

# Review (Unites States) - Protesting the Protest Novel: Richard Wright's The Man Who Lived Underground

Friday 10 December 2021, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2021).

***The Man Who Lived Underground.* By Richard Wright. New York: Library of America, 2021, 240 pages, \$22.95 hardback.**

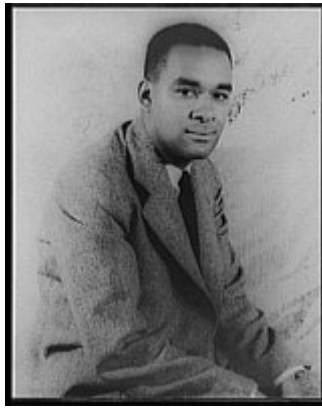
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WHEN THE POSTHUMOUSLY published *The Man Who Lived Underground* appeared in the spring of 2021, after a year in which fifteen to twenty million people protested in the streets over a number of police killings, political antennae in the media went on high alert. Some subjects are elusive and ambiguous, but at this moment there was a turbocharged awareness of the vicious actuality of racial subjugation in the United States.

## The Nightmare of Racism

All of a sudden, a new generation of anti-racist adversaries was living in a near-permanent state of emergency over the very form of cop violence recounted in the book's opening pages. In the midst of what a *New York Times* article declares has grown into a "tsunami" of volumes about anti-Black racism, allusions to the re-emergence of Richard Wright seemed everywhere. [[1](#)]



*Richard Wright, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection [LC-USZ62-54231]*

Unsurprisingly, such a frame of mind brought with it the temptation to corral what was envisioned to be a multi-faceted work of the imagination of a different era into a reflexive political appraisal. Add in a marketing campaign by the publishers with an historical “presentist” tilt, and the more involved artistic aspirations of the writer became ever more edited from view.

A further assist to likely misperceptions of the creative intentions of *The Man Who Lived Underground* came from the pervasiveness of the generally accurate but incomplete popular literary reputation of its author.

The African-American Marxist Richard Wright (1908-1960), after all, is commonly evoked as among the most astute exemplars of the anti-racist “protest” tradition of the Old Left. [2] Born in Mississippi and coming of age in Chicago and New York, he emerged in the latter years of the Great Depression as a popular Left-wing fiction writer.

Wright was also a public member of the Communist Party (CP-USA) from 1933 to 1942 and is remembered above all for his unquenchable sense of urgency about the social and psychological costs of oppression by color and class.

In his story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938; expanded edition, 1940), novel *Native Son* (1940) and autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), he put pen to paper with unvarnished bluntness. Although there was pressure on him to delete language deemed obscene and passages about interracial sex, there is no evidence that he ever pulled punches to dumb down or sanitize explosive material about the double wallop of economic exploitation and racial bigotry. [3]

Moving to Paris after World War II, and traveling from there to several continents, Wright lived and wrote in exile as an independent-minded revolutionary anti-capitalist until his death at age fifty-two. Even as he enjoyed an international reputation, he remained haunted to the end by an over-riding question, sometimes torqued to maximum volume in fiction and prose: Will the Black experience in America be a slow progress to freedom or an unending nightmare?

Now, sixty years after his passing, we have a curious book from the Library of America, a non-profit producer of “classic American literature” originally funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The first 150 pages consist of *The Man Who Lived Underground* (hereafter shortened to *Underground*), which provides the title for the volume. This is a novel-length extension of a long-revered short story (more like a novella) that Wright first published in an anthology called *Cross-*

Section in 1944 after the full manuscript was rejected by Harper and Brothers publishers in early 1942. [4]

This edition also contains an essay intended to be a companion to the novel called “Memories of My Grandmother” (hereafter shortened to “Memories”), composed by Wright in the winter of 1941-42. [5] “Memories,” focused on the autobiographical nature of his source material for the fiction, is a fifty-page treatise that was previously unpublished but frequently consulted by researchers in Wright’s archives at Yale University.

## **Transformation of a Crime Story**

Technically, the fictional part of the Library of America volume is a blend of literary naturalism, pulp and surrealism, partly stimulated by an article that Wright came across in *True Detective* magazine about a white burglar who lived in an underground bunker in the Los Angeles sewers. Wright’s transformation of this crime story starts with his depiction of the frame-up of a twenty-nine-year-old African American worker, Fred Daniels, for the double murder of a wealthy white couple. In Part One, the description of Daniels’ horrific “interrogation” and forced confession at the hands of “law enforcement” feels like a frontal assault on the reader:

*“Johnson yanked him up and clapped steel bands upon his ankles, then Johnson and Murphy lifted him bodily and swung him upside-down and hoisted his feet to a steel hook on the wall. The steel bands on his ankles were looped over the hook and he hung toward the floor, headfirst. Blood pounded in his temples and his heart and lungs sagged heavily in his chest. He could barely breathe.”* (20)

Every sentence relating Daniels’ hours of torture in captivity, accompanied by racist language and insults, can hit home like a slap in the face. This book may not be for everyone.

In Part Two, Daniels escapes into the vast sewer system of a metropolis, recalling Jean Valjean’s descent belowground in Paris in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862). The city is never identified, although there are vague suggestions — names of streets, a proximity to the ocean — that it might be New York.

Slogging in darkness through the dank water, Daniels locates a cave as home base and digs into the basements of a church, movie theater, and several businesses and stores. From there he observes aspects of humanity from new angles while also retrieving objects — a radio, watches, jewelry, cash — that he brings back to his underground alcove in order to create a kind of surreal “art installation” that seems to call into question the conventional values of the items. [6]

In Part III, under the belief that he has now achieved a more authentic understanding of the human condition, Daniels resurfaces after a Biblical three days to spread a Christian-like message of compassion and universal guilt to the world. To his astonishment, he quickly learns that no one will listen and once more he finds himself treated as subhuman by the police.

Since the true murderer, an Italian-American, was discovered during Daniels’ disappearance, the main concern of the cops who had formerly arrested him has changed; now they must rid themselves of Daniels so that he won’t reveal how they forced his confession.

To get him out of the police station, they agree to follow Daniels back to his underworld habitat. Like an artist who believes that his or her work should speak for itself, Daniels believes that displaying his symbolically decorated cave and underground passageways to the cops will communicate his

new vision in a way that his verbalizing cannot: *"If he could show them the things he had seen, then they would feel as he had felt and they in turn would show them to others and those others would feel as they had felt..."* (155)

Unexpectedly, as they approach the manhole in the street where Daniels originally descended, the unnamed city is attacked by unidentified airplanes: *"to the east a tongue of red flame licked the sky....Explosions burst about them, jarring the earth."* Daniels' first reaction is to associate the air raid with four of the items that went into his cave installation. He thinks of the diamonds, the radio, the hundred dollar bills, and *"the distant sound of explosions was like the awful ticking of those golden watches."* (157, 158)

Then, with the chaos of the bombing as cover, a cop shoots Daniels and tosses his fatally-wounded body back into the same dark sewer where he thought he had found enlightenment: *"The current spun him forward. He closed his eyes, a whirling black object, rushing along the darkness, veering, tossing with the grey tide, lost in the heart of the earth."* (159).

It's a bleak ending suggesting that the novel's three-part structure could be taken as a pessimistic counter-narrative to the familiar Hegelian triad of the progress of history: A thesis (the frameup) and anti-thesis (the escape), followed by a highly disturbing synthesis (the return) that "overcomes" or "sublates" (*aufheben*) nothing.

## **A Tale for Today?**

Without doubt *Underground* demands attention as a beguiling volume effectively unveiling in a strange new form Wright's dark vision of the depth and durability of murderous racism. Whether that is the prism through which this entire text should be seen is another matter.

Mostly mesmerized by the power of the opening pages and their reverberation with current events suggesting that Black Americans live in an urban police state, reviewers acclaimed the book in the major intellectual publications of the United States with unusually well-informed critical essays. [7] Accordingly it climbed straightaway to the best-seller list [8] and was promptly acquired for film production by Paramount Pictures. [9]

Yet it is telling that the *New York Times*' headline declared, "Richard Wright's Newly Restored Novel is a Tale for Today," and the *Los Angeles Times* announced, "Richard Wright's Newly Uncut Novel Offers a Timely Picture of Police Brutality." [10] *The Chicago Tribune* headline was "Richard Wright's Novel of Police Brutality: The Most Relevant Novel of 2021." [11]

CNN ran an on-line Opinion essay called "The Long Lost 80-Year-Old Novel that Sums Up Our World." This last item emphasized that the book "triggers instantly recognizable parallels" and then "a deeper resonance" with "the legacy of [George] Floyd's killing." [12]

Episodes in the first part and conclusion in *Underground* may well be "for Today" and "Timely." These definitely include police brutality with "parallels" to and a "resonance" with what happened to George Floyd. Nevertheless, as several of the more substantial review essays noted, an overemphasis on a tie-in to the social issues of the present moment fails to accurately capture Wright's actual project. *Underground* was not a dramatized political lecture, but a novel of emotional and psychological exploration and discovery; a full-bodied and complicated bid to enlarge his artistic reach beyond the framework of his prior thinking and writing.

No one can deny that the novel's portrayal of the law in 1941 and its similitude to the present does

point unswervingly toward the need for the kind of “abolitionist” rather than reformist solutions to policing. The conundrum is that an attentive reading of the “Memories” section of the book reveals that a literary performance of police brutality and legal manipulation against African Americans was never the primary artistic or political aim of the novel.

In fact, Wright provides only one fleeting and rather lackluster mention of all this, as if it were included in the novel merely as an enticing set-up for the main event: “He is picked up by the police, beaten, tortured and charged with a horrible crime.” (190) Moreover, in all of the previous publications of partial versions, it was the appalling staging of Daniels’ inculpation, mistreatment and forced confession by the cops that Wright omitted. [13]

Instead, Wright insists in “Memories” that “*the far-reaching, complex, ruling idea-feeling*” (163) of *Underground* is “*a picture of the inner religious disposition of the American Negro....the living inner springs of religious emotion.*” (165)

He goes on to elaborate this point with a discussion of his grandmother’s (Margaret Wilson’s) exemplification of these qualities, and of the blues and surrealism as aesthetic techniques most appropriate to recreating her Seventh Day Adventist way of imagining the world. The thinking and behavior of Fred Daniels is meant to display how this same state of mind operates in different circumstances.

It is evident, then, that the underground voyage of Daniels cannot be seen simply as a reprieve from the “everyday fascism” of cop thuggery; a journey to a clear-headed understanding of the U.S. social order as a racial prison as a Marxist conceives it. On the contrary, the subterranean journey is artistically calculated to parallel a religious conversion from an intolerable secular existence to a far-out theological understanding.

But the latter form of consciousness is no advance, inasmuch as it processes experience through the categories of universal guilt and pity instead of the social and economic determinants of inequality and oppression. Daniels may be a man in search of decent behavior, but the beliefs and conduct resulting from his underground life can’t possibly be intended as a model of effective conduct.

### **Daniels in the Bardo**

The novelist Ralph Ellison is known to have admired the 1944 shorter version of *Underground*, but his unnamed narrator’s act of fleeing to a secret basement in his own *Invisible Man* (1952) is quite different from Fred Daniels’ flight.

In Ellison’s case, going beneath the surface seems to provide a political solution for a time; it takes one into space liberated from the above-ground domain of continuously projected identities for the Black man and suggests a restorative process. Daniels, however, is impelled by the threat to his life to move into a Bardo-like state of being (as in the Buddhist concept of Bardo) that is transitional between two varieties of existence. [14]

The first is normative, in the sense of the typical life experience of subordinated Black working people in capitalist America; the second is near-magical, in the sense of allowing a short-lived and untenable autonomy marked by the mirage of uncommon powers of agency and perception that ultimately lead nowhere. This is summarized by Wright as going from “*life-in-death above him [into] this dark world that was death-in-life here in the underground*” (134).

During this temporary, intermediate period of divorce from what was (and is) accepted as the

normative physical environment of racial capitalism, Daniels endures near-hallucinatory experiences, both frightening and enlightening. This includes the recognition that another person has been blamed for one of his own mischievous actions and paid the ultimate price. Thus, he returns to the terrain of his prior existence (the normative) with a changed way of thinking, bursting with a saintly empathy for a humanity branded by a shared guilt.

Wright insists in “Memories” that his main goal in *Underground* was the recreation of a mystical, transcendental inner experience, which explains why there are only two places in the novel where the topic of racism is treated incisively: At the beginning, in the interactions with the police, and at the end, when Daniels hears racist voices (accusing a young Black man of theft) just before emerging to find himself soon back in the hands of law enforcement.

The middle section mostly depicts a “raceless” and often mysterious world focusing on physical details and objects that are suggestive of some additional symbolic meanings that remain unspoken.

When Daniels, living underground, has direct dealings with whites (in a movie theater, in a store), these are quite respectful. There is also an episode in which a white man is subject to police brutality and a frameup in a manner similar to Daniels’ own. If this is a “protest novel,” the protest may be a more philosophical and existential one than the incontrovertible indictment of white supremacy that is actually relegated to bookending the tale.

Readers who are looking for political solutions to present-day racism, or even just an expansion of hope, are bound to find *Underground* a profoundly unsettling read. In all probability, Wright was less fixated on promulgating a social thesis than on honing his skill in crafting a language of precision to vivify Daniels’ altered perceptions.

## Born Guilty

Nevertheless, it is precisely those powerfully-handled scenes of racism that will dominate the responses of contemporary readers. In appraising the now-reconstituted manuscript as a whole, one finds that Daniels’ encounter with the racial violence of the state is addressed with considerably greater muscularity and clarity than his recreation of his grandmother’s religious disposition in the character of Daniels. In style and sensibility, it recalls the earlier Wright with whom we are familiar from previous fiction — especially the two-dimensional (although credible) white-supremacist cops.

To appreciate more fully Daniels’ adventures in the underground requires taking an approach very different from that of a direct translation into politics, and more like the multi-perspectival deliberation one brings to a Cubist painting. [15] The novel’s protagonist is now free of many earlier illusions, and yet his embrace of what appears to be Christian (rather than legal) guilt, and his declaration of universal compassion, operate as a disempowering outlook.

What the reader took to be Daniels’ escape only brings social and psychological consequences that are devastating. In the closing events, Daniels’ public declamations of his newfound religious passion come off as near insanity.

To be sure, once clued in by “Memories,” one can go back and re-read the underground life as a delirious religious fantasy; and “Memories” tells us directly that the newly transformed Daniels is imitating Wright’s grandmother’s behavior by substituting an abstract love of humanity for a true caring about individuals closest to him (such as his wife and newborn son, who are still aboveground). But it’s hard to correlate Daniels’ resulting impotence and passivity — as he sings “I got Jesus in my soul” (154) to the threatening cops — with the kind of empowerment actually



attributed to the grandmother in “Memories.”

After all, Margaret Wilson managed to live a relatively long life and raise children and grandchildren in several different environments that presented challenging circumstances. Her illusions operate as a protective shell allowing her to go on the offensive: *“My grandmother was a rebel, as thorough a rebel as ever lived on this earth; she was at war, ceaselessly, militantly at war with every particle of reality she saw.”* (170)

This is not the first time Wright addressed Black religion, but earlier efforts were unmistakably inflected by politics. In the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, several stories demonstrate the appropriation of Black Christianity for revolutionary ends in the context of Southern and rural folk culture.

Then in *Native Son*, Christianity in a major urban center (Chicago) seems to play the part of encouraging servility. Perhaps in *Underground* and “Memories” the reader is not being asked to pass political judgment on any of Wright’s portrayals of the religious mind — only to look at them.

Then there is the matter of whether one can reconcile the reasons as to why Wright’s grandmother and Daniels embarked on their shared course of unworldly belief. Surely Daniels’ escape into the sewers to find a new consciousness of humankind and social relations was a response to the intensity of the aboveground racist violence that precedes it. His going “underground,” literally (to hide) or psychologically (to achieve a new perception), is the only choice he has for survival and even a bid for freedom.

### **Totalitarianism American-Style**

The situation might have been different with other options, especially if Daniels were somehow connected with a community of resistance — a social movement, a race-conscious trade union, a Left-wing political party, or a church with a strong civil rights commitment. In Wright’s rendition, however, there are no realistic allies, not even a radical lawyer (as in *Native Son*) to take his side.

Moreover, Wright’s depiction of Daniels’ situation above ground seems calculated to communicate the all-encompassing and unforgiving totalitarian character of a racist system that criminalizes its targets. As in Nazi Germany, resistance can only occur underground. [16]

The opening of the novel is a tour-de-force of Wright’s clear-headed Marxist anti-racism. [17] For example, Wright depicts the substance and procedure of law enforcement as premised on an assumed white privilege, a color hierarchy inhering in ways that are not openly acknowledged.

What we learn is that under racial capitalism, founded on the super-exploitation of kidnapped peoples from Africa, those who are objectively victimized by the socio-economic system are consequently perceived in advance as a threat. Daniels, like other people of color, is always already criminalized to the point of being an empty vessel into which the dominant group can pour projections and illusions of bad behavior.

This is clearest in the police interrogation of Daniels, which consists of officers Lawson, Murphy and Johnson unthinkingly attributing motives and deeds to their captive without bothering to check out the explanations and alibis that are offered. To them, Daniels never comes into view as an authentic human but only as a delusional trope of racism. Although a man of modest stature, mild mannered and a church-going husband, he is automatically perceived as more dangerous, violent, and delinquent than he actually is, due to his skin color.

In an essay written to explicate a conventional protest novel, one might expect that Wright would extrapolate on the historic condition of Black Americans being “born guilty” to explain why Wright’s grandmother herself embraced extreme religiosity. In a society in which Blacks are criminalized as shiftless and dangerous, and forced to live a life constantly threatened by false accusations, one needs a means to escape and survive if collective defiance is not possible.

His grandmother’s response of theological fantasy and illusion could then be understood as parallel to Daniels’ descent into the underground. Perhaps the pro-Communist lawyer in *Native Son*, Boris Max, would make that point if he were asked for an analysis.

Yet “Memories” goes in a very different direction. Wright does provide an explanation of the theme of false accusation in the novel, but he does not refer to racist criminalization at all. Instead, the motif stems from two episodes of false accusation that occurred in his own life, neither involving the police or bigotry.

The first incident, relatively minor, took place when, as a child, his grandmother mistakenly accused him of stealing biscuits. The accusation meant that he had been “*pushed out from the warm circle of trust that exists in all families.*” (209)

More significant is the second, “*upon which I built the emotional structure of The Man who Lived Underground*” (209):

*“[O]nce in my life I was accused without cause. And when you are...a member of a minority political party and you are suddenly and violently accused of holding notions you’ve never held, of having done something you’ve never dreamed of, I can tell you that is one of the most agonizing, devastating, blasting, and brutal experiences conceivable. Fred Daniels’s feeling of being accused without cause was woven out of my memories of having been accused without cause”* (206)

This allusion to “*a period of two years ...when many people...suspected me of having...uttered dreadful political notions*” (206) will be no mystery to students of Wright. It is undoubtedly a reference to the 1935-37 period in Chicago when Wright came into conflict with the Black CP-USA leader Harry Haywood and was rumored to be guilty of “Trotskyism.” [18]

Wright’s public identity as a Communist at the time he wrote *Underground* was widely known, yet he intentionally fogs all his references to the CP-USA in the “Memories.” This is apparently because everything he wants to say is negative. For example, at one point he recalls: “*In a leading labor journal...I came across a violent attack on the prose of [Gertrude] Stein, an attack that branded her the apogee of all that was degenerate in English and American literature. I was puzzled. Because I had admired how she wrote, I was condemned, too.*”

The ridicule of Stein, however, was not in a “labor journal” but the Communist-led *New Masses* magazine, and the article was the famous 1934 assault on Stein (“Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot”) by leading Communist writer Mike Gold who proudly reprinted it in his 1936 collection *Change the World*. [19]

There is another oddity regarding the relationship of *Underground* to Wright’s political life, also indicative of his desire to maintain a distance from the CP-USA. As biographer Hazel Rowley indicates, Wright almost certainly wrote the part of the novel about the mistreatment of Daniels very early, immediately following, and in response to, the police beating of his Black Communist friend Herbert Newton. [20]

We know that Wright came up with the title for the novel on July 8, 1941, [21] and Newton was



arrested on July 18<sup>th</sup> for leading a protest of fired employees of the Works Project Administration (WPA, a New Deal Program). Newton was then taken to the police station where six policemen punched and kicked him, throwing him over a chair and then taking him into a closed-off room where they jumped up and down on his back, breaking his ribs. [22]

Although Wright subsequently spoke out publicly against New York City police brutality in the *Daily Worker*, in “Memories” he includes no references to the Newton incident and simply omits any source or explanation for the beating episode. [23]

## **The Teller and the Tale**

The odds are that the apparently candid, confessional quality of the information revealed in “Memories” is meant to disguise and distract from other relevant autobiographical issues that Wright preferred not to openly examine. That is why the reader may sense an incompleteness about the personal background he summarizes in “Memories”; it fails to adequately explain the burning emotional intensity of this novel and the slippage between the first two parts.

Such an incongruity brings to mind D. H. Lawrence’s famous dictum: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.” [24] From such a perspective, looking not at what the author claims but the writing in context, Wright’s most careful biographers reveal that aspects of his multipronged piece of imaginative work might be correlated to his increasingly unhappy relationship with the Communist movement around political as well as literary matters.

One learns from Michel Fabre’s *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973) and Hazel Rowley’s *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2001) that tensions between the writer and the CP-USA were coming to a boil in June of 1941. By the next month, Wright had been sufficiently provoked — for reasons that I will explain in a bit — to strike out on his own.

First, he reoriented himself by switching his writing projects; at the start of July, he halted work on a long novel called “Black Hope” and unexpectedly started writing a new kind of narrative he immediately titled, “The Man Who Lived Underground.” Later would come a step-by-step political distancing from the CP-USA, well under way in 1942 but kept quiet until a press conference in 1944.

Such a newfound emotional freedom from prior restraints accounts for his theatrical declaration of creative independence at the outset of “Memories:” “*I have never written anything in my life that stemmed more from sheer inspiration, or executed any piece of writing in a deeper feeling of imaginative freedom, or expressed myself in a way that flowed more naturally from my own personal background, reading, experiences, and feelings than The Man Who Lived Underground.*” (183)

Even as there are continuities, there would be something very distinctive about this project. [25] What, then, provoked this leap to “imaginative freedom”?

## **This Is/Is Not Our People’s War**

The most obvious sign of Wright’s break from past impingements on his imagination was the manner in which *Underground* made it explicit that he no longer felt pressure to assuage the CP-USA’s shifting politics in his writing. This is evident by the lack of any conventional sign of hope in *Underground* in the form of a character associated with the CP-USA — an absence that represents a striking difference between *Underground* and Wright’s earlier fiction. [26]

Of course, political views in imaginative writing do not in themselves have any positive or negative valence in assessing the quality of fiction; it is always a matter of how they are communicated. The main point at issue is that of trying to figure out what Wright was up to. A closer look at immediately-preceding events provides a clue.

When *Native Son* appeared in March of 1940, Wright was rightly suspicious that it would be met with misunderstanding by some members of the CP-USA, not to mention the literary establishment. This was also several months into the “Little Red Scare” that began with the Hitler-Stalin Pact in the Fall of 1939, and there was much talk in the press of international war.

To escape all these pressures, Wright and a new wife (the dancer Dimah Rose Meidman) went “underground” to Mexico that very same month. From Cuernavaca, Wright received reports from Ralph Ellison and others about the controversial response to *Native Son* in the Communist milieu as well as the mainstream press.

It is possible that Wright had originally planned not to resume permanent residency in the United States, as would be his decision when he relocated to France seven years later. Unhappily, the marriage to Dimah collapsed after a few months, and he traveled back alone, detouring through Mississippi where he briefly met with his long-estranged father.

Once returning to the world he had known in the Communist movement in New York, Wright was asked to defend the current CP-USA orientation of opposition to a U.S. intervention in the European war. This he did happily, as he was firmly opposed to the notion that African Americans should give their lives by fighting in a segregated army for a system that treated them as racial inferiors. [27]

When the Communist-initiated Fourth American Writers Congress occurred on June 6, he gave the keynote speech “This is Not My People’s War,” which was printed in the *New Masses* on June 17. His plan was to use a similar talk when he received the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP for notable achievement in Houston at the end the month.

However, the USSR was invaded by Hitler on June 21 and overnight the CP-USA reversed its position on the war. Now he was informed that he should say that it would be an honor for Black Americans to fight and that the United States should open a Second Front to intervene.

A humiliated Wright was pressured by the CP-USA to sign statements to that effect as well as change the contents of his Spingarn acceptance speech. Wright’s chief biographer, Michel Fabre, dates this conflict as the beginning of Wright’s terminal break with the CP-USA. [28]

Bitterness over the pressure to sign, and then repudiate, various declarations is perhaps reflected in the scenes in *Underground* where Daniels is forced to put his name to a paper by “a man in a grey business suit,” who demands: “I’ve got something here I want you to sign, boy.” (see footnote 24) Daniels is being pressured to make a statement of something that he doesn’t believe, which is burned up three days later when things change.

One more indication that Wright’s anger at the revised Communist attitude toward WWII affected the novel comes with appearance of bombers over the city in the closing pages of *Underground* — an element that no critic has so far addressed.

Presumably these are fascist planes, but from Daniels’ situation the home-grown fascist police are already in power. Why in the world would he then join with these goons in blue to drive off the threat from outside when the threat from inside is just as great? One can almost hear Wright himself intoning, “This is not my people’s war.”

## Titanic Creativity

This is not to suggest that one thread — Wright's estrangement from the CP-USA — is the straightforward key to unlocking *Underground*. Among other things, one cannot accurately explore the matter responsibly without considering all the positive dimensions of Wright's association with Communism that rendered his withdrawal from the organization so painful.

Moreover, Wright's was a titanic creativity that can never be fully decoded. There are abundant suggestive insights in *Underground* that potentially reveal some of the very nerves of American society and culture. Approximating a Geiger counter, Wright's narrative seems to emit increased noise as Daniels travels through the sewer and approaches radioactively explosive ideas in the form of symbolic objects, incidents and encounters.

Reminiscent of Daniel of the *Old Testament*, Fred Daniels struggles to interpret these dream-like events. Moving through the underground, he bumps into a dead baby, hears strangely familiar church singing, witnesses a suicide, and so on. Yet the parsing of these encounters is fiendishly difficult for Daniels and perhaps unnecessary.

Multiple ambiguities may be precisely Wright's point; as with Daniels' underground art installation, the narrative itself is meant to communicate something not entirely translatable into logical terms. Feeling free of the pressure to use his "art as a weapon" (the CP-USA slogan), Wright was simply not out to "solve" any problem in this novel.

Beyond that, a refusal to put one's art at the service of a larger "cause" does not mean that the writer is no longer political; a "committed" writer takes stands in the area of politics but may still create according to what he or she regards as aesthetic judgment. Some questions explored through artistic strategies don't lend themselves to obvious answers, and Wright was never one to flatten irreducible ambiguities into pedestrian messages.

The events befalling Daniels may well have been designed to resist drawing a clear-cut meaning from them. After all, a struggle to find purchase in a shifting landscape between a racist normativity and delusionary underworld can feel as uncertain and enigmatic as the realm we actually inhabit in our capitalist United States as we make desperate efforts to interpret and possibly transform it.

*Underground* may be less a political statement than an investigation of how one fashions one's own realities and then dwells within one's own constructions. He professed in "Memories" that he had witnessed this type of behavior in his grandmother and was applying his observations to the situation of Fred Daniels, but perhaps Wright was also semi-consciously conveying a self-criticism of his own former relation to the CP-USA.

Wright's refusal to reprise some of the strategies of earlier fiction — in which there are gestures toward CP-USA solutions — does not mean that Wright, as a person, had abandoned revolutionary convictions. While *Underground* may not dramatize any Communist doctrinal "positions," his principles remained revolutionary Marxist. [29] Accordingly, it's hard not to draw the conclusion that Wright's depiction of a grotesque social system, which disheartens, devastates and annihilates human beings, is of one that must itself be replaced.

*Underground* and "Memories" more than anything else shed light on Wright's evolving creative process and fill in spaces that were previously unexplored in his published oeuvre. The result is a book that might be seen as a meditation on the kind of thinking that leads a man to nihilistic defeat. [30]

Historically, it is a signpost in clarifying Wright's identity as a radiant idiosyncratic talent and not merely a "protest" writer. Artistically, it is also a laudable victory through the range of techniques skillfully harnessed in the head-on assault it makes on normative America and the myths by which it is bolstered.

## Alan Wald

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### P.S.

- This article will appear in *Against the Current*, January-February 2022, ATC 216:  
<https://againstthecurrent.org/protesting-the-protest-novel-richard-wrights-the-man-who-lived-underground/>
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### Footnotes

[1] Elizabeth A. Harris, "Books on Race Are Best Sellers, With More on Way," *New York Times*, 16 September 2021, B4.

[2] As is well-known, in 1949 James Baldwin published an essay called "Everybody's Protest Novel" in which he promoted his own career by disparaging Wright's work as depicting Blacks defined by hate and fear. This label stuck and the caricature led to a popular perception of Wright as the author of narrow works of realism and naturalism. Baldwin's essay is online at:  
<https://faculty.gordonstate.edu/lSanders-senu/Everybody%27s%20Protest%20Novel%20by%20James%20Baldwin.pdf>

[3] Wright did accede to the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club to publish in a different venue the section of his autobiography taking his life story to the North.

[4] Two excerpts from this version had earlier appeared in the Spring 1942 issue of the literary journal *Accent*, and the 1944 version of the story was later reprinted in Wright's posthumous short fiction collection, *Eight Men* (1961).

[5] The essay seems parallel to "How Bigger Was Born," originally a lecture explaining the sources for *Native Son* that Harper and Brothers published as a pamphlet later in the same year as the novel (1940).

[6] I am grateful to my friend Paula Rabinowitz for proposing this apt characterization.

[7] For example, see: Atlantic:  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground/618705/>; Times Literary Supplement:  
<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-man-who-lived-underground-richard-wright-review-douglas-field/>; New Republic:  
<https://newrepublic.com/article/162080/richard-wright-broke-communists-man-lived-underground/>; Nation:  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground/>; Daily

Beast:

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/heres-the-novel-richard-wright-wasnt-allowed-to-publish?source=articles&via=rss>; National Catholic Reporter: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/newly-released-richard-wright-novel-puts-surreal-eye-1940s-black-life>; and Los Angeles Review of Books: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/richard-wrights-underground-novel/>

[8] See: <https://www.loa.org/books/652-the-man-who-lived-underground>

[9] See:

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/kenya-barris-adapting-the-man-who-lives-underground-for-paramount-exclusive-1234972655/>

[10] See the New York Times review:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/books/review/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground.html>, and the Los Angeles Times Review: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-04-19/richard-wright-the-man-who-lived-underground>

[11] <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-ent-richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground-20210415-jzhwmqzndzgmlmbaqmako7kjfa-story.html>

[12] See:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/26/opinions/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground-george-floyd-seymour/index.html>

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[13] Several of the reviews and articles about the book, and especially the Oprah Daily, claim that the original manuscript was censored for fear of a negative reaction to the police violence, and that this influenced Wright's decision never to allow the opening section to appear in print. Yet the evidence for any of this is entirely speculative, based on a single comment by one reader for the press about the "unbearable" quality of the violence and conjectures by Wright's grandson. Wright's published work up to that time had shown plenty of racist violence at the hands of authorities, and the main concerns of censors had been suggestions of interracial sex—something that is absent from *Underground*. Unless further documentation is found, the cause of the rejection could simply be that Harper and Brothers did not think that an experimental work of this type would be well-received by the market expectations created by *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, and that Wright then published the excerpts of what he considered to be the most original and critical parts. For the view that the violence was suppressed, see: <https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a35887249/richard-wright-unpublished-novel-excerpt-grandson-interview/>. For a fine essay that questions this interpretation, see: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/what-we-want-from-richard-wright>

[14] The concept of the Bardo came to national attention with the publication of George Saunders' best-selling *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), where it stood for an intermediate space between life and rebirth.

[15] See the excellent discussion of surrealism in relation to this part of the narrative by Scott McLemee in *Inside Higher Education* that was reprinted on the *Against the Current* website: <https://againstthecurrent.org/notes-from-the-underground/>

[16] This view of the United States harboring a racial system parallel to that of Nazi Germany was one of the reasons why many Black radicals opposed the Cold War bifurcation when the US was promoted as “The Free World” against a “Red Fascist” Soviet Union. See Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (2016), reviewed in *Against the Current*: <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc192/p5185/>

[17] These views also bear a resemblance to certain aspects of contemporary Critical Race Theory.

[18] “Trotskyism” was a multi-purpose scare-word in the CP-USA to designate that someone was an enemy. The basis for the accusation seems to be that Wright had been interviewing David Poindexter, an outspoken and critical-minded Black member, for biographical material that he might use in his fiction. There may have been additional reasons for Wright’s maltreatment, including jealousy on the part of Haywood. The result of the unproven accusation was Wright’s being given the special status of a Party member who was not operating in a unit, a situation that changed once he moved to New York and began writing for the *Daily Worker* in 1937. Wright wrote up his version of these events two years later as “I Tried to Be a Communist.” This appeared in two parts in *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1944, 61-70, and *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1945, 48-56. It has been reprinted in several editions since that time. In an informative essay written for the *Nation*, Joseph Ramsey points out that Wright was also accused by his comrades of writing “pornography” on the basis of a report of his reading a draft of some fiction; see:

[19] The article is available online:

[20] Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 255.

[21] Toru Kiuchi and Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright: A Documented Chronology, 1908-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McPharland and Company, 2014), 125.

[22] Op. cit. The beating was probably a cause of Newton’s premature death a few years later. For more information on Newton, see John Beasley, *A Life in Red: A Story of Forbidden Love, the Great Depression and the Communist Fight for a Black Nation in the Deep South* (2015).

[23] See Beth McHenry, “Negro Leaders Hit Police Terror,” *Daily Worker*, 9 November 1941, cited in Rowley, 558.

[24] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), on-line:

[25] Regarding continuities, *Underground* may have been partly an attempt to address certain criticisms of *Native Son*, both by presenting a more empathetic protagonist and through the theme of Daniels’ art project in the cave that he is unable to explain effectively. According to the materials on-line at [loa.org/underground](http://loa.org/underground), the early version of the novel contains a scene in which “Mrs. Wooten [his wealthy employer] asks Fred Daniels whether he knows the Black Communist writer who published the novel *Native Son*. Daniels responds by saying, ‘I don’t agree with men like that. I think we colored folk are solving our problems . . .’”

[26] In *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1940 edition), the presence of the Communist movement emerges over time and is represented in two stories near the end. In *Native Son*, there is the presence of Mr. Max, the Jewish lawyer who is connected with the CP-USA, and a final message of greeting



from Bigger Thomas to the young Communist, Jan, whom he had tried to frame.

[27] Wright never wavered in this view on a personal level, but he did not want to be drafted as a regular soldier and would later volunteer to serve as an officer and make other statements suggesting that he endorsed the US war effort. This is part of a pattern of understandable self-protective behavior, although it became questionable when in Europe he collaborated with the CIA in trying to offset Communist influence at a 1958 Black writers conference. See Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 201.

[28] Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 226.

[29] See my discussion of Wright's relation to Marxism and communism after his CP-USA membership in Alan Wald, "He Tried to be a Communist: Richard Wright and the Black Literary Left," in Michael Nowlin, ed., *Richard Wright in Context* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 87-97.)

[30] In this sense it is a prelude or transition to Wright's most challenging and misunderstood work, *The Outsider* (1953). See my discussion of it in: <https://againstthecurrent.org/site03/p2031/>