many into a single entity provided Steinbeck the symbolic frame to better structure his musings on collective human behavior. Steinbeck’s group-man hypothesis, it is important to highlight, was formulated in an atmosphere of intense social and political unease with the rise of fascism, communism, industrial unionism, and other mass movements. His essay “Argument of the Phalanx,” then, in Marcia Salazar’s words, can be understood as “a brief social and psychological study of behavior” employed to make sense of “the social atmosphere of the 30s” (99). Steinbeck had developed the theory with his friend Edward “Doc” Ricketts, a marine biologist, spending years “expound[ing]... and refin[ing]” the argument of the phalanx, noting in a letter to a friend,

Ed Ricketts has dug up all the scientific material and more than I need

to establish the physical integrity of the thing... When your phalanx needs you it will use you, if you are the material to be used. You will know when the time comes, and when it does come, nothing you can do will let you escape. (St. Pierre 58, *SLL* 80)

Such archival material has been the basis for a shared opinion amongst certain literary critics that Steinbeck “wrote not in the tradition of the liberal arts, but more in the tradition of the sciences,” with some suggesting that “Steinbeck’s contribution to American literature is unique, [in that] he offers dramatizations of biological principles” (Railsback 7). Though perhaps originally intended as a scientific attempt to explain human nature and group behavior, Steinbeck’s phalanx theory strays away from scientific objectivity towards subjective, even moralistic, sociological appraisal. As Louis Owens observes, many scholars have traditionally seen Steinbeck’s interest in natural processes as overly “naïve, sentimental, . . . romantic” and shallowly naturalistic, or what Sam McNeilly has playfully referred to as “the Steinbeck Problem” (Owens xi, McNeilly 31). In his review of early Steinbeck criticism, Peter Lisca finds that many critics even went so far as to call Steinbeck’s scientific naturalism a “pernicious influence” on his writing (6). Edmund Wilson’s infamous essay “The Californians: Storm and Steinbeck” (1940) set the critical tone for many years to come, maintaining that Steinbeck’s “animalizing tendency [is]...at the bottom of his relative unsuccess at representing human beings” (qtd. in Lisca 6). Leslie Fiedler, once the high priest of American literary study, would follow suit forty-six years later categorizing Steinbeck as a “middlebrow author for middlebrow critics” (qtd. in Railsback 1). Frankly, Wilson, and Fiedler do make an accurate point in

finding fault with Steinbeck's appeal to scientific naturalism. Steinbeck's less than objective approach to his phalanx theory cannot ultimately account for the constant inclusion of his personal and moral judgments on humans and the collective groups they form (though he was, one must remember, only an *amateur* marine biologist).<sup>105</sup>

However, since Wilson's essay, there have been many who have written in defense of Steinbeck and reconsidered the importance of biological and natural themes in his work such as Woodburn O. Ross' "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest" (1949), Horace Plat Taylor's *The Biological Naturalism of John Steinbeck* (1960), and Warren French's "John Steinbeck: A Usable Concept of Naturalism" (1975). One might even suggest, in opposition to Wilson and earlier anti-sentimentalists, that Steinbeck's work has found "new credence" and scholarly relevance when considered through widening scope of contemporary ecocriticism (Wyse 158n3). Perhaps best evidenced in the essay collection *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (2007), much of the fresh critical work on Steinbeck has, by and large, contended with this once under-examined trope within Steinbeck's literary corpus. The most recent volumes of the *Steinbeck Review*, the last surviving periodical devoted explicitly to the work of John Steinbeck, is littered with articles dedicated to unfurling Steinbeck's unique and complicated "ecological philosophy" or what McNeilly has more precisely called "Cooperative Ecology" (32).<sup>106</sup> Barbara Heavilin, Editor-in-Chief of the

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<sup>105</sup> While attempting to explain his phalanx theory in a letter to his good friend George Albee, Steinbeck makes such a concession, writing: "I am neither scientist nor profound investigator. But I am experiencing an emotional vastness in working [my phalanx theory] out" (*SLL* 80).

<sup>106</sup> See Lawrence Wade Powers' "Diminishing the Discontent" (2015), Netta Bar Yosef-Paz's "Filthy 'Others' in 1990s Environmentalist Fiction: From Steinbeck to Boyle" (2017), Elisabeth Bayley's "John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* and Wendell Berry: An Ecocritical

*Steinbeck Review*, reflects on this welcomed “resurgence in Steinbeck Studies” in her opening remarks for Vol. 12 no.2 in 2015, noting that, “increasingly, *Steinbeck Review* is receiving articles that touch on the topic of Steinbeck and deep ecology” (v). More specifically, Steinbeck’s phalanx theory has received renewed critical attention (McNeilly, Wyse, Shillinglaw), though discussion of the theory has remained puzzlingly limited to such works as *In Dubious Battle*, and to a lesser degree, *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, I contend much of Steinbeck’s other work (so far excluded from such studies) may be productively read through his phalanx theory. This re-visitation, I believe, provides the reader a useful framework for examining Steinbeck’s complex exploration of the constructive (or destructive) potential of human collectives.

In his latest book, *Crowd Violence In American Modernist Fiction* (2013), Benjamin S. West succinctly summarizes both these constructive and destructive potentialities of Steinbeck’s phalanx, claiming:

In all of his depictions, Steinbeck portrays crowds as potential forces for positive social change... an effective strategy to use in conflicts... Steinbeck, in spite of his consistent portrayals of the potential of collective force to inspire social change, also shows numerous examples of mobs reacting with irrational and counterproductive violence. Steinbeck’s fiction implies that mobs can be used for positive social change, but Steinbeck also argues that any mob, even a

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View” (2017), Sam McNeilly’s “Visions from the Tide Pool: John Steinbeck’s Interdependent Migrant Community” (2018), and Lowell Wyse’s “The World Brain and the Watershed: The Spatiality of Steinbeck’s Environmental Vision” (2019)

<sup>107</sup> Susan Shillinglaw has referred to these texts as “phalanx narratives” (148).

mob being used to create positive social change, is capable of losing control and committing senseless acts of violence. When Steinbeck's mobs work together as a collective, organized unit, they are able to achieve progress, but when these groups devolve into violence and chaos, their progress is thwarted (130).

My concept of "phalanx potential," that is, a phalanx's capacity for either destruction or creation calls for an intensified focus of the "collective individual." Though Steinbeck's phalanx theory is meant to elucidate aspects of group behavior, I argue West's keen observation on constructive and destructive potentials falls short by failing to acknowledge that the phalanx's success or failure is often determined, paradoxically, by the actions of a single individual. Where we have previously seen the collective individual at times participate in (Daniels) or foment (Mr. Nut) a multitude, Steinbeck puts a new spin on the individual's role in the realization of a democratic epiphany.

Simply put, the success or failure of a phalanx relies on the abilities of an extra-ordinary leader within the phalanx itself.<sup>108</sup> Though this paradox may seem counterintuitive, it is, by its very contradictory nature, unapologetically Steinbeckian. Steinbeck himself seems to have been cognizant of this discrepancy, writing in a 1955 article, "I believe that man is a double thing.... a group animal and at the same time an individual" (22). At the risk of misspeaking on behalf of a term I have created, I defer to Steinbeck to better define the specific attributes of his "collective individual."

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<sup>108</sup> Steinbeck would note as much in a letter to John O'Hara in 1949, stating rather acerbically: "the group ungoverned by individual thinking is a horrible destructive principle" (*SLL* 358)

In “The Leader of the People,” the final section of *The Red Pony*, Grandfather recounts the story of his leading a group of settlers across the plains to his grandson Jody. He reflects on this trek as “a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast” with Grandfather as “the head” soberly emphasizing later “the thing had to have a head” (93–94).<sup>109</sup> I argue Steinbeck’s version of the collective individual can be understood, then, as this head—a participatory part of the body, but simultaneously always in a distanced position of unique intelligence and compassion (readers may recall the Grandpa’s tears as he reflects his role in “carr[ying] life” to the barren West) (94). In Steinbeck’s fiction, this “head,” in addition to its privileged awareness, is endowed with the responsibility of guiding and maintaining the larger mass. Just as the success or failure of crossing the plains rested with Grandfather, so the success or failure of the phalanx, I contend, lies with Steinbeck’s collective individual.

Much of Steinbeck’s phalanx theory is inspired by concepts in organismal biology and formed from his own observations of wildlife.<sup>110</sup> While aboard the *Western Flyer* during a trip to the Gulf of California to collect, document, and preserve tidal life, Steinbeck notes that the groups of sea creatures or “the school, seem[ed] to have a nature and drive and ends of its own. It [was] more than . . . the

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<sup>109</sup> *In Crowds and Power* (1960), Elias Canetti makes a similar recognition, noting, the crowd “is closely compressed; it is impossible for it move really freely. Its state has something passive in it; it waits. It waits for a head to be shown it” (34).

<sup>110</sup> Other theories of crowd organization and crowd psychology seem to frame their arguments in analogous terms. For example, Gustave Le Bon describes crowds as “provisional being[s] formed of heterogeneous elements, which for a moment are combined, exactly as cells which constitute a living body. . . which displays characteristics very different from those possessed by each cells singly” (4). Canetti articulates his thesis in similar language, pronouncing his wish to study crowds as raw, unmediated, and in their “biological state” (22).

sum of its units” (*Sea of Cortez* 240). He graphed this observation of animals onto his larger reflections of humans, suggesting that “one diagnostic trait of Homo Sapiens is that groups of individuals are periodically infected with a feverish nervousness,” which, in turn, causes them to act in ways they normally would not act as separate entities (16–17). As Astro argues, a useable definition of how to identify group-man follows from such an observation. As it relates to both animals and humans, Steinbeck’s larger phalanx thesis, then, includes the group itself acting “as a *causal* unit on its own parts” (Astro 63, emphasis added). Subsequent critical understanding of group-man has essentially reiterated Astro’s original (and cogent) consideration. John Ditsky notes, in much of the same language found in both Astro and the *Sea of Cortez*, “[r]eaders of Steinbeck are familiar with... ‘group man,’ to describe humanity in small or large masses functioning, for whatever internal or external reason, as a unit—very much as fish in schools and birds in flocks” (180). To perceive how influential organismal biology was in shaping Steinbeck’s work, Lisca remarks that it’s only “necessary to compare in detail . . . [the writings from] *Sea of Cortez* with those about the mob of strikers in *In Dubious Battle* six years earlier” (119).

And yet, Steinbeck’s theories seem too similar to the theories of Le Bon and Sorel to be wholly extracted from observations of the natural world. Though I have not found an explicit link in Steinbeck’s letters or readings, Le Bon’s theories of crowded behavior are remarkably similar. Let us reconsider Le Bon’s description of the “collective mind”:

“[u]nder certain given circumstances... an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics, very different from those of the

individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed...but presenting very clearly defined characteristics. The gathering has thus become what, in the absence of a better expression, I will call an organized crowd, or, if the term is considered preferable, a psychological crowd. It forms a *single being*" (2, emphasis added).

What's more, Le Bon makes a comparable observation in the crowd's (or phalanx's) potential for violence and ruination, "[c]rowds are only powerful for destruction, their rule is tantamount to a barbarian phase" while also, remarkably, anticipating the biological language Steinbeck himself would come to use: "In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies" (xiii). Given Steinbeck's penchant for science and psychology (his letters often mention Jung and Freud), it is very likely Steinbeck would have stumbled across Le Bon in his research. Indeed, Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh's observation strengthens this likely connection, noting Steinbeck was well-versed in "currents of European thought that had arrived in the United States around the turn of the century" (606). Moreover, both Steinbeck and Le Bon are often clustered together in the footnotes of sociological or anthropological studies of mass behavior, however, there has yet to be a study explicitly devoted towards reading these two as related and in conversation.

In a 1933 letter to his sometimes friend George Albee discussing the idea of phalanxes for his forthcoming *In Dubious Battle* (1936), Steinbeck reflects on the

destructive capacity of group-man's "emotions of destruction, of war, . . . of hatred, of fear" (*SLL* 80). Generally considered the most "pessimistic of Steinbeck's novels," *In Dubious Battle* manifests these anxieties in fictional form (French 80). The inspiration for this novel comes from his interviews with two communist union organizers hiding in the Monterey area after they had organized a strike in the San Joaquin Valley (*True Adventures* 296). As Jon Falsarella Dawson has recognized, *In Dubious Battle* would be a compendium of "episodes from notable labor strikes that swept through California in the 1930s" particularly those that took place at the Targus Ranch in August 1933 (130). Steinbeck would, of course, fictionalize "the geography, facts and characters," blending "the different strikes and union officials he had witnessed and met in California in the first half of the thirties," providing the "perfect application of his phalanx theory" (Salazar 100). The novel's diegesis, consequently, focuses almost explicitly on the conflicts between these separate group-"men" in the Growers' Association, the vigilantes, and the strikers.

### **"The Worst Scum in the World": Destructive Phalanxes in *In Dubious Battle* and "The Vigilante"**

Due to some moral deficiency and without a fully realized collective individual at the helm, each of the groups presented in *In Dubious Battle* are examples of "destructive phalanxes." Their deficiency, as West asserts, is subsequently expressed through regression into forms of violence. The first of these group-men is the Growers' Association. As the cooperative of landowners in the valley, against whom the pickers seek to strike, the Grower's Association is consistently depicted as

predatory. Recognizing the impoverished pickers' inability to make long trips into town for provisions after grueling days in the fields, the Growers Association coerce the pickers into paying almost all their wages for food above market price. Jim Nolan, the novel's ill-fated "hero" (or "half hero"), discovers this as he converses with the old "tree-topper" Dan. As Dan makes his way from the fields, he tells Jim:

Guess I'll go over to the store and get me a can of beans. These damn fools pay seventeen cents for a pound of canned beans. Why, they could get four pounds of dried beans for that, and cooked up that'd make nearly eight pounds. . . . Well, what time have others got? Women work all day, men work all day; and the owner charges three cents extra for a can of beans because the men are too damn tired to go into town for groceries. (*In Dubious Battle* 56)

To turn a profit, the Growers' Association as group-man collectively and purposefully keep food prices artificially high, and the fatigued laborers impoverished. Though not physically violent, the Growers' Association group-man work jointly as a larger entity to enact a kind of violence against the laborers' health and well-being—what McNeilly has called a "business phalan[x]" (38). With the temptation of greater fiscal gain, the landowners maintain this power disparity to keep their employees living in abject poverty, effectively rendering them unable to organize and resist.

Acting in concert with the Growers' Association, the town vigilantes are portrayed as another destructive phalanx. While the owners form a group-man around greed, the town vigilantes form a group-man around prejudice. Steinbeck depicts these men as allowing themselves to be easily swayed by extreme nationalist ideology.

Their bigotry, in turn, is made into a justification for their violence. The town vigilantes' ideology is perhaps best embodied by a newspaper clipping the strikers find:

We [the town] believe the time has come to take action. When transient laborers tie up the Valley's most important industry, when fruit tramps, led and inspired by paid foreign agitators . . . carry on a campaign of violence and burning, bringing Red Russia into peaceful America, when our highways are no longer safe for American citizens, nor their homes safe from firebrands, we believe the time for action has come!

(230)

Through this appeal to extremist ideology, the conflict between the town and the strikers is amplified from wage strike into heavyweight political battle between "Red Russia" and a once "peaceful America, . . . no longer safe for American citizens." As a destructive phalanx, the vigilantes burn a farmhouse, destroy a strike sympathizer's place of business, and murder Jim in a grove outside the striker's camp. Jim's mentor and fellow communist organizer, Mac, perhaps best recognizes their capacity for violence, telling Jim:

Why, they're the dirtiest guys in any town. They're the same ones that burned the houses of old German people during the war. They're the same ones that lynch Negroes. They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution. But they're just the old nigger tortures working. . . . I guess they're about the worst scum in the world. (131)

Here, Steinbeck expands his exploration of the destructive phalanx by engaging with traditions of nationalistic violence. The town vigilantes in the rural fields of California, swayed by charged diction and jingoistic sentiment are, in effect, equated to the people that “burned the houses of old German people during the war” and “lynch Negroes” all in the name of a false patriotism. With this historical comparison, Steinbeck applies his critique of the town vigilantes to humankind’s penchant toward xenophobic “cruelty” (referencing, no doubt, Jim Crow and various authoritarian movements Europe). They are not patriots or protectors of the Constitution, but rather reduced to “the worst scum in the world.”

Even though the third group-man, the strikers, are depicted as exploited and abused throughout the novel, without a worthy “collective individual,” they too regress into a destructive phalanx. In the communist strike leaders, Jim and Mac, Claude-Edmonde Magny observes that Steinbeck purposefully creates “a hero in two persons” who have “voluntarily given up their individualities” (qtd. in Astro 69). Though both Jim and Mac initially organize the strike with the good intention of securing stable wages for the pickers, both men’s engrossment with the party and the party’s goals diminish their sensitivity to the real needs of the strikers, which “may well be attributable to [their] inability to think as an individual about real needs of individuals” (Astro 70). It is both Jim and Mac’s stringent obedience to a closed system of party methods that eventually make the striker phalanx fail. The “hero in two” force their ideology on the workers instead of encouraging democratic participation. In an attempt to coercively guide the strike, Mac tells a picketer to

nominate London, here, for chairman. They’ll put him in all right.

They'll do almost anything. . . . London, soon's you're chairman, you tell 'em to have order. You give 'em a list of guys, about ten, and tell 'em to vote for those guys as a committee to figure things out." (*In Dubious Battle* 80)

Instead of allowing the workers to select their own leaders, Mac takes the election into his own hands and uses his position to bend the protest according to his will. Mac's artificial guise of democracy, thereby stifling the strikers co-equal participation, thwarts the possibility of the strike becoming a successful phalanx. As Susan Shillinglaw reflects in her comprehensive essay entitled "John Steinbeck's Participatory Politics, 1936-1968" (2019), the importance of maintaining egalitarian democracy "animates [Steinbeck's] entire career—the power of 'we' to forge a self-reliant, participatory 'I' (147). It is this choice to manipulate instead of include, coupled with a rigid obsession with party interests over the picker's interests, that corrupts the striker group-man. The pickers' identities, along with the identities of the dual hero(es), Mac and Jim, together, are amalgamated into a kind of perverted "Colossus" with the potential to "run like a mad dog, and bite anything that moves" (115, 53).

Mac and Jim's inability to foster democracy and identify with the pickers they are organizing ultimately disqualifies them from becoming "the head" of their phalanx. Their counterpart, the detached and aloof Doctor Burton, has the education and self-awareness (traits Mac and Jim lack) that afford him the potential to become a leader of people. However, his desire for objective distance and his failure to understand "man's need for commitment" ultimately divorce him from the phalanx

(Owens 98–99). Doctor Burton’s failure to become the collective individual will be discussed in greater detail later when “Doc” of *Cannery Row* is examined.

Without a collective individual, consequently, the strikers’ efforts, like the Growers’ Association and the vigilantes, disintegrate into violence. After settling into their camp, the strikers go out (now under the indirect control of Mac and Jim) to a nearby orchard *en masse* to harass the replacement scabs that usurped their jobs. The strikers,

swarmed on them, cursing in their throats. The [scabs] fought for a moment, and then went down . . . The fury departed as quickly as it had come. They stood away from their victims. They panted heavily. Jim looked without emotion at the ten moaning men on the ground, their faces kicked shapeless. Here a lip was torn away, exposing bloody teeth and gums; one man cried like a child because his arm was bent sharply backward, broken at the elbow. Now that the fury was past, the strikers were sick, poisoned by the flow from their own anger glands. They were weak; one man held his head between his hands as though it ached terribly. (141–42)

In their mania, and without a worthy leader, the strikers lower themselves to the level of the nationalistic vigilantes by engaging in the same kind of hateful violence perpetrated against them.

The strikers’ position of moral superiority and the sanctity of their cause are lost as they attack the scabs, who, not unlike them, are poor pickers desperate for work. The senselessness of this violence, and the venality of the destructive phalanx

become apparent through the emptiness Jim experiences as he walks among the carnage. Instead of feeling vindication, Jim looks on “without emotion.” After the violence, the strikers, too, become “sick, poisoned by . . . their own anger.” Thus, Jim’s compromised morals and deficiency as a collective individual “leads [the phalanx] to a repulsive and dangerous lack of moral direction” (Levant 90). This same feeling of emptiness and sickness as a symptom of participation in a destructive phalanx occurs in another of Steinbeck’s stories—“The Vigilante.”

Steinbeck first published “The Vigilante” in 1936 in *Esquire* and later included it in his collection of short stories *The Long Valley*. After being part of a lynch mob, the protagonist, Mike, experiences a sense of hollowness, a contrast to his feelings during the lynching:

Half an hour before, when he had been howling with the mob and fighting for a chance to help pull on the rope, then his chest had been so full that he had found he was crying. But now everything was dead, everything unreal; the dark mob was made of stiff lay-figures. In the flamelight the faces were as expressionless as wood. Mike felt the stiffness, the unreality in himself, too. . . . A cold loneliness fell upon him. (“The Vigilante” 134)

After being a part of this group-man, Mike feels a barrenness similar to that which Jim and the strikers experience. The “unreality” affects not only Mike, but the mob in its

entirety. As Astro observes, in its reckless destruction, the mob “reflects Steinbeck’s premise that the group-man can alienate man from himself” (70). In perhaps their last collective action, they share together in the hangover of a destructive phalanx. The great catharsis in dispensing justice for the supposed betterment of the community—the goal which Jim and the strikers had sought—ultimately eludes the mob and leaves them only with “unreality” and “cold loneliness.” Mike’s alienation as rank-and-file cell in the larger mob, then, as Owens suggests, “explores the group-man theme of *In Dubious Battle* from the opposite perspective from that of Party leaders such as Mac and Jim” (127). The desolation both Mike and Jim feel is undoubtedly a symptom of the destructive group-man. Their detachment and inability to create any sense of community underscore Steinbeck’s judgement of the fruitlessness and danger groups without leadership present.

As Steinbeck continues writing into the late thirties and mid-forties, his portrayal of group-man and of group-man’s potential shifts as he begins to explore the value of “constructive phalanxes.” Warren French has noticed such a shift, noting, “The writer of *In Dubious Battle* . . . gives no evidence of believing in the perfectibility of man; the writer who rewrote ‘L’Affaire Lettuceberg’ into *The Grapes of Wrath* does” (93). Indeed, the shift present in *The Grapes of Wrath* extends well beyond Steinbeck’s newfound belief in the “perfectibility of man” and ripples into his views on collective action. On this score, Astro has argued Steinbeck began to recognize the existence of a “keying device which enables man to recognize his phalanx role and to discover how, through participation as a unit in the group, he fulfills himself as an individual” (65-66). Collectivity, then, is reconfigured to allow

for individual “participation” and possible “fufill[ment].” Astro continues:

“[Steinbeck] surely realizes that there is more than one type of group man; that there are creative and destructive phalanxes, and he maintains that man, as a ‘thinking, figuring’ being, must align himself with the group that will safeguard rather than devour his individuality” (68-69).

### **“A Night on the Barricades” : Constructive Phalanxes in The Grapes of Wrath and Cannery Row**

After *In Dubious Battle*, which first brought the plight of agricultural workers in California to public attention, Steinbeck visited a number of migrant worker camps in central California. Working shoulder to shoulder with field laborers, Steinbeck reported his observations in a series of articles titled “The Harvest Gypsies” for the *San Francisco News* during the autumn of 1936. The workers were almost all displaced Midwesterners trying to escape the sandy, crop-smothering winds of the Dustbowl (Fontenrose 67). For his research, Steinbeck, “bought an old bakery truck,” a “pie wagon” as he called it, “outfitted it with blankets food and cooking utensils,” and drove through the Central Valley, stopping “at several squatters camps” and “the camps provided by the government” (*True Adventures* 332).<sup>111</sup> After his research trips observing the camps, in 1939 Steinbeck published his greatest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

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<sup>111</sup> Though it was rumored that Steinbeck had additionally driven through Oklahoma with migrant families on their way west after a staging of *Of Mice and Men* in New York, Jackson Benson notes that Steinbeck did not actually make this excursion. According to Benson, Steinbeck enjoyed “leading everyone to think he had gone to Oklahoma when, in fact, he had only made it as far as the Nevada state line.” (362)

The Joads, like the actual migrant families trucking across the long hot highways of Depression-era America, face financial decline, collapse of morale, and desertion. However, just as the family unit seems to disintegrate, Steinbeck begins his exploration of the positive, creative phalanx in the birth of a roadside group-man, as shown in the warm relationship between the Joads and Wilsons, strangers who meet on the road.

The Joads meet the stranded Wilsons as they pull onto the side of the road hoping to find a place to refill their radiator and to give a “sicker’n hell” Grandpa Joad a respite from their taxing journey (*Grapes* 136). After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Sairy Wilson immediately offers to let Grandpa Joad rest on their mattress. After Grandpa dies (presumably from a stroke) in the Wilsons’ tent, Sairy helps Ma Joad prepare his body, while the men outside decide what to do for the burial. Here, the cohesion between the two families is further strengthened as Pa seeks the Wilsons’ advice on how bury the body, stating also “[w]e’re beholden to you,” to which Wilson kindly replies “[t]here’s no beholden in a time of dying” (139). The burden of Grandpa’s death is thus transmuted into a problem for both the Joads and the Wilsons as a whole, effectively, albeit momentarily, making them members of one, constituent, roadside group-man. This relationship, solidified through kindness and sharing, becomes organically democratic, echoing Steinbeck’s description earlier in chapter 10: “And without any signal the family gathered by the truck, and the congress, the family government, went into session” (99). As the Wilsons and Joads deliberate together, their bodies are described as forming a “ring,” symbolically marrying both the Joad and the Wilson clans (142).

The democracy, community, and egalitarianism spawned in the roadside phalanx are later institutionalized in the “Weedpatch camp” (285). Run by a “Central Committee,” elected directly by the people, the camp is self-governing and able to function without the police (287). The Central Committee and its subcommittees, such as the Ladies’ Committee, have the responsibility to integrate the new families into the camp and to host “the best dances in the county.... every Saturday night” (288).

On the first morning in the camp, the Ladies’ Committee of Sanitary Unit Number Four visit Ma Joad and “try to make [her] feel at home” by showing her around the camp and explaining the rules the migrants have voted to enact (313). Even this slight gesture on behalf of the committee goes a long way in salvaging Ma’s dignity and making the Joads feel included as a part of the assemblage—making her more “perked up [than she had been] in years,” noting herself, “[t]his here's the time the fambly got to get decent. Comin' acrost they wasn't no chancet. But now we can” (319, 313).

These government camps are presented in the novel, in quite explicit terms, as *the* model for providing much needed housing for displaced Midwestern workers. The migrants’ ability to form committees, sponsor their own dances, and democratically police themselves plays an integral part in preserving their self-worth as human beings. Steinbeck bases much of his favorable portrayal of the Weedpatch group-man on his own fact-finding. When researching for his collection of articles titled “Harvest Gypsies,” Steinbeck visited various government camps in California. In these visits he finds,

the result has been more than could be expected. From the first, the

intent of the management has been to restore the dignity and decency that had been kicked out of the migrants by their intolerable mode of life. . . . The result of this responsible self-government has been remarkable. . . . The central committee makes the laws that govern the conduct of the inhabitants. (“Article IV” 39)

In addition, not unlike way the way Ma’s reaction is described, Steinbeck notes “[t]he sullen and frightened expression that is the rule among the migrants has disappeared from the faces of the Federal camp inhabitants. Instead there is a steadiness of gaze and a self-confidence that can only come of restored dignity” (“Article IV” 40). Steinbeck’s observation of the success of actual government camps is, of course, responsible for the success of the fictional portrayal of the Weedpatch camp. In affording its campers self-governance, equality, and community, the Weedpatch camp becomes a (temporary) constructive phalanx. Its people work together to survive, preserve their dignity, and produce a practical structure for others to follow. Though the government camp phalanx appears to fit Steinbeck’s theory of an optimal group-man, the problem of the collective individual’s sustained involvement remains.

In short, the problem with the Weedpatch camp as successful phalanx lies in the role of the federal government as collective individual. The government enables the temporary existence of the camp— but is not of the community itself. The running water, the paid overseer, and the housing structures all rely on resources (costing, according to Steinbeck’s calculations, “\$18,000”) subject to the whims of fickle lawmakers (“Article IV” 38). The material required for Weedpatch camp’s success is provided by a more powerful and unpredictable outside entity with the interest of

providing only provisionally. Although demonstrating traits of what a constructive phalanx can look like, Weedpatch, dependent on the federal government as its collective individual, cannot be a model for *sustained* success. Over time and without any viable means to draw income on the campsite, the Joads' supplies and food stores are quickly depleted. Chapter 26 opens to a troubled Ma and Pa Joad watching some of the younger members of their family sleeplessly writhing with hunger. Steinbeck describes the exhausted couple as diverting their eyes away from the restless starving down to the "earth... in shame" (350). Despite the Weedpatch camps basic (and necessary) amenities, the Joads are ultimately forced to leave in search of uncertain employment opportunities to the north. The camp's purpose both in Steinbeck's journalism, and in the novel, are meant only to temporarily allay the suffering and plight of the midwestern migrants. It is, by its very design, not meant to mature into an abiding, self-sustaining, community. When Pa makes his final plea to stay because "[t]his here [camp has] hot water and toilets," Ma, the wiser of the two, can only soberly retort "we can't eat no toilets" (351). Though the government camps provide needed relief, they can only ever be, as Steinbeck acknowledges, impermanent.

Even the roadside phalanx spawned between the Joads and Wilsons, though undoubtedly described as positive, eventually divorces and disbands without the emergence of a single collective individual. When the families stop for water near the California border, an alienated Noah Joad decides to leave the family to forever "walk on down [the] river" (208). After this desertion, the Wilsons follow suit, choosing to stay behind to allow Sairy to "res' an' get strong" (217). Ma Joad is ultimately unable to keep them together and eventually acknowledges that "it's time to go" (219).

Indeed, even Tom Joad's transformation into the "socially responsible individual" empowered by "the gospel of reform" at the end of the novel comes too late for the preservation of the Joad-Wilson group-man (Astro 69).

Perhaps best exemplified by "Doc" in *Cannery Row* (1945), the collective individual must take it on himself to guide and foster democratic, participatory communities to ensure the success of a constructive phalanx. Critics have viewed *Cannery Row* "as overly sentimental and inadequate in philosophy," with Edmund Wilson going so far as to call it a "poison creampuff" (qtd. in Lisca 198). To be sure, *Cannery Row* is written with a lighter touch, meant as a "relief from war" for GIs abroad (198). However, Steinbeck's more relaxed and humorous approach does not make it any less important for understanding his larger body of work. As Jackson Benson contends:

Because it certified the switch from the subject of farm labor, because it endorsed values inimical to those concerned with the "class struggle," and because it revealed more pointedly than ever before its author's major concerns, *Cannery Row* marked the turning point in the reception of Steinbeck's work... Almost without exception, critics specializing in the study of Steinbeck's work have found merit in the book, while generalist critics writing for major intellectual journals have disliked it intensely ("Political Glass" 56)

If we accept Benson's position that *Cannery Row* represents a "turning point" in the reception of Steinbeck's work, and that the novel represents Steinbeck's concerted move away from material concerning "farm labor," it presents an especially

interesting object to explore the ways Steinbeck continued to employ his phalanx theory outside the fields of *In Dubious Battle* and the dusty roads of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In its seemingly lighthearted style, this novel may be read as an allegory for the themes explored in all of Steinbeck's prior fiction. French astutely suggests, "[c]ertainly if any author has ever granted us license to read his novel as an allegory and to search for symbolic interrelationships . . . Steinbeck has here" (114). Moreover, as Shillinglaw has emphasized, Steinbeck was still preoccupied with his phalanx theory, even during this later phase of his writing career. A few years prior to *Cannery Row's* publication, Steinbeck writes to Wilbur Needham, "[c]oming up occasionally from the observation of invertebrates particularly in an ecological sense I have found myself looking at my own species with the same eyes" ("Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency" 22).

In line with the novel's whimsical tone, Steinbeck's account of the aftermath of a party thrown at Doc's house (in his absence) by the rowdy but well-intentioned "Mack and the boys" presents a micro-illustration of the dangers of the destructive phalanx:

The lights blazed in the laboratory. The front door hung sideways on one hinge. The floor was littered with broken glass. Phonograph records, some broken, some only nicked, were strewn about. The plates with pieces of steak ends and coagulating grease were on the floor, on top of the bookcases, under the bed. Whiskey glasses lay sadly on their sides. Someone trying to climb the bookcases had pulled out a whole

section of books and spilled them in broken-backed confusion on the floor. And it was empty, it was over. (*Cannery Row* 115)

Though Mack and his group collectively pool their money for weeks to buy party favors, without Doc's guidance the party descends into chaos. The tipped-over items in Doc's labs playfully parallel the collapsed bodies after the strikers attack the scabs in *In Dubious Battle*. The way Steinbeck surveys the wreckage of the house is amazingly similar to Jim's open-eyed astonishment at the carnage he and the striker phalanx caused. Even the emptiness, earlier described as a symptom of the destructive group-man, is revisited by Steinbeck in describing the end of the party: "And it was empty, it was over."

Arriving home to a house destroyed by a party thrown without his permission or participation, Doc angrily strikes Mack, ending while poignantly underscoring the violence spawned by the destructive phalanx. However, instead of continuing his attack, the uniquely compassionate Doc immediately calms himself and tells Mack to "go wash [his] face" (119). He subsequently pours Mack a beer, and asks patiently, "What happened?" (120). After listening to Mack's shoddy explanation, Doc decides not make Mack pay for the damages, knowing he never will be able to afford them anyway.

Not long after, Doc is even able to see worth in Mack and the boys, calling them "true philosophers," and marvels at their ability to "survive . . . in the world better than other people" (129). This forgiveness and ability to find the best in people, despite their recklessness, speaks to Doc's superior capacity for generosity, maturity, and love for others. With this sense of heightened empathy and understanding, Doc

separates himself from the rest of the inhabitants on Cannery Row. Indeed, it is this unique charitability in Doc's character that is essential to his position as "collective individual" and to the constructive phalanx. It is he alone who possesses the ability to consciously guide a potentially destructive mass toward their potential as compassionate community.

Later, in an attempt to make up for the disastrous carouse, Mack and boys decide to give Doc another party. After a curious prodding by Mack about his birthday, Doc discovers Mack's intent. Doc's "reaction to the idea was not simple. He felt a great warmth that they should want to give him a party and at the same time he quaked inwardly remembering the last one they had given. . . . He glanced about considering what things would have to be locked up. He knew the party was going to cost him plenty" (156). Despite knowing the party will undoubtedly ruin his lab again and will "cost him plenty," Doc outweighs his apprehensions with his care for Mack and the entire community (who Doc finds out is also invited). In his desire to do good for his friends and neighbors, he begins to make preparations for the party himself:

His best records he carried into the back room where they could be locked away. He moved every bit of equipment that was breakable back there too. He knew how it would be—his guests would be hungry and they wouldn't bring anything to eat. They would run out of liquor early, they always did. . . . Doc ordered fifteen pounds of steaks, ten pounds of tomatoes, twelve heads of lettuce, six loaves of bread, a big jar of peanut butter and one of strawberry jam, five gallons of wine and four quarts of a good substantial but not distinguished whiskey. He

knew he would have trouble at the bank the first of the month. Three or four such parties, . . . and he would lose the laboratory. (156)

Here, despite the first party's destruction, Doc makes the decision to shoulder the logistic and financial burden to ensure the second party's success. By preparing and investing selflessly, despite knowing "he would have trouble at the bank the first of the month," Doc is able to preside over the course of the festivities. With his attentive guidance, the party is a "roar[ing]" success, becoming an event for the entire community (174). Described as having "all the qualities of a riot and a night on the barricades," the party rages from "end to end of Cannery Row," absorbing everyone from Mack and the boys, to the grocer Lee Chong, to Dora (the matron of the Bear Flag brothel) and her girls, to the stray crew of a San Pedro tuna boat, to the local police (174). The party group-man, whom Steinbeck himself describes "as a kind of individual" unto itself, is able to organically unite those who would otherwise be the disparate, and even adversarial citizens of Cannery Row (168). It is perhaps no mistake, then, that Steinbeck ends the climax of his novel with an image of Doc in the very maelstrom of the party calmly "smil[ing]" and sitting "cross-legged on the table," enjoying the community he has resuscitated, and the multitude he has spawned (174).

Doc's role as collective individual continues even after the party is over. The following morning, Doc cleans the aftermath of previous night's festivities by himself, though not with any sense of unreality or detachment, but rather, with a cold beer, and "the angelic, disembodied voices.... incredibly pure and sweet" from one of his cherished albums (179). It is in this spirit that Doc recites aloud, among the piles of greasy dishes, "Even now, /I know that I have savored the hot taste of life/ Lifting

green cups and gold at the great feast. /Just for a small and forgotten time/ I have had full in my eyes from off my girl/ The whitest pouring of eternal light— ” (181).

Indeed, the confluence of music and poetry in this scene signals Doc’s full and completed cohesion with the larger community, substantiated in a letter Steinbeck wrote some twelve years earlier to Albee: “[w]hen a man hears great music... reads great poetry he loses his identity in that phalanx... it is invariably a feeling of oneness with one’s phalanx” (*SLL* 81).

Taken as a whole, the party and the morning after complete the process of democratic epiphany. Doc’s position on the table signals the corporeal dislocation of the collective individual. Cross-legged and tapping his fingers, Doc is raised just above the cheery multitude, the stable center holding the commotion eddying around him. Environmental hysteria is evoked, quite explicitly, by Steinbeck’s description of the party as a “riot” and a “night on the barricades.” Echoing the locomotive energy of mass demonstration (complete with “broken windows” and a “twenty-five-foot string of fire-crackers”) and arousing the political reverberations conjured by “riot” and “barricades,” the party is elevated into the ecstatic, if not revolutionary (174). Lastly, through Steinbeck’s own definition of a party as an “individual unto itself,” formed in a “spontaneous” eruption, a successful party is quintessentially an amalgamation of its participants, very much like a phalanx (168).

This sense of amalgamation is further corroborated by Steinbeck’s syntax. The party’s final description is provided in a single lengthy paragraph—one of the longest in the novel. The subjects of this passage seem to swim in and out of a descriptive river, mixing and melding with adjacent party goers. The paragraph mentions Hazel,

Alfred, Doc, Mack and the boys, Phillis Mae, Jimmy Bruscia, an entire shift from the Bear Flag brothel, the police, and the crew from the San Pedro tuna boat. Some of these characters, such as Doc, Hazel, and Mack, have been given attention throughout the novel. Others, such as Jimmy Bruscia and the Sand Pedro crew, are mentioned only in this sub-scene. And yet, the interweaving between the major, minor, and obscure characters into a single passage syntactically conveys Steinbeck's narrative formation of multitude—a *mélange* of individuals intermixing into a community.

What's especially interesting about the party scene is its return to Doc after the party has ceased. Though Doc is alone, he is presented as very much at peace, savoring an internal tranquility that has eluded the often moody scientist throughout the novel. The moment is spiritual and epiphanic, though only lasting "for a small and forgotten time," Doc's eyes are described as being "filled" by the "whitest pouring of eternal light." The epiphany, or rather Steinbeck's indication that an epiphany has been had, is chorused by the echoes of the multitude: "disembodied voices... incredibly pure and sweet."

However, Doc's experience as the collective individual, is not, cannot, be the same as that of the others. It requires an aptitude for foresight, investment, and altruism nonexistent in his peers. What was once only destructive is transformed through Doc's love and expense into a creative, participatory, community event. The focus Steinbeck affords Doc in these last few lines of *Cannery Row* elevates Doc above his friends, placing him at the head of the phalanx.

The Doctor in *In Dubious Battle*, comparable to Doc in *Cannery Row*, creates an interesting problem for my model of "phalanx potential." Both doctors are

educated, morally upright, non-biased, and caring toward their fellow human beings (they are even based on the same person, Ed Ricketts). Just as Doc sacrifices self-interest by caring for his neighbors, the Doctor—although he does not believe in their cause—volunteers his time to Jim and Mac to care for the injured strikers. Both characters are situated to guide the phalanx and are essentially equal in potential.

The difference in their roles and their ability to foster the success of their respective phalanxes lies within their willingness to participate proactively. While Doc spends his own resources and provides a controlled environment for the party group-man, the Doctor in *In Dubious Battle* maintains a more distanced and observational approach. In discerning the phalanx as it forms in the camp, the Doctor tells Mac and Jim, “I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like a single man. A man in a group isn’t himself at all: He’s a cell in an organism that isn’t like him any more than the cells in your body are like you” (113). However, instead of engaging personally in the formation and guidance of the phalanx, the Doctor simply seeks to “watch these group-men.” The strikers’ collective potential is reduced, rather bleakly, to its component “cells” and “organism[s].”<sup>112</sup> As Owens observes, it is through the Doctor’s “intellectual desire to see ‘the whole picture’ that [he] finds only an inability to commit himself to any group and the loneliness and unhappiness that accompanies such non-commitment” (92). Additionally, in this distanced position, the Doctor makes no effort to correct Mac and Jim’s perversion of democracy. Thus, he squanders his privileged position of self-

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<sup>112</sup> This description is not unlike Gustave Le Bon’s pitiless description of men in crowds as “microbes” (xiii).

awareness by his willful decision *not* to participate. It is the Doctor's academic distance, rooted in scientific impartiality (bearing some resonance with Edmund Wilson's critique) that makes the phalanx fail and disintegrate into violence. As both Owens and French have noted, the Doctor's failure to "commit to the point of self sacrifice" does not "[provide] the answers that another Doc finds at the end of Cannery Row" (99, 80).

Though my concept of phalanx potential helps to explain the evolution of Steinbeck's examination of constructive and destructive phalanxes, it remains unclear whether the collective individual was meant to have any real-world application. The closest example is the government-run Weedpatch camp—a hopeful experiment subject to collapse beneath the strong winds of an unpredictable Congress. Still, it lacks the organic community involvement that Doc's party-group man is able to foster. The endlessly kind and forgiving Doc, after all, is a creation of Steinbeck's fiction. Lisca comes to a similar conclusion, noting that Doc is an "apotheosis . . . embod[y]ing all the qualities which Steinbeck finds admirable. In him all opposites are reconciled. He is both scientist and mystic, both calculating and tender, both learned and common, both intellectual and emotional, both classicist and romanticist" (215). He is, in essence, a perfect character to facilitate a perfect ending. But perhaps the viability of a real-world Doc is less important than the ideal he represents and the role he plays in structuring the spirit of Steinbeck's masterful social commentary. He is presented as a kind of goal toward which the powerful may strive—a bright idea always ahead, but just out of reach, that perfect combination of influence and love to guarantee a creative, democratic, multitude hereto unrealized. It is perhaps this

impossibility, the brazen ideal of the man who is both one and many, that keeps Steinbeck's fiction, through successive generations, a fresh place for hope and potential.

## EPILOGUE

This dissertation has examined the ways writers of color and their leftist allies created a modernism distinctively their own, a unique and vibrant “multitude modernism.” Beyond mapping the contours of an “antiracist ethnic” aesthetic that would come to define American literature in the 1930s and 40s, we have essayed to posit a theory of “democratic epiphany,” a conceptual lens through which seemingly kaleidoscopic episodes of social fusion may be focused into a clearer, more unified picture.

While many recent “new modernist” critical studies have focused on solipsistic individualism of Eliot, Pound, and Stein in the work of American multiethnic writers, new room must be made for the ways modernists leveraged experimentation for an expression of the collective. This dissertation attempts to provide one of the most thorough investigations of the ways leftist American writers and American writers of color refashioned High Modernist literary techniques to craft resistant textual spaces wherein societal threats such as racial and economic oppression can be thwarted. I have shown “democratic epiphanies” are signaled by three tropes: corporeal dislocation of the epiphanic individual from the body politic (the individual is usually depicted as floating above or leading in front), environmental hysteria (immediate surroundings are often presented as raucous, volatile, and frenzied), and visual representations of communal amalgamation (groups of people are often portrayed as being surrealistically melded into a single, autonomous entity). However, opposed to merely adapting High Modernist literary technique, I have hoped to demonstrate that

these writers' experiments with literature's social potential constitute the creation of a modernism distinctively their own, a unique and vibrant "multitude modernism."

*Multitude Modernism: Democratic Epiphany in American Interwar Literature* directly engages with, I think, four distinct disciplinary fields. Indeed, I locate my project at the juncture between Modernist Studies, American Studies, Leftist Literary studies, and Comparative Ethnic Studies. Though these fields do consistently overlap in various examinations, there have been few that trespass all four. In one respect, this study is concerned with how the critical legacies within these fields have developed; in another, it offers itself as a waypoint for where they might go.

My chapters pay due attention to the formalism of traditional Modernist Studies by privileging textual experimentation as a means for heightened expression. But where many Modernist studies have tended to couch this understanding in terms of the individual, I look to the ways Modernist experimentation is reconsidered in terms of the collective.

For American Studies, and to a greater extent, Comparative Ethnic Studies, my work contributes to a larger project of cultural recovery some 40 years in the making. This, of course, is to champion the works of writers of color and their allies. Writers of color remain clumsily siloed into satellite traditions, orbiting a cannon that has endured as predominantly white and male. To assign the value and dignity these texts deserve is only a small step in a broader antiracist endeavor. To see people of color as fully human necessitates we see people of color's artistic production as wholly admirable. As I see it, the issue is that many communities of color continue to bear the responsibility of salvaging their literature—often, and unfortunately, disconnected

from other emergent traditions, resulting in a kind of conceptual segregation, or what Nissa Parmar has provocatively called “ghettoization.” My project strives to see how these diverse, though not divided, traditions are in solidarity with each other.

The last is Leftist Literary Studies. This may be the most niche subfield, though it is undoubtedly crucial for my work. Pioneered by Cary Nelson, Barbara Foley, Alan Wald, and Michael Denning, this field strives to show the importance radical leftist politics has had in developing American culture. Often historicist in nature, much of this vital work is archival, and as such, does not often attend to the formal elements of the work. I have tried to underscore the importance of the text—its language and structure—in conveying these powerful social messages.

I conclude this dissertation by considering what must now be addressed in any study that purports to consider the "multitude" critically. The events of January 6, 2021, demonstrate how little remains known about collective phenomena. Indeed, in the words of John Steinbeck, the masses seemed, on that day, “more lumpen than ever.” With continued assaults on voting rights, civil rights, and one's ability to determine their own identity, the promise I argue the multitude can hold may seem disingenuously idealistic. And perhaps it is. After all, I did not decide to join a Ph.D. program in English literature because I cherish practicality. Despite the dangers collective movements may hold, I believe my dissertation and the wonderful writers it examines make a strong case for their capacity to change, to create, to improve. What my work tells the scholarly community that it did not know before was that the desire for equality—expressed through these vivid moments of collective fusion— spans beyond any one writer, any one cultural group, any one tradition. These texts speak of

an invisible network of the oppressed and hopeful. It is through their words dignity is demanded. It is through their words potentiality is kindled.

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