Proletarian modernism: aesthetic intervention in naturalist epistemology in Steinbeck, Wright and McCullers

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Proletarian Modernism:
Aesthetic Intervention in Naturalist Epistemology in Steinbeck, Wright and McCullers

By

Kenji Kihara

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Abstract

This dissertation explores three proletarian novels published at the end of the Depression era—John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*—in light of how their aesthetics complicates the inherited epistemology of literary naturalism in response to the changing political climates in the age of the Popular Front. Calling these texts “proletarian modernism,” I investigate how their aesthetics mediate the relations among Marxist ideas, political solidarity and the American value of individualism in an age when it became gradually difficult to fundamentally criticize capitalism and liberalism.

Chapter 1 examines Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, focusing on its narrative structure, that is, the interaction between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, between the author’s depiction of anonymous farmer groups en route to California and the story of the Joads as exemplary farmers. Reading through the interchapters, readers see the farmer’s domestic migration as a large-scale social phenomenon of a nation, whereas in the narrative chapters, we see the phenomenon at a more personal, intimate, and concrete level. Through reconsidering Steinbeck’s philosophy in light of his rumination on mass politics in the context of the thirties, I will argue that these two different sorts of chapters can be understood in a tension-filled relation, rather than as constituting an organic unity, as preceding studies have discussed. I demonstrate that the tension between the two forms of chapters corresponds to the conflict between Steinbeck’s faith in the inviolable value of individualism and his awareness of the necessity to present a macro vision on the migrant famers’ predicament. From this perspective, I clarify how the novel’s aesthetic intervenes in the strict determinism of literary naturalism.

In Chapter 2, I explore Wright’s *Native Son* in terms of the rhetoric of possession deployed
in it. Preceding studies on the novel have been bifurcated: on the one hand, one camp regard the novel as naturalist in that it limns the way racist environment profoundly conditions the protagonist Bigger Thomas’s life and finally defeats him; on the other hand, other scholars treat the novel as existentialist or modernist in that it describes the way Bigger struggles for liberation and finally achieves his own voice. I begin by revisiting Wright’s political ideas, focusing on the theme of possession, thereby opening up the possibility to read the novel as Wright’s critique of what C. B. Macpherson calls “possessive individualism,” which assumes that the human essence lies in the freedom to possess. Clarifying how the novel is thoroughly structured—including its naturalist narrative form—by the theme of dis/possession, I show that even Bigger’s seemingly existential selfhood is also informed by his sense of possession. From this perspective, I argue that the novel’s ending tacitly gestures toward an outside to capitalist property relations.

Chapter 3 reads McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in light of the theme and rhetoric of labor. The novel is rather exceptional in the author’s oeuvre in that it is the only work that manifestly addresses Marxist ideas such as the labor theory of value as well as socioeconomic problems, including impoverishment, exploitation, racism and gender inequalities. While earlier studies have downplayed or simply neglected such socioeconomic aspects of the novel, I argue that the ways in which it handles the issue of labor symptomatically suggest the changing meaning of labor in the late 1930s, an age which witnessed the rise of the Popular Front. Critically analyzing what Michael Denning calls the “laboring of American culture”—a structure of feeling derived from a shared sense of struggling, regardless of race, ethnicity and gender—I clarify how the novel attests to the process though which socioeconomic problematics was translated into cultural issues.
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Introduction

Proletarian Modernism, Naturalist Epistemology and the Rise of the Popular Front

In August of 1935, the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International issued the following statement in response to the spread of fascist regimes in Italy, Japan, and Nazi Germany, launching what is known as the Popular Front, a broad liberal coalition aimed at forming a new solidarity:

In face of the towering menace of fascism to the working class and all the gains it had made, to all toilers and their elementary rights, to the peace and liberty of the peoples, the Seventh Congress of the Communist International declares that at the present historical stage it is the main and immediate task of the international labor movement to establish the united fighting front of the working class. […] [T]his task makes it the duty of the Communist Parties to take into consideration the changed circumstances and to apply the united front tactics in a new manner, by seeking to reach agreements with the organizations of the toilers of various political trends for joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale. (emphasis original, Resolution of the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International 74)

That is, with the goal of “joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale” against the rising fascism, this new policy sought to “reach agreements” with various political groups through reconsidering the existing labor solidarity “in a new manner.” This statement therefore made it necessary for the communists to “strive to secure joint action with the Social Democratic Parties” (emphasis original, Resolution of the Seventh World Congress of the
Communist International 104) in search of a broader and more flexible solidarity, which could include even the middle class. After it initially formed to combat the spread of fascism, the Popular Front officially came to an end with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact on August 23rd, 1939, a historical event taken by many of the contemporary left intellectuals, writers and artists, as revealing communism and fascism to constitute two sides of the same coin.

The beginning of the Popular Front was also seen by contemporary critics as marking a watershed in the radical literary movement in the US during the 1930s. In 1938, Philip Rahv, a founding editor of the Partisan Review, contributed an essay to the Southern Review entitled “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy,” in which he announced the death of Proletarian literature. Though Rahv committed himself to the leftist literary movement in the early years of the 1930s, he had, by this time, grown critical of what he saw as the Communist Party USA’s dogmatic character that seemed to deprive writers of their intellectual independence. “It is clear,” declared Rahv, “that proletarian literature is the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class” (623). He goes on to say:

This fact explains both the speed of its development and the speed of its disintegration. Its peculiar artificiality, the devious and volatile nature of its critical principles, its artistic chaos plus its political homogeneity and discipline, its uses as a cover for organizational activities—all these are explained by the periodic shifts and changes of the “party line.” (623)

In this vein, Rahv contends that proletarian literature is “withering away” because the party, “having abandoned its revolutionary position and allied itself with liberal capitalism” in accordance with its new Popular Front policy, no longer needs it (624).

What strikes us in this context, however, is the fact that it was precisely the late 1930s,
characterized by the rise of the Popular Front, that witnessed the completion and publication of the two most critically and popularly acclaimed proletarian novels: John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, published in 1939 and in 1940, respectively. Following the publication of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* on March 1st, 1940, Michael Gold—the ex-editor of the *New Masses* (serving between 1926-1933) and one of the central figures of the proletarian literary movement in the 1930s, himself from a proletarian background—praised its achievement and success in his review for *Sunday Worker* in the same month. In the review, Gold states:

[Wright’s] first novel, “Native Son,” has sold over 200,000 copies in less than a month. It is no exaggeration to say that at one stroke he has become a national figure. Neither is it an exaggeration to claim that after ten years of fumbling, and experiment, of great visions and uneven fulfillments, our American social realism, our proletarian literature or whatever critics wish to name it, has finally culminated in two sure classics—Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” and Richard Wright’s “Native Son.”

(Gold, “Change the World” 40)

Gold was not alone in juxtaposing and thinking highly of the two novels; Malcolm Cowley, another important left critic, who served as literary editor for the *New Republic*, contributed a review to the magazine in the same month and commended them, writing, “‘Native Son’ is the most impressive American novel I have read since ‘The Grapes of Wrath’” (“The Case” 37). In Cowley’s eyes, the two novels resemble each other in that “both deal with the dispossessed and both grew out of the radical movement of the 1930s” (“The Case” 37). Both Gold and Cowley thus see in the achievement of the two novels the pinnacle of the thirties proletarian literary sensibility. Indeed, the monumentality of these novels is generally accepted even today, as Alan
M. Wald, a leading scholar in the field of thirties radical literature, characterizes *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Native Son* in terms of their “epic successes in sales and reputation” in his latest essay (19). A series of questions then arise. Why was it during the Popular Front period, in which the leftist political and literary atmosphere was supposedly already in decline, that the two proletarian masterpieces appeared? What sorts of aesthetic characteristics singularize these novels? How can these radical novels be understood as responding, in both their content and form, to the political milieu of the Popular Front period?

One may well approach these questions in terms of what was problematic about proletarian literature for its opponents. Indeed, Rahv was far from alone in criticizing contemporary radical fiction; critics such as Cowley, Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling also published essays in the 1940s to take issue with it. Here, it is noteworthy that these critics often regarded thirties proletarian literature as “proletarian naturalism” (Kazin, 379), stressing its debt to the tradition of literary naturalism. Kazin in his book *On Native Grounds*, published in 1942, famously and influentially diagnosed “the new social novel” of the Depression era as “the abject surrender to naturalism” (371). Crucially, the problem with thirties radical fiction, for these critics, lay in its commitment to determinism. Though proletarian naturalists of the thirties “believed in determinism well enough,” in Kazin’s account, their simplistic understanding of it—such as “the determinism of the class struggle, the policeman’s night stick, love without money, and the degradations of a society in which so many men were jobless and hungry”—made their naturalism no longer “a philosophy of life” but “a reflex” (372). Similarly, when Rahv in his 1942 essay “Notes on the Decline of Naturalism” asserted the present condition of naturalism to be “one of utter debility,” he also castigated its deterministic nature (46). Defining naturalism as “that type of realism in which the individual is portrayed not merely
as subordinate to his background but as wholly determined by it,” Rahv decried the ways in which “hero and victim alike are essentially implements of environmental force, the carriers of its contradictions upon whom it stamps success or failure” (43). Cowley joined Kazin’s and Rahv’s charges against naturalist determinism when his 1947 essay “‘Not Men’: A Natural History of American Naturalism” claimed that “For the naturalists, [...] men are ‘human insects’ whose brief lives are completely determined by society or nature” (433). “The individual is crushed in a moment if he resists,” Cowley goes on to write, “and his struggle, instead of being tragic, is merely pitiful or ironic, as if we had seen a mountain stir itself to overwhelm a fly” (433).

With the benefit of hindsight, it is unmistakable that these critics’ retrospective, derogatory reflections on what Kazin calls “the abject surrender to naturalism” of the thirties proletarian novelists—and, particularly, these novelists’ deterministic social views—were inextricably entangled with the critics’ reflections on their own commitments to the radical literary and political movement in their early years. Indeed, critics like Rahv, Cowley and Trilling themselves held Marxist beliefs in the 1930s. As Donald Pizer, one of the leading scholars of American literary naturalism, points out, Depression-era naturalist fiction differs from the first generation from around the turn of the century in terms of its political affiliations:

American naturalism of the 1890s was largely apolitical, but in the 1930s the movement was aligned with the left in American politics and often specifically with the Communist party. In the revulsion against the party that swept the literary community following the Soviet purges of the 1930s and the Russian-German pact of 1939, it was inevitable that naturalistic fiction would be found wanting because the naturalists of that decade, it was now seen, had so naively embraced some form of
Therefore, those ex-Marxist critics’ synchronized rejection in the 1940s of “the fallen god of naturalism” provided them with the best way to “cleanse their own ideological consciences, as well as to purge America of an infatuation with an alien and destructive political ideal” (Pizer 29). To put it differently, their critical discourse against naturalist determinism was inseparably linked to their felt necessity to impugn the sort of “religious Marxism,” whose reductive understanding of base-superstructure determinism allegedly induced proletarian novelists to limn “the conversion of one or more workers to Marxism” in automatic and thus unconvincing ways (Cowley “Not Men” 429). One of the typical cases may be found in Michael Gold’s 1930 semi-autobiographic novel Jews Without Money, which is “generally regarded as the first American proletarian novel” (Murphy 65). The novel intimately depicts the experiences of a Jewish-American boy growing up in the ghetto in the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the century. While the novel vividly portrays the lived experiences of an impoverished Jewish tenement community from within, its closing scene, only one-page-long, all of a sudden shows a quasi-religious conversion of the protagonist and narrator Mike to communism. Recalling having listened to a soapbox orator one night, the narrator tells us, “O workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah” (309). Since this scene comes as a surprise, the readers might well find the ending implausible or didactic, and regard the whole novel as a failure of craft and aesthetics.

From this perspective we can grasp the full significance of the fact that The Grapes of Wrath and Native Son, two of the greatest American proletarian novels, emerged during the age of the Popular Front. As I will discuss in detail in the following chapters, these novels complicate naturalist epistemology, as if refusing to reduce themselves to simplistic determinism. Their
aesthetic also indicates these novels’ detachment from the dogmatic sort of interpretation of Marxism, which assumes individuals’ behaviors and subjectivities as thoroughly determined by the economic base and which posits the almost automatic conversions of workers into communism. In addition, remarkably, Steinbeck’s and Wright’s novels intervene in naturalist epistemology particularly on the level of form as well as that of content. The alternating interchapters and narrative chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* show two different worldviews, thereby presenting a macro perspective on the migrant farmers’ statistical situations in such a way that does not predetermine the trajectory of the Joads’ exodus. The narrative voice and the communist lawyer Boris Max in *Native Son* both appear to tell the story of the protagonist Bigger Thomas, an African-American proletariat in Chicago, in a deterministic way, that is, in a way that Bigger himself would never be able to do; however, Bigger seems to obtain a certain sense of free will and agency from Book II onward, after accidentally having killed Mary Dalton, the only daughter of a reputable family in the South Side. Moreover, the last scene of the novel—Bigger’s defiance of Max’s all-embracing narrative—offers a meta-perspective on the very epistemology that structures the novel. It will be illuminating, then, to examine how the late thirties proletarian novels’ form and aesthetics respond to the changing political climate in the Popular Front period, in which programmatic communist views and practices were called into question.

This dissertation explores three canonical American proletarian novels that mark the apotheosis of the radical literary sensibility of the 1930s—John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)—in light of how their aesthetics, by complicating the inherited epistemology of literary naturalism, responds to the changing socio-political climates in the late 1930s. These
three novels are representative of the thirties America’s radical writings: Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* narrates the predicament of migrant farmers en route to California;¹ Wright’s *Native Son* depicts how the protagonist Bigger Thomas, an African-American working-class man, encounters racial and economic injustice in Chicago; and McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* describes the failure of communication between impoverished people living in a rural mill town in Deep South, graphically depicting socioeconomic issues such as penury, economic exploitation, and racism. Although my focus on McCullers as proletarian work might appear to be rather counterintuitive compared to Steinbeck and Wright, some critics regard *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, her first novel, as “the last of the ‘proletarian novels,’ a true Depression book,” suggesting that “its success may be rooted precisely in the tension between public hysteria, proper to an age of social protest, and private anguish, proper to the sensibility of its author” (Fiedler 478). Intriguingly enough, this is McCullers’s first novel and her last proletarian work, since she never again wrote such an unabashedly political novel, which addresses at length Marxist ideas, including the labor theory of value. Moreover, McCullers’s novel comes to a close on August 21, 1939, two days prior to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact, with which the Popular Front officially ended. In this respect, her novel can be seen as capturing the twilight of one era. The three proletarian novels by Steinbeck, Wright and McCullers foreground the ways in which socioeconomic situations fundamentally condition one’s subjectivity, behaviors and desires, and thus they can be understood as written within the tradition of literary naturalism; however, these novels also complicate the theme of determinism at the core of this literary mode, taking a certain distance from it.

Throughout this dissertation, I am using the term “proletarian novel” in a quite general sense, designating novels that portray the experiences of the proletariat, a category to be opposed

¹ During the mid-1930s, a series of severe dust storms tremendously damaged the ecology and agriculture of the US
to bourgeoisie. My interest resides not so much in what constitutes proletarian literature or its
definition but in how the aesthetics of my chosen novels, regarded by contemporary critics and
reading publics as proletarian, handle the thorny relations between Marxist perspectives,
solidarity and individualism in relation to the changing political climate in the Popular Front
age.² From this viewpoint, I will clarify how these novels’ intervention in naturalist form and
epistemology constitutes aesthetic responses to the contemporary socio-political situations.

Focusing on these three novels’ form, rhetoric and aesthetics, this dissertation calls them
“proletarian modernism,” in opposition to Kazin’s “proletarian naturalism.” One might at first
imagine thirties literary radicalism as depthless or lacking any understanding of the experimental
aesthetics and avant-garde artworks in the preceding decade, as the above critics wrote. Yet, a
close examination of contemporary left literary discourses reveals that this was not at all the case.
Barbara Foley, whose 1993 study Radical Representations remains one of the most persuasive
and comprehensive revisionary studies on American proletarian fiction, makes this point
succinctly:

In short, much Depression-era literary radicalism was intimately involved in the

² Indeed, the contemporary Marxist literary debates present a variety of issues regarding how to define proletarian
literature. One of them was a question of authorship. Does proletarian literature mean literature written by
proletarians about themselves, as Michael Gold’s Jews without Money or Wright’s Native Son are? Or, can it be
literature written by middle-class writers about proletarians, as Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath and McCullers’s
The Heart Is Lonely Hunter are? Or, can it even be literature written by middle-class writers about the middle class,
provided that there is a certain revolutionary sensibility in the work? In fact, radical literary debates during the 1930s
had an inner conflict between two distinct groups: working-class writers, including figures such as Gold,
Wright and Jack Conroy, whose own experiences gave their proletarian narratives “credentials of ‘authenticity’”
(Hanley 133); another group that consisted of middle-class, established writers, including John Dos Passos,
Granville Hicks, Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, whose cultural authority derived from “traditional currencies
of education, social networks, and credentialed expertise” (Hanley 132). Seen in this light, it is not incidental that
Cowley, in his aforementioned review of Native Son, points to the difference in background between Steinbeck and
Wright: “There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between the motives of the two authors. Steinbeck, more
privileged than the characters in his novel, wrote out of deep pity for them, and the fault he had to avoid was
sentimentality. Richard Wright, a Negro, was moved by wrongs he had suffered in his own person, and what he had
to fear was a blind anger that might destroy the pity in him, making him hate any character whose skin was whiter
than his own” (“The Case” 37). Here, it is obvious that Cowley, himself from the middle class, understands that his
social position is much closer to Steinbeck’s than to Wright’s, not only in terms of race but also in light of economic
class and cultural capital. For an analysis of the Marxist literary debates on the definition of proletarian literature in
the American context, see Foley Radical 86-128; and Hanley.
project of “mak[ing] it new.” The conflation of “modernism” with the high
modernism of Eliot, Joyce, and Pound—a definition of literary-historical categories
that occurred only under the postwar hegemony of Trilling, Rahv, and other
anti-Stalinists—can be argued only at the risk of fundamentally distorting the
intentions and perspectives of those who were actually engaged in literary production
during the proletarian period. The literary proletarians were part of modernism.
(emphasis original 62)

Indeed, as Foley writes here, proletarian writers and critics fully recognized the importance of
creating new ways of writing in order to articulate new experiences in the modern world, and
thus they also committed themselves to the project of “making it new,” which was Ezra Pound’s
famous injunction.

In addition, Foley’s critique of the Cold War intellectuals’ restriction of the term
“modernism” to “high modernism” also deserves notice. It was New York intellectuals and New
Critics of the South who played central roles in establishing the Cold War paradigm, that is, an
institutionalized literary standard that set the binary oppositions between modernism and
realist/naturalist/proletarian literature, between self-reflexive artwork and insipid propaganda,
generating “the rigid split between social structures and literary structures” (Kaplan 4). Since the
late 1980s, critics have convincingly demonstrated that the emergence of this Cold-War critical
standard was inseparably linked to the international political climate at that time. As a series of
historical events such as Moscow trials and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact occurred, the later
years of Depression era witnessed the process of “de-Marxization” (Guilbaut 17) among Western
intellectuals and critics, that is, a profound disillusionment with Marxism they had espoused
during the 1930s. When World War II came to a close, US intellectuals conceived what Thomas
Hill Schaub calls the “liberal narrative,” which viewed liberalism as being neutral in terms of its political ideology, rather than as another form of ideology (which, of course, it is). It was in this context that post-war critics came to posit the dichotomy between modernism and realist/naturalist/proletarian literature, insisting on the superiority of the former over the latter, assuming that the latter is too ideological, whereas modernism is relatively immune to political affiliations and thus resonant with the American way of life. Put differently, as Fredrick Jameson argues in *A Singular Modernity*, “the ideology of modernism”—the affirmation of the aesthetic’s sheer autonomy—was not “contemporaneous with the modern movement itself” and, significantly, this ideology is “a belated product, and essentially an invention and an innovation of the years following World War II” (164). Likewise, Joe Cleary, in his attempt to theorize the current literary world-system, addresses how the Cold War simplified and fixed “the realism-versus-modernism polemics” (263). In the Cold War context, as Cleary explains, while the Soviet Union espoused realism, the US would endorse modernism as “a wonderful new renaissance of Western culture [...] that had safeguarded the autonomy of art from Soviet-style cultural engineering” (263). Consequently, realism and modernism were imagined “at once as reified categories and as the obvious termini of modern ‘world literature’” (263). Against this reified view, Cleary points out the possibility that “nineteenth-century realism already contained latent modernisms” and that “twentieth-century modernisms may equally have retained latent realisms” which will come to the fore in further moments of crisis (268). The insights of these recent critics combine to suggest that it is necessary to historicize the dichotomy between modernism and naturalist/proletarian/realist literature, between autonomous art and hackneyed propaganda, seeing beyond the ahistorical literary criticism shaped in the Cold War period.
As for my principal writers, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*3 and McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*4 were mostly read, until the 1970s, in light of their biblical themes or spiritual issues such as anxiety, loneliness and alienation, and therefore their descriptions of social matters remained either neglected or were regarded as aesthetic flaws. Clearly, these de-politicized readings were under the influence of the Cold War paradigm. On the part of Wright, *Native Son*’s reception was profoundly affected by the influential essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949) by Wright’s erstwhile friend and protégé James Baldwin, an essay that took both Wright’s novel and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to task for reducing human being’s complexity to stereotypes.5 Following Baldwin, critics were inclined to underestimate *Native Son* as propagandistic protest fiction for decades. Then, in the 1960s when “the time came to rescue the novel for the burgeoning field of African-American studies,” as Alessandro Portelli aptly puts, “proving that it was no protest novel at all was the only way to defend and rescue it” (76). In order to fully appreciate the values of these novels, however, it is necessary to examine them within the context of contemporary socio-political situations, without separating social-realist descriptions in these texts from their investments in innovative aesthetics.

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3 From its publication to the present, critics have primarily read *The Grapes of Wrath* in terms of either its relation to Steinbeck’s unique biological philosophy or biblical motifs in it. From the 1990s on, recent studies have situated the novel within specific historical contexts, analyzing the representations of gender and race or the rhetoric of “people.” For discussions of the relation between Steinbeck’s philosophy and the novel, see Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*; Benson; and Conder. For readings of biblical themes in the novel, see Ditsky, “The Ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*”; Railton; and Owen. For the recent revisionary scholarship, see Foley; Denning; Szalay; and Cunningham.

4 *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is usually placed within the tradition of Southern grotesque or gothic literature. Earlier studies on the novel, conducted mainly from the 1940s to 1960s, tended to look to spiritual, abstract themes in the novel such as loneliness, love and alienation, regarding Southern “grotesque” images of freaks or misfits, which often appear in McCullers’s works, as metaphor of human nature. Then, from the 1970s on, critics have focused on the novel’s representations of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. However, the novel’s representation of poverty and the poor has generally remained unexamined. Judith Giblin James offers a comprehensive summary and analysis of preceding studies up to 1990. For early scholarship on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, see Evans; and Louis D. Rubin Jr. For the analysis of race and ethnicity, see Champion; and Hershon. For readings of gender and sexuality, see Gleeson-White; and Kenschaft. For studies that build on the insights of disability studies, see Russel; and Rountree.

5 For a summary and analysis of criticism up to the 1990s, see Kinnamon. For the tracking and analysis of the split between critics who consider the novel to be naturalist and those who think it to be modernist, see Goldstein. For recent revisionary scholarship on the novel, see, for instance, JanMohamed; Dawhare; Smethurst; and Afflerbach.
Adopting the term “proletarian modernism,” this dissertation devotes particular attention to the aesthetics, rhetoric and form of the novels of Steinbeck, Wright and McCullers, exploring the content of form, namely, the historicity and politics inscribed in their aesthetic innovations.

Indeed, following Foley, recent critics have multiply reconsidered proletarian literary works’ relations to innovative aesthetics since the 1990s. One of the most salient historical contexts that this scholarship has devoted attention is, in fact, the emergence of the Popular Front in 1935. Since the Popular Front did not reject solidarity with the middle class, it helped unite various distinct groups with different interests under the single slogan of anti-fascism. Consequently, the Popular Front served to facilitate the development of pluralistic cultural visions among racially, ethnically and culturally diverse social groups in the US. In this context, Michael Denning’s 1997 pioneering study The Cultural Front coins the term “the ghetto pastoral,” whereby he salvages “a new kind of a city novel” authored by plebeian men and women who grew up in ethnic working-class neighborhoods, including Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Bronzeville, and Chinatown (230). According to Denning, these books, which have not traditionally been regarded as proletarian novels partly because of their lack of explicitly political content and partly because of their use of seemingly minor regional forms, owe much to modernism for their emergence. For one thing, modernism paved a way to use the vernacular in such a way as not to reduce it to an undervalued “ethnic” dialect. In addition, Denning insists, modernism also embodied “a freedom from plot,” thereby showing the writers of the ghetto pastoral how to sketch their experiences without a “unifying narrative” (243). As with Denning, Robert Shulman’s The Power of Political Art looks to five radical writers and poets who created their most creative political works during the Popular Front era—Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. Shulman conceive of these
writers and poets as “avant-garde” because “they combined a vanguard critique of the middle class, a probing of relatively unexplored areas of American experience, and vital experiments in form and language, sometimes modernist, more often within the conventions of realism-naturalism” (7). Similarly, Chris Vials’s *Realism for the Masses* explores how left-wing writers and cultural workers elaborated the “hybrid form” of “mass-mediated realism”—a complicated and widespread blend of realist and mass-culture forms—and how this “heretofore unexplored aesthetic means” created “Popular Front subjects,” disseminating the notion of “the people,” a notion Vials considers to be “oppositional” (xvii, xv). In this context, for instance, Vials discusses the ways in which Erskine Caldwell’s best-selling novel *God’s Little Acre*, a novel portraying Georgia’s impoverished white farmers in a caricatured way, fused “realism, the southern grotesque, the pleasure of humor, and [...] sexual allure” to win a vast readership, unlike most of the other contemporary proletarian literary works (84). These recent studies combine to reveal how literature committed to describing proletarian experiences actively made use of a range of literary, cultural and aesthetic forms.

New Modernist Studies have also enriched how to approach the thirties proletarian writings. Michal Szalay, defining the term “modernism” broadly to “designate the literature of the first half of this century,” regards Steinbeck’s and Wright’s novels as “New Deal modernism,” rather than as naturalism or protest novels, with which they were usually associated (5). Szalay, in this vein, discusses how the writers and poets he calls “New Deal modernists” absorbed the New Deal’s actuarial management discourses based on newly developed statistical technologies in the decade. Joseph B. Entin coins the aesthetic genre of “sensational modernism”—an amalgam of modernist experimentation and the contemporary fashion of sensationalism—and

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6 For a review and analysis of the generic characteristics of the New Modernist Studies, see Mao and Walkowitz; and Matthews.
sees Wright as a “sensational modernist.” Entin discusses how what he calls “aesthetics of astonishment” shapes the thirties literary works, arguing that Wright intermingles divergent literary approaches such as “naturalism, modernism, and sensationalism” (249). Jeff Allred’s *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* revisits the aesthetics of the genre of documentary—a genre that combines texts and photographs to convey the images of the underprivileged and the heretofore underrepresented and that constituted one of the most prominent literary modes during the Depression era—focusing on Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices*, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. While documentary has previously been taken to task for its inchoate realism and fragmentary representations, Allred argues that the genre’s fragmented nature itself bespeaks the possibility that it can be understood as part of modernism. From this perspective, Allred interrogates how “the interruptive aesthetic of documentary modernism” complicates the representations of the fetishized object of “the people” in the era (7). The insights of these recent critics indicate how fruitful it is to expand the concept of modernism and thereby to investigate proletarian literature’s investment in formal innovations.

My dissertation will intervene in this revisionary scholarship on the relations between innovative aesthetics and proletarian literature by elucidating the ways in which my three principal three novels complicate the inherited epistemology of naturalist determinism in response to the political paradigm of the Popular Front. Steinbeck, Wright and McCullers write their works within the tradition of turn-of-the-century naturalism, being fully aware of the extent to which people’s activities are inexorably conditioned by the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding us. Indeed, as Kenneth William Payne writes, one should not downplay “the potent
impact of the naturalist movement on American letters in the first quarter of the century” or miss
the fact that “there could be no other model of social writing available except naturalism” in
those decades (21)—an influence that would have persisted well into the 1930s. Where these
proletarian writers of the 1930s diverge from their progenitors, however, resides in the ways in
which these writers repudiate simplistic, “determinism”-influenced depictions of the
working-class people, refusing to represent impoverished characters as merely passive victims.\footnote{Here, I am referring to “determinism” as a word to be distinguished from “determination.” As Raymond Williams shows, the verb “determine” derives from the Latin word “terminare,” which means “setting bounds.” “Determining” signifies some fixed point or act at the end of a process, and usually has no implication that “the specific character of the ultimate decision or settlement or conclusion is inherent in the nature of the process” (Keywords 98). Also, “determination” is something that “resolves or completes a process,” rather than “prospectively control or predict it” (98). In this respect, Williams stresses, “determination” is to be distinguished from “determinism,” a usage formed in the mid-19th century which came to be synonymous with “fatalism,” in which things are assumed to be “predetermined” so that one has no control over a process. Then Williams emphasizes that “determination” also indicates “acts of the will,” as in “I am determined to bring this about” (102).}

Literary naturalism at the turn of the century was already eager to describe the lower
class’s life. Writers such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser,
however, often drew upon the theory of Social Darwinism in constituting their fictional worlds,
presenting their imaginary characters as entirely determined by the environments surrounding
them. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, is exemplary for this mode of representation
when the narrative voice foretells George Hurstwood’s decline in Chapter 30:

Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would
be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York. […] In Chicago the two
routes to distinction were politics and trade. In New York the roads were any one of a
half-hundred, and each had been diligently pursued by hundreds, so that celebrities
were numerous. The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs [sic]
disappear wholly from view—remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was
nothing. (205)
Here, the narrative voice likens the city of New York to a natural environment (“an ocean”), presenting the city as a place where the law of the jungle predominates (“the sea was already full of whales”). There is supposed to be no room for Hurstwood, called “a common fish,” to change the trajectory his incoming decline. This is the sort of naturalist determinism that aforementioned critics such as Kazin, Rahv, Cowley and Trilling astringently criticized as simplistic and reductive.

In contrast, my principal thirties novels, while drawing upon the tradition of literary naturalism, possess notable aesthetic facets that are not easily reduced to determinism. While the Joads in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* are presented as part of the vast group of migrant farmers moving westward and thus seemingly subordinate to the fate of this larger group, their individualist and idiosyncratic ideas and attitudes make this family far from typical of the migrants. The novel’s innovative narrative structure, that is, the use of interchapters—called “Steinbeck’s great formal experiment” (Owens 109)—succeeds in offering a larger perspective of the social phenomenon of domestic migration of farmers in such a way as not to reduce the story of the Joads, told in the narrative chapters, simply to a “case” or “sample,” while showing the extent to which these specific individuals’ experiences are circumscribed by socioeconomic conditions. Similarly, while Wright’s *Native Son* was initially accepted as naturalist work based on a determinist worldview, the interpretation of the novel has in fact bifurcated: some critics keep reading it in terms of naturalist determinism while others look to the novel’s existential facets. Reviewing and analyzing preceding scholarship on the novel, Philip Goldstein in 2008 observed:

> It is well known that *Native Son* is a naturalist novel in which Wright shows how racial discrimination and class oppression destroy Bigger Thomas, the novel’s
hero. It is equally well known that *Native Son* depicts Bigger’s existential struggle for liberation. Less familiar is the incompatibility of these accounts. As the contrary responses of many critics testify, to treat the novel as protest fiction is to deny that Bigger wins liberation, whereas to treat the novel as a modernist or existential depiction of Bigger’s liberation is to deny that the novel protests his oppression and victimization. In other words, if he is liberated, the system does not defeat him, whereas if the system defeats him, he does not liberate himself.

(120) In this instance, we see a bizarre text that can be read as either naturalist or modernist/existentialist, as either depicting the protagonist’s defeat or his liberation, and as either criticizing the capitalist and racist system or tacitly attenuating the importance of this task. Above all, at the end of the novel Bigger famously declares, “What I killed for, I *am*!” (emphasis original 429), defying the communist lawyer Max’s explanation that his whole life was thoroughly determined by socioeconomic circumstances in the South Side. In this instance, the protagonist seems to refuse to reduce his story to a simplistic sort of Marxist narrative based on the rigid base-superstructure determinism.

McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* also bears an intriguing relation to naturalist epistemology. On the one hand, describing the relations between a deaf-mute John Singer and four main characters—Jake Blount, Mick Kelly, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland and Biff Brannon—as fundamentally conditioned by socioeconomic situations, the novel builds on naturalist determinism. As Copeland’s speech on the labor theory of value epitomizes, McCullers also understands how deeply relations of production affect one’s lived experiences. Yet, the novel also depicts failures of communication, without showing any successful attempts to
develop meaningful solidarity. Instead, McCullers harnesses what might be called the rhetoric of labor to transmit a sense of community of lonely characters who struggle against their social alienations.

Focusing on these characteristics, I will clarify how the three proletarian modernist texts seek to intervene in the inheritance of literary naturalism, complicating the theme of determinism. In treating my three principal novels as proletarian modernism, I am looking to the ways in which they conduct certain semi-autonomous practice of “mediation,” as differentiated from “reflection.” I am investigating cases in which this practice is used in the tradition of naturalism quite purposefully. On the one hand, in depicting working-class people, the Depression-era proletarian writers concurred with their predecessors at the turn of the century that one’s behaviors, interiority, and desires are profoundly circumscribed by the socioeconomic forces. On the other hand, however, their literary texts also seem to desire to eschew any unnecessary victimization of their characters, rejecting oversimplified depictions of them as merely “a case” of a certain category or a simple “reflection” of outer environments. What matters here is the question of how to consider the relations among the individual, solidarity, and the authors’ Marxist insights.

It is instrumental to understand the dilemma my chosen authors faced in terms of the concept of “mediation,” as understood by Raymond Williams. In Marxism and Literature (1977), he suggests that critics should reconsider the relations between society and art, between the base and its superstructure, by substituting “mediation” for “the object-reflection model.” Marx’s use of the terms “base” and “superstructure,” claims Williams, is “not primarily conceptual […] but metaphorical” (77). The point of this metaphor is, in Williams’s account, to have “a sense of

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8 For the ways in which critics often confound modernism’s “autonomy” (aesthetic project) with its “subversive” quality (cultural process), thus making incoherent claims, see Eysteinsson.
visible and formal ‘superstructure’ which might be analyzed on its own but cannot be understood without seeing that it rests on a ‘foundation’” (77). The problems of “reflection” theory, he then maintains, lie in the ways in which it fails to register the fact that society is not static but dynamic—a process—and that artworks are both “material” and “imaginative,” so that they can also be active. In this vein, whereas stressing the irreplaceability of “determination” for any Marxist thinking and practice, Williams seeks to articulate a base that is in constant motion along with the superstructure. In this context, the concepts of “realism” and “naturalism” are criticized for their tendency to consider artworks to be merely reflecting a static reality, or the base. Drawing upon Williams’s insights, I examine the ways in which the literary texts I call “proletarian modernism” conduct this aesthetic practice of mediation, thereby handling the competing political claims brought about by the age of the Popular Front. 

In so doing, I hope to historicize the aesthetics of proletarian modernism. The emergence of new ways of writing can be understood as aesthetic responses to the contemporary social structures in which they are conceived. Indeed, the preceding writers of literary realism/naturalism around the turn of the century already showed “a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world ‘out there’”(Kaplan 9). Rather, as Amy Kaplan discusses, these writers’ literary practice could be seen as “a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change” through giving an understandable form to the felt sense of social dissolution. (10) As scholars such as Kaplan, Walter Benn Michaels, June Howard and Michael Davitt Bell have argued, American literary realism/naturalism can be understood as a response to the rapidly changing social structure and discourses at that time, including consumer society, monopoly capitalism, and reformism. Indeed, as Howard cogently argues, the very form of literary naturalism itself may be understood as deeply informed by
reformism and Spencerian social views at the turn of the century, insofar as its generic narrative patterns center on the perspectives of middle-class observers or omniscient third-person narrators, who view how “brutal” characters’ lives are subject to determinism, and who are by and large exempt from it. Thus, my proletarian modernist writers’ attempts to complicate naturalist determinism through their aesthetic approach must also be seen as responses to the social change in the late 1930s.

I will argue that these proletarian modernist works’ intervention in naturalist epistemology constitutes aesthetic responses to the contemporary thorny dilemmas that accompanied the age of the Popular Front. As mentioned above, this study is not the first to investigate the relations between proletarian writings, innovative aesthetics and the Popular Front. My argument diverges from preceding scholarship, however, in my insistence that these novels not only show sympathy for the Popular Front political paradigm, but also raise queries about its limits, which we will examine in the following section.

The Popular Front and Its Cultural Politics

In this section, I will analyze the cultural politics of the Popular Front, a broad social coalition formed against the reign of Fascism, emerged in 1935. As recent revisionary scholarship has explored, it has had a huge influence on the ways in which people think of culture and politics in the US. In the cultural politics of the Popular Front, I identify three major conceptual outcomes: 1) The Popular Front movement fostered what Michael Denning calls the “laboring of American culture,” that is, a shared sense of struggle among different social groups. In this instance, significantly, the notion of labor was severed from specific relations of production, that is, from having anything to do with the accumulation of capital. 2) With the rise
of the Popular Front, the slogan for solidarity changed from the worker to the people. Consequently, the problematics of economic class came to be undervalued. 3) This transformation of class issues into cultural issues also affected how we might view the notion of typicality. While typicality was a way through which to imagine a totality of historical processes, the Popular Front’s cultural pluralism eventually came to view categories such as “proletariat” and “the working class” not dialectically in terms of their antagonistic relations to the bourgeoisie but in light of incommensurable, cultural differences, which negated the idea of typicality.

Recently, revisionary cultural historians have examined the influence of the Popular Front movement on American culture from the 1930s onward. Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front* is a pioneering study in this field. Denning rejects a core-periphery model of understanding the Popular Front—such as the view that it was led by the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and fellow travelers. Instead, he defines it as “a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching” (4). Within this broad political coalition, Denning sees the encounter between “a powerful democratic social movement” and “the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education” (xviii). Significantly enough, he then finds in the Popular Front’s influences “less a story of political divisions than of cultural continuities” (26). Regarding the culture of the Popular Front as “a structure of feeling,” Denning insists on the spread of what he calls “the laboring of American culture,” that is, a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture—“the Popular Front ‘flavor’ of American mass culture” (26, xvi-xvii, 50). Then, he asserts that the “laboring of American culture” survived the official end of the Popular Front,
which was marked by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact, well into the post-WWII period.

As with Denning, Vials sees the Popular Front as “something that moved far beyond its Communist origins to assume a life of its own within American culture” (xxvii). He argues that one of the characteristics of the Popular Front was the way it facilitated the development of cultural pluralistic visions that lay over different ethnicities and races. This change had much to do with the way the Popular Front adopted “the people” as its slogan instead of “the worker” (xxvii). According to Vials, for instance, when Earl Browder, then the President of CPUSA, made it clear that the status of working decided whether one would be included in the category of the people, he carefully avoided defining the nature of that work, thereby making the category inclusive of different races, ethnicities, genders and income levels (xxvii). In this vein, Vials suggests that the turbulent decades of the 1930s and 1940s were “not as nearly as class-centered as previously assumed,” claiming that cultural producers in this period often tried to “articulate race, class, and ethnicity [...] without privileging one category over the other” (xxviii).

Denning’s and Vials’s studies insightfully cast light on the hitherto under-attended influence that the Popular Front movement had on the cultural politics in the US, and both of them think highly of its achievements. It is also important to note, however, that the process of the “laboring of American culture” is conducted at the expense of something social, and that Denning’s and Vials’s arguments are not so much critical of the process as complicit with it. To begin with, although Denning privileges the process of “the laboring of American culture,” it is crucial that the very rhetoric of “the laboring of (American) culture” in fact culturalizes labor, that is, dissociates labor from a properly social domain of production. Indeed, even a cursory glance will reveal that this process of the “laboring of American culture” marks a great leap from socialist views on labor. Among the five characteristics that Denning signifies using this term,
the following seems to be of particular importance:

Finally, the laboring of American culture connotes a birthing of a new American culture, a second American Renaissance. But it was also a laboring in that this birth was painstaking and difficult. This was neither a revolution nor a coup d’état; it was not even a transformation. To labor is to plod, to be hampered, to pitch and roll in a storm. In all these senses, the cultural front was a laboring, an incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture, with hesitations, pauses, defeats, and failures. (xvii)

Here, it is noteworthy that this movement is no longer concerned with “a revolution,” “a coup d’état,” or even “a transformation.” Moreover, whereas the term “labor” was inseparably linked to the creation of value and the accumulation of capital in traditional socialist thinking, labor in this instance is entirely separated from concrete socioeconomic relations. What we witness here may be understood as a culturalization or psychologization of social relations. In other words, this is labor without capital, namely, labor that has nothing to do with the relations of production.9 Whereas Denning values the ways in which the terminology of working-class people—such as “labor,” “work,” “industry” and “toil”—deeply infiltrated American culture (xvi–xvii), the opposite might very well be said: with the rise of the Popular Front came a process of depoliticizing socialist concepts that facilitated the predominance of the revised concept of liberalism as allegedly ideology-free after the end of the WWII.

Additionally, it is important to note that the “laboring of American culture” in the age of the Popular Front served to attenuate the problematics of class—as the change of the slogan from

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9 For the concept of “labor without capital,” I owe much to Kevin Floyd’s The Reification of Desire (2009). Floyd examines Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity in terms of how she responds to Louis Althusser’s theory of the interpellated subject, arguing that “her reading of Althusser posits […] labor without capital,” that is, “a laboring subject severed from its own reproduction, severed from capital, and severed from the concrete social relations that constitute it (emphasis original, 96). For more on this issue, see Floyd, 79–119.
“the worker” to “the people” indicates. Although the achievements that Vials argues the Popular Front’s pluralistic politics accomplished—such as the criticism of white supremacy and patriarchy and the increased visibility of minority groups hitherto neglected in cultural representations—were without a doubt significant, it should not be overlooked that the tenets of the Popular Front ineluctably failed to criticize either capitalism or liberalism. In other words, solidarity between communists and liberals made it difficult for the leftists to radically criticize capitalist society. In this sense, although Denning’s and Vials’s studies are insightful, they seem inclined to downplay the fact that the Popular Front movement ultimately catered to middle-class liberals. Given that the predominance of liberalism after WWII inevitably led to the prioritization of the psychological and the cultural over the social, then it will be significant not only to look to the Popular Front’s achievements but also to recognize its limits, seeing this new movement as a preparatory stage of the postwar political and cultural climate. As Andrew C. Yerkes suggests, it is possible to consider that the “Popular Front communists and socialists” have in the end “replaced their critique of capitalist economic oppression with an integrationist populism” (61). Indeed, as Barbara Foley argues, with the Popular Front came “the literary leftists’ largely uncritical acceptance of an aesthetic theory that was essentially bourgeois rather than revolutionary,” that is, the theory of “positivist reflectionism,” which assumed that all a writer had to do was simply record his or her experiences (Radical 128).

Here, one may note that the concept of “typicality” was also affected in the late 1930s. In the course of explaining how the proletarian literary movement was profoundly inflected by the different ethnic working-class cultures of the US, Denning address an intriguing relation between Gold and Jack Conroy, whose novels, Jews without Money and The Disinherited, published in 1930 and 1934, respectively, were two of the widely read proletarian novels. The former, a
memoirs-like novel, portrays the experience of a little Jewish boy raised in New York, whereas the latter, to a certain extent also autobiographic, vividly depicts a working-class life in the Midwest during the 1920s and early 1930s, showing a variety of harsh workplaces such as a Missouri coal mine camp, a railroad shop, a steel mill, a rubber factory and a Detroit automobile assembly line. Notably, the reviews each writer wrote of the other’s literary work reveals, Denning says, “the cultural distance between the two major advocates of American Proletcult” (emphasis added 215). While Gold extolled Conroy’s The Disinherited, he nonetheless did not fully recognize Conroy’s workers, saying that these characters are not “typical” enough, but are “social sports and eccentrics” (Gold qtd. in Denning 215). Conroy, for his part, reads Gold’s Jews without Money with a particular focus on its portrayal of an ethnic culture of the Jewish people, with which he was unfamiliar. “Despite their common proletariat rhetoric,” Denning writes, “neither Gold nor Conroy was able to see the other’s world and characters as ‘typical,’ and these regional and ethnic divides manifest themselves throughout proletarian literature” (216).

The way Denning here charges the notion of typicality with words such as “cultural distance” and “regional and ethnic divides” indicates a change this notion underwent during the Popular Front era. Put simply, the concept of typicality is subsumed under the belief in the incommensurability of the particular. As George Lukács later elaborates, typicality is concerned not so much with abstract, transcendent generalization but with an embodiment of social paradoxes that become emergent in a specific historical period. In a genuinely realist literary text, in Lukács’s account, “each descriptive detail is both individual and typical,” pointing to “that fusion of the particular and the general” (“The Ideology” 43, 45). In contrast, Denning’s account of the typical prioritizes cultural differences over a sense of totality, the latter of which might be
adumbrated, however tenuously, by the notion of typicality. Foley points out that the labeling of “proletarian literature” and “working-class literature” can run the risk of “solidifying class as a demographic category, a positivist given,” when the term “proletariat” needs to be understood as a “dialectical category, defined in opposition to its counterpart, that is, ‘bourgeoisie’” (Marxist Literary Criticism Today 152). Put differently, the categories of proletariat and the working class should not be seen, as Foley writes, as indicating “a stand-alone category signifying not structural location but group experience defined by identity” (Marxist Literary Criticism Today 152). Indeed, in the Popular Front scheme, the category of proletariat is already grasped culturally, in terms of group identity or different ways of life, rather than seen as class that needs to be abolished.

To summarize, through the emergence of the Popular Front, an anti-Fascist broad political coalition, the relation between the social and the cultural underwent a significant change during the latter half of the 1930s. On the one hand, American culture incorporated the rhetoric of the working class, thereby generating a “flavor” of co-working—a feeling that people were sharing pain and difficulty—among different social groups and classes. On the other hand, the transformation of socioeconomic terms—such as labor, work, and toil—into cultural rhetoric has inevitably caused a gap between the social and the cultural, just as “the laboring of American culture” has nothing to do with capital or a socioeconomic transformation. In this process, the issue of labor came to be seen as something severed from the specifically economic domain of production. Furthermore, the alliance between the working class and the middle class inevitably made it difficult to fundamentally criticize the liberal, capitalist social system, failing to fully address the questions of poverty, exploitation, and property ownership. In this instance, categories such as “proletariat” and “the working class” came to be understood in terms of group
identity or cultural differences, rather than seen as a dialectical category in relation to its counterpart, the bourgeoisie. Here, the notion of typicality was regarded as almost unattainable, insofar as one’s particular situation could not go beyond various cultural differences surrounding her or him.

Chapter Summaries

The following chapters discuss Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wright’s *Native Son*, and McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in light of how their aesthetics responds to the above conceptual outcomes derived from the changing political climate of the Popular Front. On the one hand, these proletarian modernist texts complicate the inherited epistemology of naturalism by refusing to describe fictional characters simplistically as victims thoroughly determined by socioeconomic circumstances, even as they nevertheless show the ways in which social forces fundamentally condition their lived experiences. The individualistic portrayals of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*’s protagonist Bigger Thomas’s denial of the all-encompassing stories told by communist lawyer Boris Max as well as by the novel’s narrator, and an uncanny sense of community that lonely characters in *The Heart Is Lonely* uniquely convey, are all indicative of their distance from a reductive sort of base-structure determinism as well as from programmatic politics of some communists. These texts thus assume anti-totalitarian tones, which symptomatically suggest their affinity with the Popular Front paradigm. On the other hand, in a variety of ways, these texts also bear aesthetic facets which suggest that the endorsement of individualism or cultural diversity alone does not necessarily constitute their political goals. The alternating interchapters and narrative chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* show a dialectic between holism and individualism, between a macro-perspective on
social phenomenon and the specific characters’ lived experiences, without subjugating either of
these values to the other. Wright’s investment in the rhetoric of possession in *Native Son*
constitutes a radical critique of the notion of the individual defined as a subject of possession.
The ways in which McCullers deals with the theme of labor in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,
while symptomatically registering the shifting notion of labor in the Popular Front era, suggests
its limits as well. Written amid the political atmosphere in the late 1930s, in which it became
increasingly difficult to radically criticize capitalist social order, these proletarian modernist
works thus bespeak, I argue, aspirations to alternatives to the status quo as well as to dogmatic or
totalitarian sort of politics.

In Chapter 1, “Beyond dialectics of Holism and Individualism: The Politics of the
Alternating Interchapters and Narrative Chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath,*” I discuss Steinbeck’s
most critically and popularly acclaimed work *The Grapes of Wrath*, examining its unique
narrative structure in terms of the relation between individualism and holism. Describing the
predicament of migrant farmers challenged by the disaster of the Dust Bowl and deprived of
their traditional ways of life, the novel is usually thought to epitomize the images of America in
the “Red Thirties,” namely, the age of labor disputes and prevailing communism. What
distinguishes *The Grapes of Wrath* from Steinbeck’s preceding, more straightforward proletarian
novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) is, however, the former’s innovative narrative structure, that is,
the use of interchapters, called “Steinbeck’s great formal experiment” (Owens 109). *The Grapes
of Wrath* is structured around the interaction between the interchapters and the narrative chapters,
that is, between the author’s depiction of anonymous farmer groups en route to California and
the story of the Joads as exemplary farmers. Reading through the interchapters, readers see the
farmer's domestic migration as a large-scale social phenomenon of a nation, whereas in the
narrative chapters, we see the phenomenon in a more personal, intimate, and concrete level. Earlier studies on the relation between the two sorts of chapters tend to see the Joads in the narrative chapters as representative of the mass of migrants in the interchapters, assuming certain seamless connections between them.

Intriguingly enough, however, Steinbeck depicts the main characters in the novel’s narrative chapters as individualist and rather strange, far from being typical. To draw just a few examples, the protagonist Tom Joad has been just released from McAlester prison, to which he was sent for murder; Rose of Sharon assumes that she and her fetus are at the center of the universe; the Joads’ eldest son Noah leaves his family for good due to his utterly unconvincing intuition; and Grampa and Granma are diehard individualists who are never going to change their behaviors. Why is it important for a novel with apparently socialist commitments to portray individualist and atypical characters in its story? How does the interchapters’ commitment to statistical observation and typicality relate to the narrative chapters’ aesthetics, whose espousal of individuality and idiosyncrasy seem to be disharmonious with it? In what way does the novel’s aesthetic relate to naturalist determinism?

Here, it is illuminating to look to Steinbeck’s biological philosophy, to which critics often refer in discussing his works. Steinbeck’s ideas have mainly two aspects: non-teleological thinking and phalanx theory. The former refers to an attitude toward observing things “as they are,” as opposed to teleological thinking, which seeks to explain things through causal nexuses. The latter theory assumes that a group is an entity different from the mere sum of its members and that this unit of group-men could move according to its own will. Although some critics have already discussed Steinbeck’s novels through his philosophies, they tend to focus on the
natural order of living things for survival. Of particular importance, however, is that Steinbeck considers non-teleological thinking and phalanx theory to be also instrumental in explaining socio-political phenomena in his days, including the rise of fascism. He suggests that the emergence of Nazis can be an expression of the phalanx, or, group-men. Furthermore, he was also afraid that communist mass-mobilization might constitute another form of phalanx, which could lead to fascism if they ignored individuals’ creativity and wills. Hence, while deeply sympathetic to the plight of migrant farmers and aware of the need for certain collective actions, Steinbeck had difficulty in aligning himself with communists’ agitation activities. For him, the best way to resist the repressive forces of the phalanx resided in the creativity of individuals. At the same time, he was also fully aware that in order to change the harsh conditions of migrant workers, it was necessary to present a macro-picture of socioeconomic situations surrounding them and thereby to call for certain collective actions. Therefore, he relied on the insights of statistical data made newly available by the New Deal administration in his attempt to show a macro picture of vast domestic migration. The statistical information made it possible for the writer to present a social picture in a non-teleological way, that is, in a way fully resonant with his non-teleological thinking.

From this perspective, we can shed new light on *The Grapes of Wrath*’s narrative structure. Earlier studies on the relationship between the interchapters and the narrative chapters have by and large concurred that the novel as a whole constitutes “an organic unity” (Levant, 51) that obfuscates differences between the interchapters and narrative chapters, not fully explaining why

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10 For instance, Lester Jay Marks points out that Ma Joad, who often contributes to the survival of the Joads, embodies a non-teleological observer in a group when she is “as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 74). As for phalanx theory, Peter Lisca reads an analogy between the turtle and the migrant farmers, both of whom vigorously head southwest. Lisca claims that the turtle in the interchapters symbolizes the Joads in the plot, who in turn symbolizes the mass migrants in the former, so that producing “the link of community” (*The Dynamics of Community,*” 91).
interchapters as the mode of narrative alternative to narrative chapters are necessary and indispensable. In contrast, my point is that the two sorts of chapters can be read in a mutually opposing, strained relationship rather than as complementary to each other. Whereas the interchapters describe anonymous farmers as examples of “average Americans,” that is, as the actuarial objects of New Deal statistics, the narrative chapters offer to the reader the depiction of particular living creatures named the Joads, who symbolize the value of individualism. In other words, while the interchapters present a holistic, statistical reality of the social phenomena, the narrative chapters depict another reality on the level of lived experiences, stressing the inviolability of the individual wills. In this way, *The Grapes of Wrath* refuses to reduce one of its contradictory values to the other. In fact, the novel’s naturalism has generally been examined in terms of the sense of inevitability that the interchapters bring over the following narrative chapters. If we understand the relation between the two chapters as in tension, however, it becomes possible to see how the novel intervenes in a naturalist epistemology centered on determinism. Ultimately, the novel’s proletarian modernist aesthetic “mediates,” on the level of form, the political conundrums that concerned the writer. Moreover, in this context, I will attempt a new reading of the ending scene, which concludes with Rose of Sharon giving her milk to a dying, anonymous stranger.

Chapter 2 “‘I Don’t Own Any Property’: Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and the Rhetoric of Possession” will explore Wright’s *Native Son* in light of how its aesthetics addresses the problematics of property and ownership relations. Wright structures the whole novel through the theme of possession, including the issue of homeownership, which determines the relation between the protagonist Bigger Thomas, an African-American proletariat, and the Daltons, a capitalist family for whom he serves. After accidentally killing the Daltons’ only daughter Mary,
Bigger feels that he has for the first time in his life gained certain sense of freedom; however, a close reading of the novel reveals that Bigger’s seemingly new agency derives from the sense that he possesses something of his own, that is, the sense that he exclusively owns the truth of Mary’s death. At the same time, Wright shows us that Bigger is in this instance also possessed by his possession of Mary’s death, when the protagonist just cannot get rid of the image of Mary’s dead body before his eyes. Furthermore, the issue of possession also involves the naturalist narrative form of the novel, a form in which a third-person, supposedly omniscient narrator tells characters’ lives from the outside in ways that the characters would never be able to do. Significantly, Wright provocatively foregrounds the politics of this narrative form by harnessing free indirect discourse to convey Bigger’s sense that his narrative is possessed by someone else.

Focusing on the ways in which Native Son centers on the rhetoric of possession, I will read the novel as a critique of what political scientist C. B. Macpherson calls possessive individualism. Since the emergence of market society in the seventeenth century, Macpherson explains, modern political theory has been built on the concept of the individual characterized in terms of its possessive quality. The individual was defined in this age first and foremost as owner of himself, so that human essence came to be understood as residing in the freedom to possess as well as in the ownership of property. Native Son, a novel structured through the theme and rhetoric of possession, should be read, I will argue, as a critique of this sort of formation of modern subjectivity and of the capitalist property relations lying at the basis of it.

This focus on Native Son’s commitment to the issue of property and ownership will enable us to reconsider the novel’s scholarship that has been split into two camps, that is, as we saw above, those who regard the novel as naturalism/protest fiction and those who understand it in
light of existentialism. As Goldstein’s aforementioned essay succinctly puts, one group of critics emphasize the ways in which the social circumstances of Chicago determine Bigger’s destiny, situating the novel within the tradition of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser and John Steinbeck; on the other hand, the other camp stress some occasions in which Bigger seems to gain certain agency and self-determination, aligning the novel with Zola Neale Hurston’s contemporary modernist novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Wright’s next novel *The Outsider* (1953), which was written in France and clearly much more existentialist. In making their cases, however, both naturalist/protest and existentialist interpretations are inclined to downplay or simply dismiss the elements of *Native Son* that do not fit well their frameworks. For those who read the novel as a naturalist or protest work, its ending scene, in which Bigger defies his well-meaning lawyer Borris Max’s narrative, merely indicates a “dogged return to [Bigger’s] original delusion […] that his act of murder was an escape from oppression” (Burgum 73-74); on the other hand, if critics want to understand the novel as existentialist, they have to underscore Bigger’s achievement of “an understanding of and a psychological control” of “massive environmental forces” (Butler 56), thereby underestimating the influence of social forces on Bigger and other characters.

If, however, we note the ways in which Bigger’s subjectivity, including even the ostensibly existential one, is constituted thoroughly in terms of dis/possession, it will become possible to extend the naturalist interpretation of *Native Son* in such a way as to explain its seemingly existentialist aspects. I thus intervene in the preceding scholarship on the novel by expanding the naturalist/protest interpretation in light of Wright’s modernist deployment of the rhetoric of possession and property, in an effort to mediate the split between critics. Moreover, I also clarify how Wright complicates the naturalist third-person narrative voice by charging it
with the issue of narrative possession.

Chapter 3 “Between the Cultural and the Social: Carson McCullers’s The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and the Theme of Labor” reads McCullers’s first novel with a particular emphasis on how it handles the issue of labor. Given the author’s literary career, the novel is rather exceptional, since this is virtually her last proletarian novel. Indeed, during the 1930s, the author was familiar with the writings of Karl Marx and other social thinkers, growing highly aware of the problem of capitalist system as well as of the predicament of the millworkers in her hometown. Yet she never again committed herself to describing socialist issues after writing her first novel. Clearly, we can find a close affinity between McCullers’s literary career and the changing political and critical situations from the late 1930s onward. In this light, it is illuminating to probe the ways in which her abiding concern about inner solitude merges with the socioeconomic issues specific to the Depression era, exploring the author’s historical consciousness as inscribed within the novel. Focusing on the theme of labor, I argue that the text bears both the Marxist understanding of labor and the Popular Front mode of the “laboring of American culture,” and that it symptomatically registers the structure of feeling that gradually came to prioritize the latter over the former.

At first glance, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter’s fragmentary narrative voice, which always focuses on one of the main characters—Singer, Jake, Copeland, Mick and Biff—without offering any all-encompassing perspective, seems to have little to with naturalist epistemology. However, McCullers presents the novel’s central relations, that is, the one-way relations between John Singer, a deaf-mute, and the other four main characters, as fundamentally conditioned by the socioeconomic situations in which they are placed. The principal characters seek to imagine Singer as they hope him to be, projecting their desires onto him, and McCullers clearly describes
how their social alienation determines their behaviors, subjectivities and desires, writing her novel within the tradition of literary naturalism. The way McCullers has Dr. Copeland, an African-American Marxist intellectual, deliver a speech on the labor theory of value to his audience unmistakably indicates that the author understands to what extent relations of production matter in capitalist society.

Of particular importance, however, is that McCullers ultimately limns how it is unfeasible to build solidarity, based on Marxist perspectives, between oppressed people in the fictional mill town in the Deep South, where people thwart each other. Although the two Marxists, Copeland and Jake, only once have an opportunity to exchange their political views at length, they end up quarrelling. It is crucial here that McCullers presents Copeland’s and Jake’s different political ideas and ideologies as different cultures, or different ways life. While McCullers does employ naturalist determinism in describing the central character relations in the novel, the narrative voice in the end treats their different socioeconomic standpoints as different cultures, predicated on assuming the incommensurability of the particular. In this instance, the issues of working environment and labor have already become separated from the specific domain of production.

At the same time, this attenuated sense of labor, in fact, also informs the sense of commonality that McCullers’s “freakish” characters uniquely convey to the readers. By representing characters’ feelings of alienation and resistance as entangled with the rhetoric of labor, the author enables her text to emit a shared sense of struggle. Yet, this sense of co-working has nothing to do with the relations of production, or specific socioeconomic relations. In this way, The Heart Is Lonely Hunter’s proletarian modernist aesthetics bears witness to the shifting notion of labor in the Popular Front age, symptomatically embodying the contemporary structure of feeling. Yet, the ending scene, which describes the meditation of Biff Brannon, a middle-class
owner of New York Café, can be read as providing the novel’s middle class readers a way to critically reflect on the trajectory of history.
Chapter 1

Beyond Dialectics of Holism and Individualism:

The Politics of the Alternating Interchapters and Narrative Chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*[^11]

It is well known that John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* evolved from his research on the plight of the migrant workers’ camps in the California Central Valley. In 1936, after Steinbeck published *In Dubious Battle*, a novel dealing with a fruit-workers’ strike in the apple orchards in a fictional California valley, George West, an editorial writer for the *San Francisco News*, asked him to write a series of articles on the dust bowl migration. Steinbeck eagerly accepted the offer and began visiting squatters’ camps in the summer of 1936. His articles appeared as the “Harvest Gypsies” series in the *San Francisco News*, running from October 5 through 12, 1936. It was out of this material and the additional personal observation and research, mostly provided by Tom Collins, manager of a federal migrant labor camp in this region, that Steinbeck developed his masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (Benson True Adventure 338-47; Railsback and Meyer 82).

In one of the “Harvest Gypsies” articles, Steinbeck attempts to show “what a typical [camp] looks like” (26). After depicting three anonymous families in the camp, the writer concludes the article as follows:

This is the squatter camp. Some are a little better, some much worse. I have described three typical families. In some of the camps there are as many as three hundred families like these. Some are so far from water that it must be bought at five

[^11]: An early version of this chapter was originally published as Kenji Kihara, “Ko to shūgō no benshōhō no kanata ni: Nyūdīru-riberarizumu to Ikari no budō,” *Studies in American Literature*, no. 49, 2012, pp. 1-18.
cents a bucket.

And if these men steal, if there is developing among them a suspicion and hatred of well-dressed, satisfied people, the reason is not to be sought in their origin nor in any tendency to weakness in their character. (*The Harvest Gypsies* 31)

Even if these migrant people commit theft or develop antagonistic feelings toward the privileged, Steinbeck here claims, the readers should never take these are innate characteristics. Obviously, Steinbeck draws readers’ attention instead to the socio-economic conditions within which migrants are situated. Additionally, and more significantly, Steinbeck here draws upon statistical language when he observes that “there are as many as three hundred families” like these “three typical families.” Given that Steinbeck had a considerable interest in statistical observation, as I will discuss later, it is possible to infer here that he harnesses statistical reasoning to insist on the probability or inevitability of certain unfavorable attitudes, as a sort of corollary of these people’s harsh living conditions, thus inducing the readers of his articles to change the status quo as well as their views on these people.

Curiously, these “typical” families in the “Harvest Gypsies” series make a sharp contrast to the Joads, who are the main characters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel that originated from these newspaper articles and related research, for the novel portrays the Joads as rather atypical people. The protagonist Tom Joad has just been paroled from the McAlester prison, where he was imprisoned for homicide. The eldest son Noah, a mysterious man, is told to have “lived in a strange silent house and looked out of it through calm eyes” (78-9). Uncle John, in Tom’s eyes, is “[c]razy kind of son-of-a-bitch” (68). Grampa is “[v]icious and cruel and impatient, like a frantic child” (77). Even Casy, who later suffers martyrdom on account of his faith in people’s solidarity, appears at first as “a funny fella,” who “[t]alks funny all the time” as if “talkin’ to
hisself” (93). Moreover, as I will examine later, these characters are shaped as individualists. To cite one example of Rose of Sharon, who is pregnant from the novel’s beginning, “[h]er whole thought and action were directed inward on the baby,” and “the world was pregnant to her; she thought only in terms of reproduction and of motherhood” (95). Thus, the ways in which The Grapes of Wrath represents its main characters as “funny” or “strange” people equipped with individualistic attitudes seem to run counter to the images of “typical” families in the above article.

On the other hand, the description of “typical” migrant families in the “Harvest Gypsies” article is fully resonant with the images of migrants shown in The Grapes of Wrath’s interchapters. One of the things that makes The Grapes of Wrath such a compelling novel, then, is the interaction between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, called “Steinbeck’s great formal experiment” (Owen 109), that is, the relationship between the author’s depiction of anonymous farmer groups en route to California and the story of the Joads as the exemplary farmers. Reading through the interchapters, we see the farmer’s domestic migration as a large-scale social phenomenon of a nation, while in the narrative chapters, the readers witness the phenomenon at a more personal, intimate, and concrete level. The interchapters, drawing upon statistical data, always seeks to show a macro-picture of farmers’ migration: “And the dispossessed, the migrants, flowed into California, two hundred and fifty thousand, and three hundred thousand” (233). In this vein, the interchapters depict the experiences of migrant people often in statistical terms, as in Chapter 17: “And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awestruck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning” (193). Unmistakably, there is a continuity between the perspectives of the “Harvest
Gypsies” articles and The Grapes of Wrath’s interchapters in terms of their shared interest in statistical observation and in their general perspectives on these migrant workers.

Here, a series of questions must be raised. Why is it important for a novel with apparently socialist commitments to limn individualist and atypical characters in its story? How does the interchapters’ commitment to statistical observation and typicality relate to the narrative chapters’ aesthetics, whose endorsement of individuality and idiosyncrasy seem to be disharmonious with it? How does the aesthetics of The Grapes of Wrath relate to the epistemology of literary naturalism?

In order to explore these questions, this chapter looks to Steinbeck’s idiosyncratic philosophy, which derives from his experiences in marine biology. Two main aspects characterize his ideas: non-teleological thinking and phalanx theory. The former refers to an attitude toward observing things as they are, as opposed to teleological thinking that seeks to explain things through causal nexuses. Steinbeck characterizes non-teleological thinking as based on statistical, detached observations. The phalanx theory assumes that individuals can be turned into a group entity different from the mere sum of its members, and that this entity operates according to its own will. That is, Steinbeck views the phalanx, or group-men, to be a creature following its own laws.

It has become a common scholarly procedure to discuss The Grapes of Wrath in relation to the author’s unique biological ideas. Some critics note the analogy between men and animals, whereas others indicate the biblical messages in the novel. To be sure, the novel seems to be permeated by images that allow for such readings. These readings, however, are inclined to overlook the way Steinbeck assumes that phalanx-theory might apply to contemporary

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12 For the former arguments, see Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck; Benson; and Conder. For the latter arguments, see Ditsky, “The Ending of The Grapes of Wrath”; Railton; and Owen. Lester Jay Marks treats both aspects as main themes of Steinbeck.
socio-political climates, including a variety of mass movements and the rise of fascism, and the way he values non-teleological thinking particularly for what seems to be its immunity from ideological manipulation.

It is important, therefore, to note the historicity of the novel as well as of Steinbeck’s ideas, both of which were shaped in the specific socio-political situations of the 1930s. In fact, Steinbeck’s philosophy, as I will discuss, can be understood as inexorably linked to his reflections on political affiliation in the age of political upheavals. Confronted with the rise of fascism and various incidents of mass-mobilization, he had a keen interest in the relations between groups and individuals. Steinbeck suggests that the emergence of Nazis is an expression of the phalanx, or, group-men. Moreover, he was also afraid that Communist mass-mobilization might be another form of phalanx, which could lead to fascism if it ignored individuals’ creativity and free wills. Therefore, while deeply sympathetic to the predicament of migrant farmers and aware of the need of certain collective actions, he, nevertheless, had difficulty in following the Communists’ agitation. Additionally, he was highly skeptical of teleological thinking, a way of thinking through causal nexuses, fearing that it could make people self-righteous and thus susceptible to ideological manipulations. Non-teleological thinking was of particular value for Steinbeck, then, because its scientific, detached observation seemed to him to make it possible to comprehend social situations without taking this risk.

From this perspective, this chapter aims to revisit the relation between the interchapters and the narrative chapters of The Grapes of Wrath. Earlier studies on the relationship between the two different sorts of chapters have been mostly limited to the claims that they are organically united, or mutually reinforcing.\textsuperscript{13} On the contrary, my point is that these two sorts of

\textsuperscript{13} For earlier studies on the relationship between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, see Conder, 125-32; Foley, 416-20; Levant, 46-51; Lisca, “The Dynamics of Community in The Grapes Wrath,” 87-97; Owen, 109-11;
chapters can be read as being in a mutually opposing, strained relationship rather than a complementary one. The tension-filled relation, I will demonstrate, is ineluctably entwined with Steinbeck’s reflection on political affiliations, and is an aesthetic expression of it. Furthermore, I will offer a new way to interpret the last scene of The Grapes of Wrath, revealing the way the ending seeks to mediate two opposing values represented in the two sorts of chapters.

This approach will enable us to reconsider the relation of the novel to literary naturalism. Critics have often examined the novel’s investment in naturalism in terms of the relations between the interchapters and the narrative chapters. Since the interchapters frequently anticipate what will happen in the Joad narrative chapters, readers typically find certain patterns and repetitions there that hold throughout the novel. As Charles L. Etheridge Jr. succinctly summarizes, “an intercalary chapter will introduce an event that is happening to a broad section of society, and the event will be ‘doubled’ or repeated in a later Joad section” (669). This structure thus creates a sense of inevitability. Since “[a]gain and again what will happen next is made narratively inescapable,” Stephen Railton asserts, the novel is “structured as a series of inevitabilities” (32). Therefore, critics point to a strain of naturalist determinism that structures the whole novel. If, however, we see the two sorts of chapters as existing in tension, rather than complimenting one another, it will become possible to clarify how the novel complicates naturalist epistemology in accordance with the author’s rumination on the relations between group and individual, between holism and individualism.

and Railton, 27-33.
14 For the review and analysis of the preceding scholarship on the relation of The Grapes of Wrath to literary naturalism, see Etheridge, Jr. and Gibbs.
15 This study is not new in reconsidering The Grapes of Wrath’s relation to naturalist determinism. Indeed, as Alan Gibbs puts, “In the seventy years since the publication of The Grapes of Wrath, the extent of the influence of Naturalism upon the work and the quality of Steinbeck’s naturalistic discourse has been frequently debated” (687). This study, however, diverges from preceding scholarship in arguing for a mutually opposing, strained relation between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, and in analyzing this relation through reconsidering Steinbeck’s philosophy within the contemporary political climate.
In short, this chapter is an attempt to explore *The Grapes of Wrath*, with an emphasis on the relationship between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, through reconsidering Steinbeck’s philosophy in light of his rumination on mass politics. In what follows, first of all, I analyze Steinbeck’s phalanx theory and non-teleological thinking in terms of his anti-fascist and anti-communist attitudes. Through this analysis, I will clarify how this philosophy constitutes his response to the contemporary political climate as he saw it. Against the coercive forces of the phalanx, or group men, he upheld the value of individualism, which he saw as the most effective way to resist them. At the same time, however, he was also deeply aware of the necessity to show, in a non-teleological way, a macro-vision on the migrant farmers’ plight, so as to convince readers that their harsh situations should be understood not as stemming from their own faults or innate traits but as fundamentally conditioned by socioeconomic structures. In order to make this possible, Steinbeck decided to count on statistical data, newly available at that time. In the wake of this analysis, I will examine the text of *The Grapes of Wrath*, focusing on the structural differences between the interchapters and the narrative chapters, highlighting the tension between the collective understandings and the value of individualism, respectively represented in the two sorts of chapters.

Steinbeck’s Biological Philosophy and the Thirties Politics

The philosophy reflected in Steinbeck’s works, epitomized by phalanx theory and non-teleological thinking, is considered to have derived mainly from his experiences in marine biology. In 1930, he met Edward Ricketts, a marine biologist who owned and operated the Pacific Biological Laboratory on the Monterey waterfront and who was to be one of the writer’s closest friends (Benson 183-99). Steinbeck and Ricketts kept up an intimate friendship for nearly
two decades. Ricketts’s ideas influenced the writer so much so that Steinbeck himself asserts that their relationship was too close to “know whose thought it was,” that is, his own or Ricketts’s.16

Steinbeck explains the important components of his philosophy lucidly in The Sea of Cortez, a log co-written by Steinbeck and Ricketts. In this book, Steinbeck defines non-teleological thinking, the first characteristic of his ideas, as follows:

Non-teleological ideas derive through “is” thinking, associated with natural selection as Darwin seems to have understood it. They imply depth, fundamentalism, and clarity—seeing beyond traditional or personal projections. [...] Non-teleological thinking concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually “is”—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why. (emphasis original 135)

That is, non-teleological thinking, explains Steinbeck, is an attitude that seeks to observe things objectively and accept them as they are, with a view to gaining a correct picture of things. He counterposes this mode of thinking to “teleological thinking,” which attempts to explain everything through “the evaluation of causes and effects, the purposiveness of events” (134). Teleological thinking may do more harm than good, Steinbeck goes on to maintain, because it “presupposes the bettering of conditions, often, unfortunately, without achieving more than a most superficial understanding of those conditions” (134-35). One might well ask, however, what makes it possible to grasp “what actually ‘is’”?

Significantly enough here, Steinbeck, in an effort to insist on the effectiveness of non-teleological thinking, describes it as statistical. “[W]hen even the most definitely apparent cause-effect situations are examined in the light of wider knowledge,” he observes, “the

16 Steinbeck, The Log from Sea of Cortez, xlv. The book is composed of The Sea of Cortez (New York: Viking Press, 1941) and a newly written preface that is a memorial address for Ed Ricketts, who passed away in 1948.
cause-effect aspect comes to be seen as less rather than more significant, and the statistical or relational aspects acquire larger importance” (141). Thus, “It seems safe to assume that non-teleological is more ‘ultimate’ than teleological reasoning” (141). In this instance, Steinbeck prioritizes non-teleological thinking over teleological thinking on the ground that the “wider knowledge” gained from the former’s “statistical” observations offers more accurate accounts than the “cause-effect aspect” of the latter does. In this way, he characterizes non-teleological thinking in terms of its rejection of preexisting notions and its commitment to statistical observation.

Steinbeck’s philosophy has another significant aspect, called phalanx theory. Put simply, this theory assumes that individuals could be transformed into a group entity and that this entity acts with a will of its own, rather than in accordance with its members’ wills. Again in *The Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck explains the relation between a group and its components, using an example of marine creatures: “There are colonies of pelagic tunicates which have taken a shape like the finger of a glove. Each member of the colony is an individual animal, but the colony is another individual animal, not at all like the sum of its individuals. […] Here are two animals” (165). The unit of a group and the unit of individuals that compose it, in Steinbeck’s account, are two distinct entities.

While it may be true that Steinbeck obtained these ideas—non-teleological thinking and phalanx theory—chiefly from his experiences of marine biology, it is crucial that he also considers them instrumental for understanding contemporary socio-political climates. Indeed, phalanx theory, as Charles Williams aptly observes, “colored Steinbeck’s political views throughout the thirties” (“Group Man” 132). As Steinbeck scholar and biographer Jackson J.

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17 For an understanding of Steinbeck’s political attitudes and its relation to his phalanx theory, I owe much to Jackson Benson’s biography and Charles Williams’s recent essays. My discussion diverges from theirs, however, in
Benson writes, the early thirties, in which Steinbeck first conceived of his phalanx theory, were “a time when mass movements were much discussed” and when “strikes, veterans’ marches, protest rallies, and other mass demonstrations were commonplace news” (*True Adventure* 269). In a 1933 letter to his former Stanford roommate Carlton A. Sheffield, Steinbeck shows one of his earliest attempts to articulate his ideas on the phalanx: “The fascinating thing to me is the way the group has a soul, a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction and a set of tropisms which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group” (*Letters* 76). Then, in the same letter, Steinbeck goes on to write that this view can be “an explanation of so many mysterious things,” including “how Genghis Khan and Attila and the Goths suddenly stopped being individual herdsmen and hunters and became, almost without transition, a destroying creature obeying a single impulse” (77). He even applies this idea to the emergence of the Nazis, when he also suggests that the impulse of this group entity, the phalanx, “has suddenly made Germany overlook the natures of its individuals and become what it has” (77). Obviously, the concept of phalanx matters so much to Steinbeck because this seems to give him the key to understanding various historical incidents of violence and, above all, the contemporary rise of fascism. This idea can be also seen in another 1933 letter, addressed to George Albee, Steinbeck’s friend and fellow writer. It reads, “And the phalanx has emotions of which the unit man is incapable,” that is, “[e]motions of destruction, of war, of migration, of hatred, of fear” (80).

Of particular importance for the purpose of this chapter is that Steinbeck also associates this concept of the phalanx with social protest movements and labor movements. In the same arguing that Steinbeck’s anti-fascist attitude and ambivalence to Communism led to his non-teleological thinking as well, and in exploring non-teleological thinking in light of Steinbeck’s interest in statistical technology. From this perspective, I will analyze in detail the tension-filled balance between the interchapters and the narrative chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*. 
letter to George Albee, he also writes: “You have heard about the trickiness of the MOB. Mob is simply a phalanx, but if you try to judge a mob nature by the nature of its men units, you will fail as surely as if you tried to understand a man by studying one of his cells” (80). Although it remains ambiguous what kind of movements Steinbeck designates by the term “mob,” the way he links this term to phalanx, just like in the case of fascism, seems to convey his misgivings about social protest movements in general. It is not that, of course, Steinbeck was apathetic to a variety of socioeconomic problems at that time, such as unemployment, poverty, and dislocation; however, he seems to have been ambivalent about any active commitment to the labor movement, and he instead preferred detached, or non-teleological, observations. Indeed, writing again to Albee in 1935, while he was working on the manuscript of *In Dubious Battle*, a strike novel, Steinbeck says, “I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s wages and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition” (98).

Consequently, *In Dubious Battle*, published in 1936, became one of the most salient expressions of Steinbeck’s ambivalence toward labor movements, and he expresses this attitude by means of the phalanx theory and non-teleological thinking. Indeed, the novel’s title itself indicates the author’s own political misgivings, insofar as the meaning of “dubious” varies, as Morris Dickstein points out, “from ‘of doubtful purpose’ to ‘uncertain in outcome’” (78). This strike novel describes labor organizers’ attempts to organize apple pickers in the fictional Torgas Valley in California. Mac McLeod, an experienced Communist labor organizer, and Jim Nolan, his acolyte, together travel to Torgas Valley in order to rouse migrant farmworkers to launch a strike against the tremendous wage cut by the Grower’s Association. Gradually gaining confidence of farmworkers, Mac and Jim successfully carry out a strike at an apple orchard,
demanding for a wage raise. While the workers conduct the strike, Doc Burton, a medical doctor, arrives at their camp to take care of their sanitary conditions, in order to make it difficult for the state health officials to shut down the camp. Then, however, the negotiations between the migrant workers and the property owners break down, and workers’ situations increasingly grow worsened. In the end, Jim is shot to death by the vigilantes, and then his mentor Mac, placing Jim’s body on the platform, speaks to the workers, saying “Comrades! He didn’t want nothing for himself—,” drawing the novel to a close (269). While the novel’s overall tone is certainly critical of the ruthless practices of agri-businessmen dominating the Torgas Valley, Mac’s manipulative words such as “There’s nothing like a fight to cement the men together” (26) unmistakably convey Steinbeck’s skepticism about the justice of Communist organizers and about what he thought to be their somewhat self-righteous arguments.

In this novel, Steinbeck attempts to articulate his phalanx theory and non-teleological thinking through the figure of Doc, a medical doctor who wants to be a detached observer by maintaining distance from the strike Mac and Jim are leading. In contrast to Mac, who avers that “Revolution and communism will cure social injustice,” Doc, often regarded as a stand-in for Steinbeck or for his teacher Ricketts, speaks to the experienced Communist as follows: “I want to see the whole picture—as nearly as I can. I don’t want to put on the blinders of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and limit my vision. If I used the term ‘good’ on a thing I’d lose my license to inspect it, because there might be bad in it” (113). The way Doc here refrains from making a moral judgment in favor of approaching “the whole picture” obviously comes from Steinbeck’s non-teleological thinking, an attitude that rejects any presuppositions. Furthermore, Doc, in the same conversation with Mac, talks about his keen interest in observing what he calls “Group-men” (113):
I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn’t like him any more than the cells in your body are like you. I want to watch the group, and see what it’s like. People have said, “mobs are crazy, you can’t tell what they’ll do.” Why don’t people look at mobs not as men, but as mobs? A mob nearly always seems to act reasonably, for a mob.

(113-14)

Virtually reiterating the ideas Steinbeck articulates elsewhere in various letters as well as in The Sea of Cortez, Doc here refers to the phalanx, a group-entity that operates according to its own drive, specifically addressing “mobs.” Rather than actively committing himself to the strike as a member, the doctor thus wants to observe the phenomenon from outside. In other words, Doc prefers detachment to commitment, though he is certainly sympathetic to the migrant farmers. In this way, Doc, as a spokesman for Steinbeck, verbalizes non-teleological thinking and phalanx theory, distancing himself from the on-going event Mac and Jim are leading, and denouncing what he views as Mac and Jim’s sanctimonious—and teleological—attitudes.

In fact, it was Steinbeck’s repugnance for this sort of teleological views that led him to equate communism with fascism and to repudiate both of them at once. This becomes clear towards the end of The Sea of Cortez.

Ideas are not dangerous unless they find seeding place in some earth more profound than the mind. Leaders and would-be leaders are so afraid that the idea “communism” or the idea “Fascism” may lead to revolt, when actually they are ineffective without the black earth of discontent to grow in. The strike-raddled businessman may lean toward strikeless Fascism, forgetting that it also eliminates him. The rebel may yearn violently for the freedom from capitalist domination
expected in a worker’s state, and ignore the fact that such a state is free from rebels. In each case the idea is dangerous only when planted in unease and disquietude. But being so planted, growing in such earth, it ceases to be idea and becomes emotion and then religion. Then, as in most things teleologically approached, the wrong end of the animal is attacked. (emphasis original 258)

Without taking fully into account the substantial differences in theoretical content or motives between fascism and communism (for instance, “strikeless Fascism” and “the freedom from capitalist domination”), Steinbeck rejects both of them in the same manner, assuming that their “ideas,” if “planted in unease and disquietude,” will inexorably lead to “emotion” and then to “religion.” In other words, both fascism and communism looked “dangerous” in Steinbeck’s eyes, because they seemed to be equally committed to “teleological” thinking, thus potentially blinding individuals’ perspectives and suppressing their voices. This point clearly resonates to the way Doc, in In Dubious Battle, criticizes Mac and Jim’s organizing activities in terms of their seemingly self-righteous quality. Namely, Steinbeck understood both fascism and communism as expressions of what he calls phalanx, a group entity, and thought that its emergence could be facilitated by any kind of teleological ideas.

Against the reign of the phalanx, then, Steinbeck argued for the value of individualism. In his short essay titled “I am a Revolutionary,” published in Le Figaro in 1954, he responds to an article that viewed him as apolitical. Against this view, he contends that “I am a very dangerous revolutionary” (90). This is not because, he explains, he is a Marxist or communist, but because of his individualist thinking. Communists are reactionary, he asserts, because once their desired systems are established they always seek to maintain the status quo, brainwashing individuals and thus destroying their creativity, when creativity actually constitutes the only source of
change. Rather, he insists that a true revolution requires all people having “individual souls” (90). He thus declares, “I believe in and will fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction” (90). Although this post-war statement seems to be, at least to some extent, under the influence of Cold War politics, Steinbeck’s embrace of individualism was an enduring concern. As Benson observes: “A fairly accurate way of describing Steinbeck [...] is as an independent who valued individuality and strived for independence from any kind of system of thought that obscured his attempt to see the world as it actually was” (719-20). For Steinbeck, the best way to resist the phalanx, which he applied equally to fascism and communism, was to endorse the individual’s will and creativity.

One may understand the deficiency of Steinbeck’s phalanx theory as lying in its failure to register the historical specificities of each social group and event, and thus in decontextualizing and reifying the very phenomena that interest him. Charles Williams aptly summarizes this point: “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. Instead, Steinbeck subsumed radical labor organization under Stalinism and understood Stalinism as an expression of the phalanx. He reduced radical politics to subpolitical, irrational upheavals defined by the qualities of group men [...]” (“Group Man” 132-33). Or, put differently, Steinbeck here turns socio-political issues concerned with labor and solidarity into psychologized themes. Indeed, his interest about In Dubious Battle can be seen, as Dickstein rightly points out, as residing in “not Communism but Communists as character types, behavioral specimens” (86). In a 1936 letter to Louis Paul, Steinbeck confides his ambivalence about Communists, putting it in unabashedly subjective terms: “I don’t like communists either, I
mean I dislike them as people” (Letters 120). “[S]ome of these communist field workers,” he continues, “are strong, pure, inhumanly virtuous men. Maybe that’s another reason I personally dislike them and that does not rebound to my credit” (120). The wording—“strong, pure, inhumanly virtuous”—indicates that Steinbeck rejects what looks to him to be Communists’ sanctimoniousness even though he admits there is value in these people. In so doing, however, he understands Communists in terms of personality rather than in light of the specific content of their ideas or their political engagements.

All of this is not to say, of course, that Steinbeck was indifferent to the predicament of the farm workers he observed in California. Particularly after experiencing the aforementioned research for the San Francisco News in 1936, Steinbeck began to commit himself intensely to the problems of the Depression. During the period between this research in August 1936 and the next one for the flooding and starvation in Visalia in March 1938, he “not only went down into the trenches, as other committed thirties writers did, but grew horrified and helplessly indignant at the migrants’ living conditions” (Dickstein 127). Consequently, he came to “[know] the American small farmer and worker better than either the capitalists or the communists” (Benson The True Adventure 387). Even though he might have been unwilling to align himself with Communist organizers, it is unmistakable that he was eager to change the harsh situations surrounding migrant farmers. Steinbeck hoped to catalyze this change, however, in some way other than Mac and Jim’s communist agitation in In Dubious Battle—preferring, instead, an alternative, non-teleological way.

It is in this context that non-teleological thinking’s commitment to statistical observations assumes particular importance. Theoretically speaking, a social movement remains inconceivable unless one understands her/his situation as statistical—as part of people who are
disadvantaged by specific socio-economic conditions—rather than seeing one’s fate as entirely her/his own fault or as under God’s control. Karl Marx famously addressed this problematic in his 1852 book, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. (84)

Marx’s insights tell us that, in order for a class to be constituted we need certain mediations that foreground “the identity of their interests.” Though it is uncertain whether Steinbeck actually read this book, his experiences of the research in migrants’ camps in 1936 should have taught him that it is necessary to show, both for farm workers themselves and for a reading public, a larger picture of these migrants’ situations in California, in order to understand their interests and thus bring about corrective actions.

In order to achieve this goal, Steinbeck was able to draw upon the statistical data made newly available by the New Deal administration. As mentioned above, it was Tom Collins, a New Deal administrator managing Weedpatch Camp at Arvin, in Kern Country, that provided Steinbeck with the statistical information he used in writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. This New Dealer’s reports, which Steinbeck used “as a kind of handbook,” offered “numerous surveys, lists, polls, and investigations,” and Collins seemed to have “counted everything countable” (Benson *The True Adventure* 344, 141). Remarkably, Collins’s reports “always started off with statistics, giving detailed figures for the numbers of campers employed or unemployed, those
who were ill, campers who were destitute, those dismissed from camp, and so on” (Fender 171). One can surmise how much Steinbeck appreciated and respected Collins’s work from the fact that *The Grapes of Wrath* is dedicated to “Tom, who lived it” as well as to his wife Carol, “who willed the book,” as written.

In sum, it was crucial for Steinbeck to never let go of the wills and creativity of individuals who can resist the repressive forces of the phalanx, a group entity that operates with its own will and that he considered to lie at the core of fascism and communism. At the same time, he was also fully aware that in order to change the harsh conditions of migrant farmers, it was necessary to present a macro-picture of socioeconomic situations surrounding migrant workers and thereby to generate certain collective actions. Yet, since communism seemed to Steinbeck to be an ossified and teleological idea that could also lead to the phalanx, he was unable to set forth communist actions like Mac and Jim’s in *In Dubious Battle*. Then, it was the showing of statistical, non-teleological observations that he in the end relied on, in order to offer a broader understanding of migrants’ situations.

Steinbeck’s Philosophy and the New Deal Intellectual Discourse

These dual commitments—to the value of individualism and to the statistical comprehension of migrant farmers’ situations—seem to have eventually brought Steinbeck’s standpoint fairly close to that of New Deal liberalism. Initiated by the stock market collapse of 1929, the 1930s witnessed a broad debate over “the redefinition of freedom” (Foner 195). As historian Eric Foner writes, although opponents denounced the New Deal as “the greatest threat to individual freedom in American history,” most Americans came to accept, by the second term of the New Deal, the view that “freedom must encompass economic security, guaranteed by the
government” (205). And the New Deal’s Social Security Administration was built on the drastic development of statistical technology at that time.

Indeed, the period between 1933-1940 saw a radical alteration in the terms of the social debate and statistical tools informing it. Until the early twentieth century, unlike the European states, the United States “did not possess a permanent bureau of statistical administration” (Desrosières 195). Though a superintendent and provisional personnel were recruited at the time of each census, the group was disbanded once the work was finished. The age of the New Deal witnessed, then, “both the birth of a new manner of conceiving and managing the political, economic, and social imbalances of the federal American state, and a language in which to express this action” (Desrosières 199). Beneath this was the development of a series of statistical systems, such as the founding of Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services (COGSIS) by the Department of Labor, the validation of random sampling techniques, and the invention of econometrics. Notably, unemployment came to be viewed newly on a national scale. In fact, up to this time, the unemployment problem was administered locally (Desrosières 203-06, 190, 70).

The New Deal administrator Tom Collins’s government reports, whose statistical data Steinbeck drew on in creating The Grapes of Wrath, were in fact part of this technological and political transformation. In this respect, the novel is ineluctably embedded in New Deal liberalism’s politics, which sought to strike a balance between individual freedom and governing. During the New Deal period, intellectuals seriously debated the tension-filled relation between “activist government and the prerogatives of personal liberty,” the former of which was predicated on the development of statistical innovations (McCann 32). Likewise, Steinbeck counted on the usefulness of statistical data, including the New Deal reports by the Collins, while
embracing the value of individuals’ wills. Seen in this light, Steinbeck’s philosophy, which upheld both individualism and statistical observation, may well be understood less as idiosyncratic to the novelist than as deeply resonant with a broader intellectual trend of the liberalism at that time.

Here, it is instrumental to look to the politics of statistics, which Steinbeck must have faced in the process of writing his novel, drawing upon Alain Desrosières’s insightful study on this theme. Above all, two issues seem to be worth noting. First, the essence of statistical work lies in two processes of defining categories of equivalence and encoding. That is, statistics establishes “classes of equivalence” and then “appropriates singular cases into whole classes” (Desrosières 8). In order to make possible the comparison between what are, a priori, separate things, statistical work selects certain characteristics or elements out of particular objects to encode them. Second, the statistical mode of knowledge aims “to constitute and support realities of a superior level thus capable of circulating as synthetic substitutes for multiple things (the price index, for increases in products; the unemployment rate, for unemployed persons)” (70). In conducting this “magical transmutation” from one level of nominalist reality to a reality of the imagined whole, statistical works also involve “a transfer from one language to another (from unemployed persons to unemployment)” (70). Significantly, these two levels of reality “can exist in partly autonomous ways” (70).

It should be revealing to probe Steinbeck’s text in light of how he deals with these two levels of mutually autonomous realities, that is, a nominalist and individualist reality and another reality of synthesis. Echoing the politics of New Deal liberalism, Steinbeck was sympathetic both to individualism and statistical comprehension. As we will see below, The Grapes of Wrath is structured through this dialectic.
The Tension-Filled Relations between the Narrative Chapters and the Interchapters

*The Grapes of Wrath* describes the predicament of migrant farmers challenged by the disaster of the Dust Bowl and deprived of their traditional ways of life by capitalists, narrating the story of the Joad family. The Joads regrettably decide to abandon their homeland and to leave for California in search of better job opportunities. Once in California, however, they face the hostility of California residents and soon find that the situation is as tragic as in their home state, Oklahoma. California agri-businessmen have spread countless numbers of advertisements for farm workers, aiming at cutting down wages as low as possible. Gradually learning the mechanism through which migrants are exploited, the protagonist Tom Joad eventually calls for the solidarity of farm workers, though he disappears from the story after making up his mind. At the end of the novel, the Joads flee from a flood and evacuate to a dry barn for comfort. There, they meet a starving male stranger and his little son. To save the man, Rose of Sharon, who has just delivered a stillborn baby, decides to nurse him with her breast milk.

On top of this impressive plot, what makes *The Grapes of Wrath* singular lies in its experimental insertion of interchapters between its narrative chapters. It is often possible to see that the content of the interchapters corresponds to that of following narrative chapters. Both Chapter 9 and 10 come to an end, for instance, by describing migrant families leaving their country for California. Referring to this sequence, Howard Levant claims that “[t]he interchapters ‘locate’ and generalize the narrative chapters, somewhat like stage directions” (46). On the other hand, assuming *The Grapes of Wrath* to be “a novel about conversion” (29), Stephen Railton conversely argues that the interchapters enact their “own kind of oppression, and, by arousing in its readers a desire to fight this sense of inevitability, [they] works to arouse us
toward action to change the status quo” (32). As already addressed, this sense of inevitability has suggested for critics the novel’s investment in the epistemology of literary naturalism. These arguments, however, are predicated on the same presuppositions that the novel as a whole constitutes “an organic unity” that ignores the visible differences between the interchapters and narrative chapters, failing to fully explain why the interchapters as the mode of narrative alternative to the narrative chapters are necessary and indispensable (Levant 51).

The clearest differences of the interchapters from the narrative chapters reside in the ways the former always relate the narrative of unspecified farmers from an objective, detached, bird’s eye viewpoint. On the other hand, the story of the Joads, told in the narrative chapters, counters the interchapters with a more novelistic narrative filled with affects, anxieties and emotions of the Joads. In other words, the interchapters are an attempt to describe, in a non-teleological fashion, the population as a statistical entity as grasped by the New Deal. In contrast, the narrative chapters present a realistic story of specific individuals, who exist in an utterly different manner from the anonymous groups addressed in interchapters. It is true that the plot in the narrative chapters is to be read always in reference to narrative chapters that precede them; yet, the Joads are never simply a sample of migrant farmers, while the migrant people are not simply the mere sum of individuals.

Indeed, since we must recognize the individuality of the Joads, it is necessary to see that they cannot, therefore, be represented in the interchapters that depict anonymous farmers. It is not until readers realize the discontinuity between the interchapters and the narrative chapters that we understand why the Joads, in the latter, are portrayed in such a way as to particularly emphasize the value of individualism. Although Tom has just been released from the McAlester prison, he does not regret the murder he committed and declares if necessary he will “squash
[Herb Turnbull] down with a shovel again” (54). He does not seem to learn anything from his experience in prison, and contends that the prison is “jus’ a kind a way a drivin’ a guy slowly nuts” (177). Tom’s killing makes his brother Al feel somehow proud, because it allows him to evoke “some admiration among boys of his own age” (84). Since Al respects Tom’s ungovernable individuality, he even feels “disappointed” to hear that his brother was paroled, rather than “bust[ed] out” (85). Of course, the point is not that Tom is evil or malevolent. Just after his mother prevented Tom from killing deputies, the protagonist confesses he is afraid that if he keeps suppressing his anger, “after a while I won’t have no decency lef’” (280). Obviously, what Tom embodies here is the traditional value of individualism as a sort of “decency.”

Jim Casy, an ex-preacher, similarly has a strong commitment to individualism. Although playing a Christlike role later in the novel, he is anything but sanctimonious and shows a deep understanding for people’s individualist behaviors. For one thing, he used to have sexual affairs with young women in his congregation. Suffering from the difficulty of separating his sexual desires from his religiousness, he wanders about in the wilderness until he meets Tom at the beginning of the novel. In Chapter 4, Casy manifests his almost nominalist attitude: “There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain’t nice, but that’s as far as any man got a right to say” (23). Here, refraining from making a moral judgment, Casy seeks to accept all the things people do, affirming the value of individuals’ free wills. Certainly, Casy also verbalizes the novel’s important message, saying, “one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that’s right, that’s holy,” subtly insisting on the oneness of humanity beyond our selfish behaviors (81). It should be noted, however, that he never renounces the individuals’ rights to act freely. In Chapter 26, when Tom tells that his brother Al is only interested in young women, Casy replies,
“He’s jus’ doin’ what he’s got to do. All of us like that” (385). In this instance, which takes place just before his martyrdom, he remains profoundly sympathetic to individuals’ free wills.

Another example of individualism is found in the unique character of the eldest son Noah. He is given a mysterious quality: “Noah moved slowly, spoke seldom, and then so slowly that people who did not know him often thought him stupid. He was not stupid, but he was strange” (78). Being taciturn and placid, unlike other members of the Joads, Noah might appear to have little to do with individualism. On the way to California, however, he all of a sudden decides to leave the family due to his unconvincing intuition that “[f]ella can’t starve beside a nice river” (208). By doing so, he not only abandons his family but also escape from the larger narrative of Okie exodus that the interchapters tell us. In a sense, Noah’s decision constitutes the most individualistic act in the novel, since he deserts the whole mass migration as well as his family, turning himself into a maverick. This “strange” son thus vividly represents the extent to which characters in the narrative chapters cannot be entirely reduced to a monolithic narrative about migrant people.

Likewise, Grampa is described as individualistic, or even selfish. When the Joads prepare to depart for California in Chapter 10, Ma Joad tells Grampa that he has to behave himself once there in concert with people’s expectations, saying, “They don’t let people run aroun’ with their clothes unbutton’ in California” (92). To this, Grampa replies, “Well, I’ll show ‘em. They think they’re gonna show me how to act out there? Why, I’ll go aroun’ a-hangin’ out if I wanta!,” making clear that he will never adjust his opinions and behaviors to others’ expectations (92). As a result, in order to take Grampa to California against his will, the other family members have to make him fall asleep by putting some whiskey into his coffee. Moreover, Granma is on par with his partner in her individualism. As Tom reminds Casy in Chapter 4: “When Granma got to
talkin’ in tongues, you couldn’t tie her down. She could knock over a full-growed deacon with her fist” (24). The ways in which this couple together “fought over everything, and loved and needed the fighting” (78) indicate how they are unyielding individualists.

The Joads’ small children, Ruthie and Winfield, also share individualist tendencies. In Chapter 20, the Joads arrive at a camp in the countryside in California. There, people live in tents and homes made of scrap materials. When Ma Joad cooks some stew for supper, hungry children in the camp gather around her to look at the stew. Then, Ruthie and Winfield express complicated emotions: “Ruthie and Winfield stood inside the circle, comporting themselves with proper frigidity and dignity. They were aloof, and at the same time possessive. Ruthie turned cold and angry eyes on the little girl” (253). It is understandable, of course, that any person could be unwilling to spare what little food they have when themselves running short of money and food. It is noteworthy, however, Ruthie and Winfield look “possessive” in this moment. This idea of possession is inextricably linked to the concept of the individual, which is characterized in terms of its freedom to possess. Through the figure of these children, Steinbeck thus tacitly draws attention to the tension between individualism and sharing. Furthermore, in Chapter 22, Ruthie and Winfield see a group of children playing croquet in the court of the government camp. Snatching the croquet mallet from a girl, Ruthie tries to take over their croquet game, causing the other children step away from her. Winfield joins them in keeping a distance from her. Then, she runs crying for home. Through this bitter lesson, Ruthie learns how to strike a balance between her individual desire and the necessity of cooperation with others. The point is that she learns this through her own experience, rather than being forced to do so—just like her brother Tom will do, as we will see later.

Aside from the main characters, Muley Graves is also a man of individualism. Being
deprived of their land and lacking job opportunities, the other members of his family have already left for California, so Muley alone remains in Oklahoma. Although the Joads encourage him to head for California with them, Muley rejects this offer. This is mostly because, in his view, “a man can’t, when he’s tol’ to” (47). In other words, “If on’y they didn’t tell me I got to get off, why, I’d prob’y be in California right now [...]” (47). Muley thus joins the novel’s major characters in upholding individuals’ wills over anything else.

As we have seen, Steinbeck depicts the characters in the main plot as thoroughly unique individuals, who present to the readers the irreplaceable value of individualism. Put differently, they are never seen as the “statistical creature,” or “the average American” (Susman 213), which was produced by the development of statistical method in the 1930s, particularly in the polling system. This is inextricably linked to the ways in which Steinbeck embraces individuals’ wills and creativity against the reign of the phalanx. Despite its commitment to the issues of labor movement and solidarity, then, *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights the rights of individuals to act freely, because only individuals’ wills could constitute, so thought Steinbeck, an effective way to resist dominance by group-men.

The images in the interchapters are, therefore, valuable precisely because they are what the Joads, a particular family, can never achieve in the narrative mode of the main chapters, which delineates inviolable individuals. The interchapters often present, in non-teleological ways, statistical images such as “Two hundred and fifty thousand people over the road” and “Fifty thousand old cars—wounded, steaming” in Chapter 12 (122). Likewise, Chapter 19 displays a group of people moving westward:

> And then the dispossessed were drawn west—from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out.
Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. (233)

As seen in the last section, statistical work primarily involves two processes of establishing classes of equivalence and encoding. In this quotation, these masses of people are categorized into a class through the shared element of being “dispossessed.” That is, the statistically grasped people in the interchapters are not so much a group of individuals—internally divided—as a synthesis. In other words, what these chapters show are less *individuals who migrate* than *migrants* as such, just as Chapter 21 writes: “The moving, questing people were migrants now” (21). Meanwhile, the Joads are, in the narrative chapters, *individuals who happen to decide to migrate* westward—though, of course, their decision is socioeconomically conditioned—rather than being migrants as such. The aesthetics of the interchapters thus marks, to borrow once again Desrosières’s words, the “magical transmutation” from one level of individualist reality to another level of holistic reality. In this way, these statistically observed people help the reader understand that the predicament of migrant farmers is socioeconomically determined, rather than stemming from their own faults or any innate characteristics—just like the case of the “typical families” Steinbeck describes in his “Harvest Gypsies” article, which we saw at the beginning of this chapter.

At the same time, the interchapters’ aesthetics requires the erasing of the singularity of individuals. Chapter 5 shows exchanges between “the owner men,” “the tenant men,” and “the women” concerning the usurpation of farmers’ lands (31-39). Remarkably, by constructing the subjects by means of these collective nouns, and by thus erasing particularities of individuals, this chapter seeks to offer a typical situation of farmers. Also, in Chapter 17, migrant families gather in a camp alongside the cross-country highway to live a sort of community life: “the
twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream” (193). The expression of “the children of all” makes a distinct contrast to the way Rose of Sharon is obsessed with her pregnancy: “[h]er whole thought and action were directed inward on the baby” and “she thought only in terms of reproduction and of motherhood” (95). This sort of idealized community life is elusive for the Joads, insofar as they stick to the value of individualism, favoring a nominalist reality over a holistic one.

As examined above, the narrative structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*, divided into the two elements of interchapters and narrative chapters, represents a tension-filled balance between the necessity to understand a larger socioeconomic picture and the value of individuals’ wills, between the New Deal statistics and individualism. The interchapters describe anonymous farmer groups as an actuarial object of the New Deal governing and convey a sense of typicality, whereas the narrative chapters offer to the reader the depiction of particular living creatures named the Joads, who symbolize the value of individualism, something that must not be subsumed under the logic of group-men. The interchapters display a holistic reality that is statistically and non-teleologically grasped, whereas the Joads, in the narrative chapters, represent another one, which is nominalist and individualist. The narrative voice of Chapter 14 famously addresses a movement “from ‘I’ to ‘we’” (152). Steinbeck’s concern was how to constitute this “we” without erasing the singularities of specific “I”s. As argued, the author’s aim is not to reduce one of the contradictory values to the other. The excellence of the novel lies in its structural achievement that vividly represents, on the level of form, the political and aesthetic conundrum he faced in the late 1930s.

The invention of the interchapters also enabled Steinbeck to make a leap from *In Dubious*
Battle’s aesthetics and politics. In this strike novel, as we saw above, Doc Burton serves as the spokesman for the author, saying: “I want to see the whole picture. [...] I don’t want to put on the blinders of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and limit my vision” (113). In so doing, however, Doc constitutes himself as a sort of bystander, whose political standpoint is, at least to some extent, inevitably reactive. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck elevates Doc’s non-teleological perspectives to the level of form, that is, to the interchapters. This, in turn, allowed him to depict a set of thoroughly individualist characters, the Joads, who live in an alternative reality of the narrative chapters.

The True Meaning of the Ending

When readers understand that the novel is structured through the tension-filled relation between the narrative chapters and the interchapters, we can figure out why the message of the novel must not be communicated verbally, but grasped by Tom through his own experience. At first glance, Casy seems to serve as mentor for Tom. To be sure, Casy, early in the novel, suddenly has an epiphany, crying out that he has caught “a dose of spirit” (56). Yet, he does not attempt to explain it to anyone at this instance. Only later in the novel does he attempt to convey his ideas to Tom. After being unreasonably sent to a jailhouse, Casy learns, through conversations with other prisoners, that most of them were sent there because of theft. Then, Casy attempts to explain to Tom that what made these “nice fellas” commit theft was that “they needed stuff” (382). Casy goes on to address how the people’s contingent but collective protest against the terrible food in the jailhouse led to them obtaining “some other stuff to eat,” trying to articulate, albeit rather vaguely, the importance of collective actions for workers (382). When Casy asks Tom if he can understand this idea, however, the protagonist simply answers, “No” (382). As a result, Casy concludes that “[m]aybe I can’t tell you” and that “you got to find out”
by himself (382). These exchanges between Casy and Tom make a sharp contrast to the relation between Mac and Jim in *In Dubious Battle*. The older, experienced organizer Mac tells Jim, a novice, to “use whatever material you’ve got” (48). Eventually, Jim internalizes Mac’s maxim and declares later: “I wanted to be used. Now I’ll use you, Mac. I’ll use myself and you. I tell you, I feel there’s strength in me” (215). Here, Steinbeck represents the relation between Mac and Jim as one of teacher to student and, further, as one between user and used. In contrast, in *The Grapes of Wrath* Casy and Tom stand on the same plane.

Therefore, Tom must think through what to do by himself, rather than being taught by someone else. Immediately after the above conversation with Tom, Casy is murdered by vigilantes. Tom impulsively kills one of the vigilantes, and then he is forced to go into hiding. He spends a lot of time alone in the woods, ruminating on Casy’s words, and reflecting back on his whole experience in the novel, including how migrant workers’ self-government was run successfully at the Weedpatch Camp. Then, he finally determines to call for the solidarity of farm workers. To his mother, Tom makes his famous speech, talking as if he and Casy were one:

I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. [...] I’ll be in the ways guys yell when they’re mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build—why, I’ll be there. See? God, I’m talkin’ like Casy.

Comes of thinkin’ about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes. (419)

In this way, Tom spontaneously realizes the importance of labor unions without being forced to do so. That is, in this scheme, the value of individualism is never abandoned. This is one of the answers that the novel offers as to the value of labor movements. Furthermore, Tom addresses, in this quote, the inviolable value of ordinary people’s ways of life. Of particular notice here is that
around each of these irreplaceable lives there will be always a Tom, although after his speech he disappears from the narrative—he becomes anonymous. His speech thus epitomizes the dialectic between the value of individualism and the importance of collective understanding.

In interpreting the structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* in this way, we will note that the utopia for the novel lies neither in interchapters nor narrative chapters, but in the impossible space between the two sorts of chapters. In fact, the novel seems to fail to work out the problem regarding the migrants’ plight: the ending scene of the novel, that is, Rose of Sharon giving her milk to a stranger, does not offer any solution for their harsh living conditions. Yet, both sorts of chapters in their ways suggest that something is going to happen: the interchapter 25 describes “the grapes of wrath” in the souls of people that are “growing heavy for the vintage” (349); Pa Joad, at the end of the Chapter 24, says “They's a change a-comin’. I don' know what. […] But she's a-comin’” (345). Nevertheless, nothing drastic happens in both of them until the end: the final interchapter ends up by suggesting the coming of spring; Tom disappears for good from the plot after his decision of calling for the solidarity between farmers. Analyzing the novel’s ambiguity over what constitutes revolutionary change, Charles Cunningham observes: “it is not clear if the struggle will stop once a somewhat better wage is won or if will it continue until the relations of production themselves change.”¹⁸

Even if the novel does not present a solution—at the level of its content or plot—to the tension between individualism and collective understanding, it would be overhasty to conclude that the novel ends without mediating the rupture between them. In the final scene of the novel, the Joads flee to a barn for comfort, where they meet a strange man and his son. The son tells the Joads that his father is so hungry that he is dying. In order to save him, Rose of Sharon, who

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¹⁸ Cunningham. Page number not available.
once was solely preoccupied with her baby and has just delivered a stillborn baby, makes him suckle from her breast. Then, she “look[s] up and across the barn, and her lips c[o]me together and smile[s] mysteriously” (455). Her “mysterious” smile echoes Jim Casy’s vision that integrated people are “holy” (81). In this way, The Grapes Wrath ends with characters somewhat abstracted into “the whole shebang” (81), as Casy once told the Joads.

When we examine the ending scene, the figure of the starving man deserves notice. Michael Szalay, in his reading of The Grapes of Wrath against the background of the New Deal welfare state, refers to the importance of the strange man, claiming that he plays the role of a test, that is, whether or not the Joads can provide aid even for a complete stranger. “The dying stranger […] emerges with such force at the close of The Grapes of Wrath,” Szalay insists, “not because he is more in need than the Joads themselves, but because he is resolutely anonymous” (200). While taking Szalay’s claim into consideration, however, I would like to present a new way of reading. While, as Szalay argues, the anonymity of the stranger is important for the novel’s theme, it is fairly important as well, in order to appreciate the novel’s political aesthetics, to understand that the strange man is a figure from the interchapters’ anonymous farmer groups. The ending scene ultimately offers an imaginary unity between the opposing values inscribed in the interchapters and the narrative chapters.

When meeting each other for the first time, the characters in the narrative chapters often introduce their proper names, as if to confirm each one’s uniqueness. In Chapter 13, while the Joads are setting up a tent along the highway, they encounter a similarly migrating family.

And Al, who stood near the car, looked at the license plates. “Kansas,” he said.

The lean man said, “Galena, or right about there. Wilson, Ivy Wilson.”

“We’re Joads,” said Pa. “We come from right near Sallisaw.”
“Well, we’re proud to meet you folks,” said Ivy Wilson. “Sairy, these is Joads.”

(135)

Through this practice of introducing proper names, the “lean man” becomes “Ivy Wilson” for the Joads, turning from an anonymous part of the migrant population to a specific individual, and this also applies to the Joads. This also happens in Chapter 20, when Al and Floyd Knowles introduce each other (255). Then, in Chapter 22, while the Joads are looking for the Weedpatch camp, they meet a family they do not know. After the family kindly helped the Joads with food, they have a curious conversation:

Tom said, “Seems funny. I’ve et your food, an’ I ain’t tol’ you my name—nor you ain’t mentioned yours. I’m Tom Joad.”

The older man looked at him, and then he smiled a little. “You ain’t been out here long?”

“Hell, no! Jus’ a couple days.”

“I knowed it. Funny, you git outa the habit a mentionin’ your name. They’s so goddamn many. Jist fellas. Well, sir—I’m Timothy Wallace, an’ this here’s my boy Wilkie.” (292)

As we see here, the characters in the narrative chapters are supposed to have “the habit a mentionin’ your name,” since it is vital for them to underscore their singularity against “so goddamn many,” by the acts of naming. By the act of calling their proper names, these people become “Tom,” “Timothy,” or “Wilkie,” rather than as a mere sample of certain categories, such as “migrant farmers” or “Okies,” who are grasped statistically. That is, whereas the fact remains that they are forced to migrate due to natural disasters and the exploitive practices of capitalists, the characters in the narrative chapters are nonetheless encouraged to stress their irreplaceable
individuality, rather than being entirely taken as part of a mass.

In contrast, within the interchapters that describe a migrant people of “three hundred thousand,” it is rare to find specific names (233). Even if the interchapters focus on some individuals, they are usually described as “that Texas boy” or “that Cherokee girl,” as in Chapter 23, thereby maintaining their anonymity (329). Certainly, there are a few moments in which the interchapters present proper names. Chapter 15, for instance, presents figures such as “Al” and “Mae” in describing the interactions between workers at a hamburger stand along Highway 66 and their customers. It needs to be noted, however, that these proper names are only tentatively given. Before giving specific names to these people, remarkably, the narrative voice tells us that “The cook is Joe or Carl or Al, hot in a white coat and apron” and that the waitress is “Minnie or Susy or Mae, middle-aging behind the counter” (emphasis added 154). In the aesthetics of the interchapters, namely, particularity does not matter; on the contrary, these chapters are primarily interested in showing a general picture of migrants’ experiences, and this is achieved by attenuating the sense of individuality through an indifference to proper nouns.

When we notice this distinctive difference between interchapters and narrative chapters, the anonymity of the dying stranger, who emerges suddenly at the close of the novel, assumes a new importance. Tellingly, Steinbeck, in a letter addressed to his publisher Pascal Covici, contends that the last man “must be a stranger,” asserting the point is that the Joads “have no ties to him” (Letters 178). The complete stranger, with “no ties” to the Joads, ought to be understood as someone coming from the anonymous farmer group shown in the interchapters, whose collective pictures are, in a sense, world away from the Joads’ specific story in the narrative chapters.

In the final scene, Rose of Sharon gives aid to the messenger from the interchapters in an
odd black barn which is “nearly obscured by the rain” (453) and with which “[t]here [is] no door” (453)—a site appearing as if existing in a liminal zone. Through this symbolic ritual, a bridge is finally built between the unique individualists in the narrative chapters and the need to have a comprehensive view of socioeconomic conditions. In this way, the mediation between them is achieved at the level of the novel’s form, or outside the plot of the novel, just as Tom also goes outside of the novel’s narrative in order to achieve the novel’s ideal.

Conclusion

Against the spread of totalitarianism—Steinbeck equally rejected fascism and communism on account of their subjection to the phalanx—the writer ceaselessly defended the value of individualism. His “strong social conscience” (Benson 720), at the same time, made him committed to changing the harsh situations of migrant farmers he witnessed in California, developing his keen awareness of the necessity to offer a socio-economic account of their plight from a macro-perspective. This led Steinbeck to count on the New Deal’s statistical data, and his politics eventually became close to the New Deal liberalism in that both of them were eager to strike a balance between individual freedom and New Deal governance, which centered on the newly developed statistical technology. The novelist then dreamed of showing at once the holistic reality of migrant group as a population and another reality of particular individuals, whom he wanted to embody unyielding individualism. That is why *The Grapes of Wrath* achieved its great narrative structure—the alternating interchapters and narrative chapters—amalgamating social-realist descriptions with modernist formal experimentation, thereby complicating the determinist epistemology of literary naturalism.

Ultimately, *The Grapes of Wrath* goes well beyond a merely passive reflection of the
contemporary dilemma of liberal discourses in its narrative structure. In the finale scene, Rose of Sharon and the dying stranger are fused into one in the imagination of readers, heading for the totality, or a place where individuality and collectivity are consonant with each other, as the imaginary sublimation of the dialectic between narrative chapters and interchapters, between holistic reality and nominalist reality. In my final analysis, The Grapes of Wrath can be read as a socially symbolic act that seeks to resolve, on the imaginative level, the dilemma that the author and other contemporary liberals confronted in the late 1930s. The novel became representative of the era precisely because it endeavored to offer a solution to the contemporary conundrum concerning the relationship between a group and individuals, between the general and the particular, and between holism and individualism.
Introduction

Halfway through Book II of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), the protagonist Bigger Thomas finds himself surrounded by a host of newspapermen gathered at the Daltons’ house hearing that Mary Dalton, their only daughter, has gone missing. When Mr. Dalton’s private investigator Britten shows them a batch of Communist pamphlets, which Bigger received the evening before from a young Communist Jan Erlone, the newspapermen become excited and ask him questions:

“Say, boy, what do you think of public ownership? Do you think the government ought to build houses for people to live in?”

Bigger Blinked.

“Suh?”

“Well, what do you think of private property?”

“I don’t own any property. Nawsuh,” Bigger said.

“Aw, he’s a dumb cluck. He doesn’t know anything,” one of the men whispered in a voice loud enough for Bigger to hear. (213)

This conversation foregrounds three significant issues at the core of the novel. To begin with, Bigger’s reply that “I don’t own any property” leads readers to recognize that this twenty-year-old African-American man is, by definition, a proletarian, namely, a working-class man having no property other than his own labor power. This passage thus reminds us that
Native Son was initially applauded as the culmination of “American social realism” or “American proletarian literature” (Gold 40) together with Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath. Secondly, it is noteworthy that in addressing the issue of “public ownership,” the newspapermen refer specifically to “houses.” Indeed, during the 1930s, homeownership assumed a new importance to such an extent that “homeownership increasingly replaced ownership of productive property as an economic measure of freedom” (Foner 209). As readers of the novel are already informed up to this point, the relation between the Thomases and the Daltons is one of renter and owner. The Thomases are forced to live in a rat-infested kitchenette in the South Side of Chicago, many of whose buildings are owned by Mr. Dalton’s company, the South Side Real Estate Company. Thus, while the newspapermen are seeking for fodder, they unknowingly touch on the relation between the exploited and the exploiter, between the proletariat and the capitalist.

Thirdly, and most importantly, in reality Bigger throughout Book II thinks that he does possess some property of particular value: “It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him”—the knowledge that it is none other than Bigger himself that killed Mary, who is actually “ten feet away from them, burning” in the furnace (105, 208). At the beginning of Book II, he accepts his having killed Mary as a voluntary act, rather than viewing it as an accident (though it was), and simultaneously gains a sense of freedom for the first time. Therefore, when Bigger says, “I don’t own any property,” he is in a sense deftly deceiving the condescending newspapermen by feigning foolishness—by pretending to be “a helpless, bewildered man” (214)—at once concealing his irreplaceable property underneath. In these ways, the above exchanges between Bigger and the newspapermen involves such important themes as the proletarian novel,
homeownership, and Bigger’s embrace of his murder as a sort of property.

A close reading of the novel reveals, however, that Bigger is also possessed by his wrongful possession of the invaluable property of Mary’s murder. Since Bigger’s newly acquired confidence in himself is predicated on the acceptance that he intentionally killed Mary, he simply cannot get rid of the image of her body: “he had to get that lingering image of Mary’s bloody head lying on those newspapers from before his eyes” (113). Here, Bigger is possessed, or haunted, by the image he has produced through his acts, and this, in turn, makes Bigger seek to revenge himself on white people in the same way: “he wished he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy” (130). Bigger thus wants to haunt, or possess, white people around him, albeit in a way different from possessing material property. When readers note the ways in which Bigger’s newly obtained sense of freedom is inseparably linked to such a convoluted sense of possession, it will become necessary to reconsider whether Bigger’s seemingly voluntary acts in Book II onward can be seen—as critics tend to emphasize rather too optimistically—as “the quest for identity, the self-realization of a personality, the growth from neurosis to joyful self-actualization” (Fishburn 72).

This chapter reads Native Son in light of the rhetoric of possession deployed in it. Focusing on the anxious tropes of possession and property, it clarifies the ways in which the novel is centered on Bigger’s subjectivity, itself constituted in relation to his sense of dis/possession. By doing so, I will argue that the novel can be read as a critique of what C. B. Macpherson calls possessive individualism, which assumes, as we will see in the next section, that the human essence lies in the freedom to possess and in the ownership of property.
Reading *Native Son* with a focus on the rhetoric of possession will enable us to revisit a split that has characterized preceding scholarship on the novel, namely, the split between critics who regard it as a quintessentially naturalist/protest novel and those who understand it in terms of existentialist aesthetics. The former critics situate *Native Son* within the tradition of literary naturalism such as Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, probing the ways in which Bigger’s subjectivity and fate are determined by social environments. On the other hand, the latter critics, emerging from the 1960s on, query the victimization of the protagonist, drawing attention instead to how Bigger seems to acquire free will and self-consciousness in Book II, and then highlighting how the final scene seemingly represents Bigger’s achievement of an existential selfhood when he defies the defense attorney Borris Max’s all-encompassing narrative. For this camp, *Native Son* anticipates Wright’s next novel *The Outsider*, a novel he authored in Paris, inspired at least in part by French existentialist philosophers. In making their arguments, however, both naturalist/protest and existentialist interpretations tend to downplay issues that do not fit well to their frameworks. In order for *Native Son* to be a naturalist novel, the ending needs to be relegated to “the dogged return to [Bigger’s] original delusion […] that his act of murder was an escape from oppression” (Burgum 73-74), whereas in order to read the novel as existentialist, one has to stress Bigger’s achieving “an understanding of and a psychological control” of “massive environmental forces” (Butler 56), thereby underestimating the influence of such social forces on Bigger and other characters.

If, however, we draw attention to how Bigger’s subjectivity, including the seemingly existential elements, is constituted thoroughly in terms of dis/possession—a theme present from the very beginning of *Native Son*—it will become possible to extend the naturalist interpretation

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19 For instance, see Bone; Burgum; DeCoste; and Foley.
20 For instance, see Gibson; Gallagher; Butler; and Fishburn. For the comprehensive survey of this split between critics, see Goldstein.
of the novel in such a way as to explain its ostensibly existentialist facets. I will intervene in the preceding scholarship on the novel by complicating the naturalist/protest interpretation in light of the rhetoric of possession and property, with a view to mediating the split between critics. Put differently, I align myself with recent revisionary critics who investigate the ways in which Bigger’s creation of new selfhood by means of violence is profoundly conditioned by socioeconomic circumstances, and who reassess, to varying degrees, the novel’s realist/naturalist/proletarian aesthetics.\textsuperscript{21} I diverge from these critics, however, in focusing on the tropes of possession and property and in arguing that these tropes are also present in the novel’s narrative form.

In what follows, I begin by examining Wright’s perspective on the problematics of ownership and property in his documentary book \textit{12 Million Black Voices} and two of his essays, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and “How Bigger Was Born.” Through this examination, I will show that the theme of possession was at the heart of Wright’s insights during the writing of \textit{Native Son}, looking to the way he seeks to imagine an outside to capitalist ownership relations. Then, focusing on how Bigger’s subjectivity and his relations to other characters are embedded in the issue of dis/possession, I will discuss the novel in terms of the rhetoric of possession and property. In so doing, I will look not only to the content and character relations but also to the novel’s naturalist form, exploring the question of who owns the narrative.

Wright’s Critique into Possession

Wright’s views on the history of the African-American people and the influence of property ownership on their lives are most clearly expressed in \textit{12 Million Black Voices}, a photo-documentary text published in 1941. Making use of the first-person plural “we” and

\textsuperscript{21} For instance, see Foley “The Politics of Poetics”; Irr; DeCoste; and Matthews.
statistical data gained from newly emergent Chicago sociology, Wright seeks to present “a broad picture of the processes of Negro life in the United States” (xx). He narrates vividly, if linearly, the passage of African Americans from chattel slavery through Jim Crow to, anticipatory, full citizenship and equality. Throughout the book, he capitalizes two dominant social groups: the “Lords of the Land” in the agrarian South and the “Bosses of Buildings” in the industrial North. Wright does so based on his understanding that “the forces that affected black life in America were different manifestations of property ownership” (Bradley xvii). Concerning the South dominated by “Lords of the Land,” Wright characterizes the lives of the majority of black people in terms of their folk humanity, which he explains is kept intact due to their lack of property:

So, living by folk tradition, possessing but a few rights which others respect, we are unable to establish our family groups upon a basis of property ownership. [...] There is nothing—no ownership or lust for power—that stands between us and our kin. [...] Because our eyes are not blinded by the hunger for possessions, we are a tolerant folk. A black mother who stands in the sagging door of her gingerbread shack may weep as she sees her children straying off into the unknown world, but [...] that mother always welcomes them back with an irreducibly human feeling that stands above the claims of law or property (60-61).

As for the “Bosses of Buildings” in the industrial North, Wright addresses the ways in which they thrust African Americans into deteriorated rooms called kitchenettes, and he describes in detail how these horrible living conditions negatively affect people’s minds, consciousness and health. The narrative voice even observes that “[t]he kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial” (106), which “blinds [black children] to hope” (110). To be sure, one can debate the truth of Wright’s ostensibly unilinear narrative of history or his binary views of the rural
South and the industrial North. Overall, however, these descriptions from *12 Million Black Voices* tell how “the fever of possession” (25) fundamentally conditions both black and white people’s exterior and interior lives and how private ownership blinds people to broader social relations, as Wright saw them.

Wright’s critique of possession and individualism naturally leads us to turn to what C. B. Macpherson calls possessive individualism. Analyzing John Locke’s theorization of ownership, Macpherson illuminates how the emergence of market society in the seventeenth century generated a concept of the individual characterized in terms of its possessive quality. The individual was defined in this age, according to Macpherson, “neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself,” that is, “as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities” (3). Significantly, then, “[t]he relation of ownership […] was read back into the nature of the individual,” so that “[t]he human essence is freedom from dependence on the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession” (3). Needless to say, modern political theory’s assumptions of free individuals as owner of their bodies and capacities have always been racialized and gendered. As Charles W. Mills writes, “The reality is that one can pretend the body does not matter only because a particular body (the white male body) is being presupposed as the somatic norm. In a political dialogue between the owners of such bodies, the details of their flesh do not matter since they are judged to be equally rational, equally capable of perceiving natural law or their own self-interest” (53). If it is ownership and possession that makes one a human or individual, then being denied access to them would mean, by definition, that she or he is constituted as sub-human. Wright’s above comments on ownership and individualism should be understood as a critique of the conceptualization of possessive individuals lying at the basis of modern liberal-democratic society and of private property,
including chattel slavery.

The goal of Wright’s project, however, does not seem to be to advocate that black people should have the same access to property ownership as white men. We see this in his 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” which first appeared in *New Challenge*. In this essay, Wright offers a rich investigation of the aesthetic and political themes relevant to politically committed writers. Black writers should, Wright asserts, draw upon Marxist perspectives on society so as to elevate the lives and consciousness of black people toward new goals, toward “a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired” (196). Throughout the essay, Wright obviously bears in mind as potential adversaries not only white racists but also “a rising Negro bourgeoisie,” when he condemns “the illusion that [African-American people] could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race” (197). Therefore he also states, in a way resonant with *12 Million Black Voices*, that workers of minority groups may enjoy better access to a deep social consciousness because they lack “the handicaps of false ambition and property” (196). In Wright’s eyes, once again, to own a property can be a “handicap,” insofar as it obscures broader social relations.

To focus on Wright’s views on possession and property brings in the issue of his relation to Marxism. During the 1930s, as is well known, Wright, as a black Marxist writer, sought to educate African-Americans about the ways capitalism and racism go hand in hand. Engaging with the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) through the 1930s and into the early 1940s, he worked for the John Reed Club, an organization founded in 1929 to support radical writers and artists, serving for a variety of leftist magazines, such as the *New Masses* and *Left Front*. In the course of the decade, however, some of the party leaders’ dogmatic policies gradually disillusioned him, and this process finds one of its clearest expressions in his essay “I
Tried to Be a Communist,” an essay contributed to *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944 and later included posthumously in *American Hunger* in 1977. Following the publication of the essay, Wright officially left the CPUSA in 1944.\(^\text{22}\) This process of disillusionment and Wright’s eventual break with CPUSA provides critics with a justification for reading an existentialist subtext in his work. Edward Margolies claims, “The chief philosophical weakness of *Native Son* is not that Bigger does not surrender his freedom to Max’s determinism, or that Bigger’s Zarathustrian principles do not jibe with Max’s socialist visions; it is that Wright himself does not seem to be able to make up his mind” (79-80). That Wright ceased his commitment to party politics does not necessarily mean, however, that he entirely abandoned his trust in a Marxist perspective. Indeed, as Anthony Dawahare succinctly puts, “To say Wright’s disagreements and eventual break with the CPUSA was rejection of Marxism would be as fallacious as saying that Martin Luther’s break with the Catholic Church was a rejection of Christianity” (66). While it is true that Wright became disappointed at some of the party politics’ ossified aspects, it is also possible to see him as “an internal critic of Communism” (Irr 197), exploring the way *Native Son* points to “a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired.”

Clearly, the problematics of ownership was one of the most important things Wright bore in mind when he wrote *Native Son*. In his 1940 lecture “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright tells the process in which the figure of Bigger Thomas gradually took shape in his imagination. Along the way, he addresses his memory of reading a pamphlet describing the friendship of Gorky and Lenin in exile:

> The booklet told of how Lenin and Gorky were walking down a London street. Lenin turned to Gorky and, pointing, said: “Here is *their* Big Ben.” “There is *their*..."
Westminster Abbey.” “There is their library.” And at once, while reading that passage, my mind stopped, teased, challenged with the effort to remember, to associate widely disparate but meaningful experiences in my life. […] Then, with a sudden glow of satisfaction of having gained a little more knowledge about the world in which I lived, I’d end up by saying: “That’s Bigger. That’s the Bigger Thomas reaction.” (emphasis original 443)

Italicizing the possessive pronoun “their” in Lenin’s words, Wright seeks to emphasize what it feels like to be alienated from production and possession. In other words, he here highlights “the deep sense of exclusion” of those who are forced to live facing “the look of a world which one did not make or own” (emphasis added 443). This profound sense of alienation informs the figure of Bigger Thomas. Therefore, Wright characterizes Bigger not as “either a Communist or a Fascist” but, first and foremost, as “a dispossessed and disinherited man,” who lives “amid the greatest possible plenty on earth” (446, 447). Only when we note the extent to which the issue of possession matters in the creation of Native Son can we grasp the full implication of the notion of “No Man’s Land” that appears both in the lecture and the novel. In Wright’s account, Bigger is “hovering unwanted between two worlds—between powerful America and his own stunted place in life,” existing in a “No Man’s Land” (“How Bigger” 451). Given that this expression refers to an area or land that no one owns or controls, it can be read not only as indicating Bigger’s lack of place but also as pointing to an outside to property relations. Indeed, as I will discuss later, “No Man’s Land” may well constitute a possibility for a certain utopian vision in Native Son.

As I will discuss from the next section on, Native Son portrays the ways in which Bigger, alienated from the possibility of a better living condition, let alone of property ownership, ineluctably has his subjectivity constituted in terms of dis/possession. By constructing the whole
novel in terms of the theme of possession, Wright highlights how fundamentally the
possessor-possessed relations condition one’s subjectivity and human relations. In this sense,
*Native Son* may be called naturalist. At the end of the novel, however, it subtly gestures toward
the outside of capitalist ownership relations, particularly on the level of form, complicating its
own naturalist epistemology.

Book I and the Problematics of Possession

*Native Son* begins with the description of the Thomases’s impoverished livelihood in a
rat-infested kitchenette. As soon as Bigger gets up, a huge black rat appears in their “tiny,
one-room apartment” and Bigger kills it hurling a skillet (4). Then, he scares his sister, Vera,
with the body of the rat, causing a quarrel within the family. In the end, the mother asks Bigger
to make sure to see Mr. Dalton that afternoon to hold a job assigned by a relief program of the
government. Of this opening, critics suggest that the black rat foreshadows Bigger’s own fate,
arguing that the novel’s outset already inserts the theme of violence, around which the whole
novel revolves.23

Less discussed, however, is why the opening scene is set in the Thomases’s kitchenette.
Caren Irr acutely points out the ways in which the novel begins with “depictions of enclosed
spaces and the psychology of living in them,” linking this observation to the theme of spatial
phobias (199). This account, however, fails to register the overtly historical context of this
opening setting. In Depression-era America, as Eric Foner writes, homeownership became a
symbol of one’s freedom:

> Nowhere were the limits of New Deal freedom more evident than in the evolution of
> federal housing policy, which powerfully reinforced residential segregation. Owning

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23 For example, see Baldwin; and Butler.
one’s home had long been a widely shared ambition in American society. […] Although the renter is, in some ways, “freer” than the owner, in the industrial age homeownership increasingly replaced ownership of productive property as an economic measure of freedom. More than an investment, a home was a mark of middle-class respectability, and for workers, a form of economic security at a time of low wages, erratic employment, and limited occupational mobility. (209)

Significantly, in Native Son’s South Side, property all over the Black Belt is possessed by the company run by Mr. Dalton, whom Bigger is going to see soon. In this way, Wright from the beginning introduces the problematics of the relation between the renter and the owner, situating property ownership at the heart of the novel, and underscoring Bigger’s sense of being dispossessed.

For his first task as chauffer for the Daltons, Bigger is asked to take Mary to university. However, she tells him to go to a different destination, where they meet Jan Erlone, her Communist boyfriend. Then, Mary and Jan ask Bigger to go for a ride around the city. In the car, Jan talks to Bigger, looking at the cityscape:

“This is a beautiful world, Bigger.” Jan said, turning to him. “Look at that skyline!”

Bigger looked without turning his head; he just rolled his eyes. Stretching to one side of him was a vast sweep of tall buildings flecked with tiny squares of yellow light.

“We’ll own all that some day, Bigger,” Jan said with a wave of his hand. “After the revolution it’ll be ours. But we’ll have to fight for it. […] And when that day comes, things’ll be different. There’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor.”

Bigger said nothing. (68)
It is likely, as Charles Scruggs points out, that Bigger does not reply because “he doesn’t see what they see,” having no “cognitive map” of the world Jan and Mary recognize (156). It is equally plausible, however, that Bigger cannot understand what Jan’s words “we’ll own all that” mean. Probably, Bigger has not heard of public or collective ownership, given that all he knows about communism is likely images from cartoons in newspapers, images of “darkness, old houses, people speaking in whispers, and trade unions on strike” (66). Additionally, and more importantly, Bigger seems unable to understand that Jan’s “we” includes him, since African-American people in the South Side have been always segregated and dispossessed by white people. That is, Bigger cannot imagine, even after the “revolution,” that the buildings would be “ours,” collectively shared by black and white people.

In fact, the theme of possession not only informs *Native Son*’s content and character relations, as discussed above, but also involves its form and the issue of points of view, particularly in terms of what might be called as the possession of the narrative. Rather than being a simplistic naturalist novel, wherein the third-person, allegedly omniscient narrator tells characters’ fate, *Native Son*’s narrative is structured by the issue of possession in convoluted ways.

To be sure, the novel’s dominant tone may be called naturalist. As June Howard cogently writes, literary naturalism’s generic narrative pattern centers on the perspectives of middle-class observers or omniscient third-person narrators, who view how “brutal” characters’ lives are subject to determinism, and who are by and large exempt from it. Likewise, in *Native Son*, the third-person narrator represents Bigger’s story from the outside, as if being a detached observer. For instance, Book I includes the following passage:

> These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract
brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating. He was like a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night; but the sun that made it bloom and the cold darkness that made it wilt were never seen. (29)

This passage can be read as a quintessentially naturalist description. Here, the narrative voice depicts Bigger’s life from without, rather than from within, in such a way that the protagonist himself would never be able to do. Put differently, Bigger’s pattern of life is presented as a sort of public spectacle without his knowing it.

Later in Book I, however, Wright inserts an uncanny passage that destabilizes the narrator’s view of Bigger’s story. Serving as chauffer for the Daltons, Bigger finds himself in a situation where he has to take Mary, intoxicated and unable to walk by herself, to her bedroom without being noticed by her parents.

She rolled her eyes toward a door. He got her as far as the door and stopped. Was this really her room? Was she too drunk to know? Suppose he opened the door to Mr. and Mrs. Dalton’s room? Well, all they could do was fire him. It wasn’t his fault that she was drunk. He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people. (emphasis added 84)

Drawing upon the technique of free-indirect discourse, this passage throws into relief the issue of theatricality, that is, a structure that turns characters’ lives into a public spectacle through a “taking down of the fourth wall” (Seltzer 90). When Bigger feels as if he were “acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people,” this passage in a sense talks back to the readers of the novel, as a sort of metacommentary, making us aware of our own position of spectatorship. Indeed, in
the 1930s Wright was working as publicity agent for Federal Negro Theater in Chicago, and he thus had opportunities to observe plays by black actors and actresses, though hardly satisfied with the quality of the theater, which he thought was far from “a genuine Negro theater” (“I Tried” 151). In addition to the suggestion of such theatrical structure, it also deserves notice that Bigger here has a sense of being “possessed.” On the one hand, this term implies the way his act seems to be environmentally conditioned, indicating his lack of agency in a way resonant with a naturalist epistemology. More importantly, the term also suggests, particularly due to its juxtaposition with the theme of theatricality, that Bigger feels his narrative is possessed, or, owned, by someone else. Book I thus also presents, on the level of literary form, the protagonist’s life in ways inseparably linked to the problematics of the relation between the possessor and the possessed, thereby provocatively foregrounding the politics of naturalist perspective. Noting the theme of possession at the core of Book I will make it possible to shed new light on the ways in which Bigger in Book II seems to acquire a certain measure of freedom and act out of free will.

Book II and Bigger’s Property

Returning home from the Daltons after accidentally having suffocated Mary, Bigger falls asleep. He then wakes up to find that the entire world looks different, and feels that “He had murdered and had created a new life for himself” (105). He quickly writes a ransom note to obtain money from the Daltons, but in the end Mary’s bones are found in the furnace, and his plot eventually fails. Then, he rapes and kills his girl friend Bessie Mears, ending up in being caught by the police in the freezing blizzard.

Critics who treat Native Son as an existentialist account of Bigger’s liberation tend to insist
on his achievement of genuine will and self-consciousness. Robert Butler is exemplary for this reading when he claims that Bigger in Book II is “very much more conscious of his actions” than in Book I, finding in the protagonist “a kind of growth in his personality” in that his acts, including Bessy’s “brutal killing,” are “ultimately … conscious” (45, 46). It should not be overlooked, however, that the creation of Bigger’s ostensibly free will is profoundly enmeshed in the rhetoric of possession. Notably, for Bigger, the newly-gained sense of life is “something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take from him” (105). Likewise, when Bigger sees Peggy for the second time at the Daltons’ home, he finds himself somehow empowered: “What would [Peggy] think if she knew? He felt he had something of value which she could never take from him even if she despised him” (122).

Clearly, Bigger’s newly acquired sense of strength is premised on the possession of “something of value,” the knowledge of Mary’s murder. This knowledge matters to Bigger so much because it serves a sort of property that he can exclusively possess.

It is no coincidence, then, that immediately before Bigger obtains this new sense of freedom, he recollects the Daltons’ home, comparing it to his family’s kitchenette:

He looked round the room seeing it for the first time. […] This was much different from Dalton’s home. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton’s home: pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own. He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. (105)

What the Daltons have and the Thomases do not is “a little world of his own,” that is, a room of one’s own. Given the ways in which Book I rests on the issue of possession, this passage may be
read not merely as depicting the lack of private spaces but also as referring to the way the Thomases are denied ownership as such. It is this sense of being dispossessed that leads Bigger to own Mary’s murder.

Indeed, when we note that Bigger’s sense of seemingly self-liberating, if violent, selfhood is inseparably linked to the sense of possession, the greatest irony of Book II lies in the fact that Mr. Dalton almost exclusively owns the houses all over the Black Belt, as Bigger finds:

He looked round the street and saw a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt, and he owned property where white folks lived, too. (173)

Bigger, possessed by the secret he exclusively possesses—the knowledge that he killed Mary Dalton—in fact has the foundations of his livelihood dominated by the company run by her father, Mr. Dalton. Her murder constitutes property of such value for Bigger, precisely because “The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them” (173). In this instance, Dalton’s company, on a socio-economic level, owns property all over the South Side, including the Thomases’ bleak kitchenette. In order to psychologically feel “the equal” of the Daltons, Bigger resorts to the possession of different sort of property.

Put differently, this knowledge as property is of such importance to Bigger because to...
have something of his own has become a way to sustain his selfhood. By constituting himself as
owner of property, he tries to become a possessive individual, to borrow Macpherson’s words.
Thus, Bigger also thinks that “as long as he could take his life into his own hands and dispose of
it as he pleased […] he need not be afraid” (130). Here, Bigger’s sense of confidence is
predicated on the idea that he possesses his life as property, which he can both take “into his own
hands” or “dispose” according to his will. Only in this context can we appreciate the following
exchange between Bigger and Jan in Book II. Bigger faces Jan one-to-one outside, where huge
wet flakes of snow form “a delicate screen between them” (171). Never suspecting Bigger, Jan
wants to know about the truth of Mary’s having gone missing, but his “innocence” (171) makes
Bigger angry. Bigger raises his gun to run off Jan, and then he returns to his senses: “He was
coming back into possession of himself; for the past three minutes it seemed he had been under a
strange spell, possessed by a force which he hated, but which he had to obey” (172). This
passage, rather than simply narrating Bigger’s calming himself down, bespeaks the extent to
which his selfhood is constructed by the sense of dis/possession. Jan’s “innocent” passion to
know the truth tacitly encourages Bigger to let go of his property, that is, to disclose the truth of
Mary’s death. It is because Bigger’s self-possession (being calm, confident and in control of
himself) is premised on the possession of her murder as a creative act that he feels as if being
“under a strange spell, possessed by a force which he hated,” subconsciously wondering whether
to disclose the secret to Jan. Wright thus represents Bigger’s selfhood as thoroughly entrapped in
the paradigm of possessor-possessed.

In this context, it is notable that Bigger’s relation to Bessie is also portrayed as embedded
in the problematics of possession. He needs her “just to feel and know that she was his to have
and hold whenever he wanted to” (140). Indeed, as Bigger confides to Max later in Book III,
Bessie constitutes a sort of property for Bigger. He explains, “She was just my girl. I don’t reckon I was ever in love with nobody. I killed Bessie to save myself. You have to have a girl, so I had Bessie” (350). These passages have naturally induced critics to condemn Wright novels for their apparent misogyny. It would be rather hasty, however, to equate Bigger’s morality with Wright’s and *Native Son’s*, failing to register how the novel presents Bigger’s subjectivity as inextricably entwined with the sense of dispossession and how his violent acts brings about his own ruin. That Bigger takes advantage of female characters may be understood less as a sign of Wright’s or the novel’s misogyny than as an attempt to expose the ways in which this black proletarian protagonist’s sense of being alienated ineluctably leads him to look for a substitute for material property. And such a sense of powerlessness is presented in the novel particularly in terms of homeownership, as seen above. Early in Book II, Bigger, after having sexual intercourse with Bessie, feels that “he did not need to long for a home now” (135). While this passage seems to indicate, as Catherin Jurca insists, “Bigger’s haunting desire to be ‘at home’” (115) in a figurative sense, it may be also possible to read it rather literally, that is, in light of his longing for homeownership.

With his newly gained freedom premised on the ownership of the secret knowledge of Mary’s death, however, Bigger is also haunted, or possessed, by the possession of it. He ruminates, “There was only one thing that worried him; he had to get that lingering image of Mary’s bloody head lying on those newspapers from before his eyes” (113). And it is precisely because he is haunted by the image of Mary’s body that Bigger in turn longs to haunt (possess) white people around him in the same way, “hover[ing] before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy” (130). In this way, when we look to the theme of possession in Book II, it turns out that Bigger’s seemingly new freedom, far from being
an achievement of genuine will, in fact derives from his obsession with possession, conditioned by having been severed from the possibilities of homeownership and of any better living condition.

From this perspective, we can grasp how the possession of narrative is at work in Book II, as well as in Book I. Critics who read *Native Son* as an exploration of existentialist themes are inclined to esteem Bigger’s seemingly developing command of language. Valerie Smith is typical of this reading when she, seeing a parallel between the protagonist Bigger and the author Wright, argues that both “rely on their ability to manipulate language and its assumptions—to tell their own stories—as a means of liberating themselves from the plots others impose on them” (70). Smith aptly points out that from Book II on “Wright relies increasingly on free indirect discourse,” insisting on Bigger’s increased “capacity to understand and express himself” (83). To be sure, Bigger begins to view all the people around him—both black and white—as blind, seeking to manipulate them in his criminal plot. As Ian Afflerbach recently argued in light of the rhetoric of blindness, however, it is important to recognize that Bigger “is constantly misreading himself” (106), unaware of his own blindness. Indeed, that Wright seems to enhance Bigger’s ability to narrate his story does not necessarily signify that the protagonist is liberating himself from oppression. Rather, if we focus on the issue of possession in the novel, Bigger’s interest in telling his own story can be also read as intertwined with the hunger for possession.

After Mary’s bones are finally found in the furnace, Bigger flees from the basement and then wants to read a newspaper:

The papers ought to be full of him now. It did not seem strange that they should be, for all his life he had felt that things had been happening to him that should have gone into them. But only after he had acted upon feelings which he had had for years
would the papers carry the story, *his* story. (emphasis original 222)

In Smith’s remarkable account, Bigger often wants to read a newspaper “because he cannot understand his position until he knows what others are saying about him” (84). It is also noteworthy, however, that this passage tacitly inscribes the theme of possession. On the one hand, Bigger hopes the newspapers will be “full of him” and thereby he wishes to occupy a large portion of them. On the other hand, this passage italicizes the possessive pronoun “his” as if to *alienate* it. Not only indicative of the fact that African-American people are unjustly criminalized and that the newspaper always feature white people, the passage also reveals that this is not Bigger’s own story at all, insofar as these articles are always biased according to the white media’s desire. Therefore, Book II, rather than telling Bigger’s self-realization of personality, depicts how his ostensibly free acts are entangled with the problematics of possession, suggesting that this freedom is instead intimately determined by his social order.

Book III and the Possession of Narrative

Book III limns Bigger’s trial and comes to a close by describing how he views his life on his last day. Despite Bigger’s attempt in Book II to frame him, Jan asks for help from his lawyer friend Borris Max. The lawyer attends to Bigger’s words and delivers a long speech in defense of him. Yet, Bigger is eventually sentenced to death. In the last conversation with Max, Bigger famously declares, “What I killed for, I *am!*” (emphasis original 429), bewildering him. Then, when Max leaves, Bigger asks him to say hello to Jan, concluding the novel. Indeed, Book III is also inextricably linked to the theme of property relations, and I will argue that the novel’s controversial ending can be better understood in terms of the possession of narrative.

In Bigger’s trial, State’s Attorney Buckley seeks to show various evidence against the
accused, with a view to heightening his own reputation. Along the way, Buckley brings Bessie’s dead body into the courtroom and seeks to take advantage of her death. Watching her body “being used” as “merely ‘evidence’,” Bigger is aware that “[t]hough he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished” (331). Bigger then cannot help feeling that his life as well as Bessie’s has been owned by white people around him: “He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death” (331-32). In words intensely reminiscent of slavery, Wright underscores the ways in which the racist environment forces Bigger to be the object, not the subject, of possession.

In order to affect the mood of the courtroom, Buckley also addresses Mary’s earrings, which were found along with her bones in the furnace of the Daltons’ basement.

“[...] Now, Mrs. Dalton, how long did you own this pair of earrings?”

“For thirty-three years.”

“How did they come into your possession?”

“Well, my mother gave them when I was of age. My grandmother gave them to my mother when she was of age, and I in turn gave them to my daughter when she was of age. ...” (314-15)

Here, Mary’s earrings turn out to be the Daltons’ property inherited over generations. It is no coincidence that her earrings are placed in the furnace throughout Book II together with her bones, the secret of which constitutes Bigger’s property. While what Bigger regards as his invaluable property expires after all, the property of the white, ruling class endures. This plot detail throws into relief the idea that Bigger is alienated from ownership.

The problematics of possession matters so much to the novel that Max’s defense also
involves the rhetoric of ownership. In his lengthy plea to the jury, Max attempts to set forth the rationale for Bigger’s crimes by illuminating the causal nexus that brought about them. Toward the end of the speech, Max asks, “And out of what can they weave a different life, out of what can they mold a new existence, living organically in the same towns and cities, the same neighborhoods with us? I ask, out of what—but what we are and own?” (emphasis original 398). Max here highlights the extent to which one’s selfhood (“what we are”) is inextricably connected with what one possesses (“what we own”). By so doing, Max is offering an explanation of Bigger’s revengeful acts in Book II as ones motivated by the sense of dis/possession. In so doing, however, Max at once becomes the successor to the omnipresent third-person narrator, who, as seen previously, recapitulates Bigger’s life from outside in such a way that the protagonist would not. That is, Max’s speech, as Paul N. Siegel succinctly states, is “not seen and heard from Bigger’s point of view” (97). Tellingly, immediately after Max finishes his speech Bigger is represented in the following terms: “[h]e had not understood the speech, but he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max’s voice” (406). In this instance, Bigger’s narrative is possessed by someone else.

It is in this context that we can fully grasp the ending scene. Before looking at it, however, it is necessary to turn to a utopian vision Bigger reaches. Halfway through Book III, Bigger, following a long discussion with Max about his life, gains “a pinnacle of feeling” (360):

Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun’s rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun. (362)
Bigger glimpses a world where all the differences of race (“the colors”) and class (“the clothes”) vanish away. Indeed, the sun’s “blinding” quality is hardly incidental, given the repeated usage of this rhetoric throughout the novel, and thus the “blinding sun” might seem to be underscoring the “lack of viability” (Entin 253) of such utopian scenarios. It should not be missed, however, that people in this imagery are *dispossessed* of their property (“melted away”) and that, significantly enough, the sun’s rays draw something “common” skyward. This epiphanic moment thus gestures toward an alternative to capitalist ownership relations, though it is “blinding”—invisible and thus hard to tell what it looks like beforehand. It is true that Wright developed an aversion toward the CPUSA from the late 1930s and eventually left it in 1944. Yet, it does not follow that he has entirely abandoned a Marxist perspective. The ethereal picture can be read as indicating Wright’s aspiration to a “view of society as something becoming” (“Blueprint” 196), an alternative view to both an ossified, dogmatist politics and capitalist possessive relations. That is, Wright’s Marxism is visible equally in his attention to the property relation and in his utopian vision of superseding property.

After being sentenced to death, Bigger meets Max in his cell alone together. There, Bigger learns that he was wrong to assume that Max shared the utopian vision, which he gained prior to Max’s speech:

“I remembered all them questions you asked me. …”

“What questions?” Max asked, coming and sitting again on the cot.

“That night. …”

“What night, son?”

Max did not even *know!* Bigger felt that he had been slapped. Oh, what a fool he had been to build hope upon such shifting sand. (emphasis original 423)
Wright here deploys the modernist theme of incompatible points of view. In this conversation, Bigger even feels that “Max was upon another planet, far off in space” (422). For all his aspiration to share with Max the epiphanic vision of something “common and good,” Bigger cannot let the lawyer know it, resulting in a deep sense of despair.

Then, Max, leading Bigger to the window and encouraging him to see the city over there, talks about how civilization has unfolded out of people’s dreams. When Max explains how civilization has come to a halt, however, his comments become replete with words related to possession and property: “A few men are squeezing those buildings tightly in their hands” (427); “The men who own those buildings are afraid. They want to keep what they own, even it makes others suffer” (427); and “they take what people own and build power” (428). Even when Max touches on the issue of class struggle, he merely suggests, in a quite vague manner, that “the side that feels life most” will “win,” without pointing to anything outside of private ownership (428). That is why Bigger has to defy Max’s narrative by asserting that “what I killed for, I am!” (429).

Having failed to share with Max his epiphanic vision of what is “common,” and having been told once again the story of private ownership from Max’s viewpoint, Bigger, feeling as if there were no such thing as common, is compelled to avoid having his life reduced to part of the lawyer’s narrative.

As Kathleen Gallagher acutely points out, Wright, in the last few pages of the novel, “abruptly and disturbingly abandons Bigger’s point of view, giving the reader no more information than he gives Max and throwing the action into some confusion” (14). Indeed, it is this abandonment of Bigger’s point of view that provides the existentialist subtext. In this vein, Robert Butler sees in the final scene Bigger’s shift “from the status of a naturalistic victim to that of an existential hero” (57), while Katherine Fishburn considers the theme of Native Son to be
“the quest for identity” and finds in Bigger “the self-realization of a personality” and “the growth from neurosis to joyful self-actualization” (72). In so doing, however, these readings inevitably underestimate the influence of socioeconomic conditions on Bigger’s life, an influence that has almost dominated the whole story.

Rather, seen from the perspective of possession, the point is that Wright ultimately makes Bigger’s story unpossessable for readers. At the close of the novel, Bigger defies Max’s master narrative, thereby escaping from the third-person narrator’s voice as well. Throughout the novel, Bigger has always felt as if he were possessed by someone else. As seen above, even the third-person narrative voice has possessed his life from outside, in a naturalist fashion. When he gives up trying to make Max see his utopian vision of the “common,” Bigger decides not to concede his story to anyone else, instead calling it his own.

Conclusion

This chapter has read Native Son in light of the rhetoric of possession. At the end of the novel, Bigger’s story becomes unpossessable, making the protagonist its private owner. While existentialist-oriented critics rather optimistically insist on an establishment of selfhood in the final scene, I argue that the ending is an outcome of the difficulty that Bigger, and presumably Wright, had in imagining the outside of the possessor-possessed relation.

In the last scene of Native Son, however, Bigger’s last words to Max read, “Tell….Tell Mister….Tell Jan hello….” (430). For the first time in his life of twenty years, as numerous critics have commented, Bigger calls a white man’s name without prefacing it with “mister.”

Early in Book III, Jan similarly becomes the first white man to appear to Bigger as “a human being,” not as part of “that looming mountain of white hate,” when he speaks “a declaration of

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24 For instance, see Siegel; Miller; Smethurst; and Dawahare.
friendship that would make other white men hate him” (289). Rarely discussed though, is that Jan is, in this scene, represented as dispossessed of his property: “[Bigger] saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan’s face” (289). Here, it is through being dispossessed of his “deforming mask” of whiteness that Jan appears before Bigger as a specific human being, though Bigger is not entirely sure about what he beholds. Wishing to be remembered to Jan, Bigger, at the end of the novel, thus subtly gestures toward the epiphanic image of the “common,” as something to be distinguished from private ownership and possession. It is a utopian vision in which Bigger—who “does not own any property”—meets Jan, now free from the property of whiteness, in a “shadowy region, a No Man’s Land” (67), sharing non-possession in common. Ultimately, Bigger Thomas’s “faint, wry, bitter smile” (430) shown at the very close of the novel bespeaks Richard Wright’s aspiration—equally faint but indelible—to an outside to capitalist ownership relations.
Chapter 3

Between the Cultural and the Social:

Carson McCullers’s The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and the Theme of Labor

Introduction

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers’s first novel published in 1940, unfolds in a rural mill town in the Deep South between June 1938 and August 1939. The narrative revolves around the relationship between a deaf-mute named John Singer and four people who confide their worries only to him: Dr. Copeland, a Marxist, African-American intellectual working as town doctor; Jake Blount, a heavy drinking anarchist who is attracted to the idea of Communism; Mick Kelly, a 13-year-old girl who is the daughter of the family that manages the inn where Singer lives; and Biff Brannon, the owner of New York Café, a bar that the people in the town frequent. Each chapter develops around the relationship between Singer and each of these individuals until Singer is unexpectedly informed, at the end of Part 2, of the death of Antonapoulos, another deaf-mute and his only close friend. Despairingly, Singer commits suicide, drawing the novel to a close in a way that forces the four characters to resume their lonely lives.

Not only does The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter inaugurate her literary career, but it also marks a highly exceptional position in McCullers’s works, since none of her other novels so meticulously depicts socioeconomic problems, including poverty, racism and gender inequalities in the workplace. Leslie Fiedler even called it “the last of the ‘proletarian novels,’” a true

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Depression book,” suggesting that “its success may be rooted precisely in the tension between public hysteria, proper to an age of social protest, and private anguish, proper to the sensibility of its author” (478). Indeed, although the failure to find a common bond remained McCullers’s enduring concern, her later works are far less committed to the ways in which socioeconomic situations fundamentally condition people’s lives and interiority than *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is. Her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), centers on complicated love-hate relationships characterized by acts of voyeurism, whereas *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, first published in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1943 and then in book form in 1951, is a fairy-tale-like story populated by figures with physical deformities. *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) describes female adolescent Frankie Addams’s experiences over the course of a few days of a summer during which the tomboy protagonist struggles to find where to belong, challenging conventional wisdom about what is normal and what is not. McCullers’s final novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), engages the social problem of racism, yet the novel’s central concerns are more abstract issues such as the contemplation of death and the trajectory youth. In short, as Kasia Boddy observes, McCullers never again wrote “such an expansive, unashamedly political novel” as her first (xvii).

Notably, McCullers situates *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* within a period of peculiar importance in American political history, namely between June 1938 and August 1939, and even concludes Part 3, the final section of the novel, by describing the main characters’ experiences on August 21, 1939, two days prior to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact. This historical incident was a watershed moment in that the political agreement between the two countries, that is, between a totalitarian state and a supposedly socialist state, shocked the majority of Western
intellectuals and triggered their deep disillusionment with the idea of communism. As scholars have shown, the establishment of an apolitical literary standard during the Cold War period—a standard which prioritized tension and irony within literary works, fixing the binary opposition between modernism and realism, and then valorizing the former over the latter—was inextricably linked to the emergence of the renewed conception of liberalism as ideology-free, which was an idea derived from Western intellectuals’ profound disillusionment with Marxism.

It might be said that McCullers’s literary career more or less followed the same trajectory. Indeed, as McCullers’s biographer Virginia Spencer Carr writes, she was also “ardently interested in the writings of Karl Marx and other social protesters popular in the 1930s,” and was “increasingly aware of what she considered the weakness of her country’s capitalistic system” as well as of “the plight of the millworkers” in her hometown (48, 57). Moreover, the author was also familiar with the novels of social-realist writers such as John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, John Steinbeck, and James T. Farrell (38). In the late 1930s, McCullers pleasantly told her friends “that as a sympathetic agitator she had marched in peace parades in New York City and walked a picket line in support of striking waitresses at Woolworth’s” (38-39)—reminding readers of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter that one of the four main characters, Mick Kelly, ends up having no choice but to work at Woolworth’s 10-cent-store to help her poverty-stricken family at the expense of her school education. Yet, McCullers did not deeply engage in socioeconomic themes after writing her first novel. Therefore, we can find a close affinity

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26 For more on the impact the Nazi-Soviet pact had on Western intellectuals, see Guilbaut, 17-47.
27 One of the most compelling studies on this issue is Thomas Hill Schaub’s American Fiction in the Cold War. Schaub examines the process whereby US intellectuals came to repudiate communism out of the disillusionment with contemporary political events, such as the Moscow trials between 1936 and 1938 and the Nazi-Soviet pact, and he calls the logic they instead adopted liberal narrative. According to Schaub, liberal narrative defined liberalism as being neutral with respect to all ideology and prioritized modernism over realism on the assumption that realism was too ideological, whereas modernism was relatively immune to political affiliations and thus resonant with the American way of life.
between the author’s literary career and the changing political and critical situations from the late 1930s onward. Seen in this light, it will be illuminating to probe the ways in which McCullers’s first novel merges her abiding concern with inner solitude with the socialist issues specific to the Depression era, so as to approach this facet of the author’s historical consciousness inscribed in the novel.

From this perspective, this chapter attempts to read *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* against the backdrop of the contemporary rise of the Popular Front, a new political coalition of the time, in an effort to clarify how the novel’s aesthetics responds to its changing socio-political situation. The Popular Front, a broad left alliance launched in 1935 in order to resist the spread of Fascism in Europe, did not reject solidarity with the middle class. Of particular importance is the fact that, as a result of the need to make an alliance with the middle class, the Popular Front contributed to a process of transforming specific socioeconomic relations into cultural or psychological problematics, and that the concept of labor became separated from concrete relations of production in the process. By exploring the relation between the Popular Front movement and McCullers’s first novel, I will reconsider the novel’s aesthetics, with an emphasis on how the novel addresses the issue of labor.

This chapter intervenes in the preceding literary scholarship on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, then, by illuminating how socioeconomic descriptions in the novel are, far from being incidental, in fact fundamental to its aesthetics. At least in part because this is McCullers’s only novel that manifestly addresses socialist ideas, including Marx’s labor theory of value, its social-realist aspects have garnered little attention from critics, who have generally regarded such aspects as an aesthetic flaw or who have simply neglected them. Early critics tended to understand *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as an allegory for universalized human conditions such
as loneliness and alienation, thus assuming that the novel’s realist dimension is secondary or part of its aesthetic failure.  

Chester Eisinger contends that “[a] peripheral matter in this novel is the way in which Mrs. McCullers treats social problems” (251), whereas Lawrence Graver castigates McCullers’s inner conflict “between her desire to document the world and a desire to give it evocative poetic significance” (56). Recent studies that draw upon the insights of gender studies and queer theory have expanded the reading of the novel by investigating the ways in which its depictions of perverted desire or grotesque bodies “resist normalizing discourses” (Gleeson-White 2). The latest scholarship builds upon the insights of disability studies, illustrating how the novel’s treatment of disabled bodies takes issue with such notions as “normative citizens” and “cognitively unproductive citizens” (Rountree 190). Yet, these recent studies still neglect the proletarian themes of the novel, including the issue of labor. Drawing adequate attention to how the novel approaches the theme of labor offers, I argue, a way to read the novel less as an allegory for a generalized human condition than as an aesthetic response to a contemporary social situation.

When we consider the novel’s aesthetic mediation, its most salient formal characteristics lies in the ways in which the third-person narrator in each chapter always focuses on a single character, delving into their inner conflicts and unfulfilled desires. It is quite rare for readers to find any substantial communication among the four main characters surrounding Singer, that is, among Jake, Mick, Copeland and Biff. Ihab Hassan thus states that each character is contained in “a padded cubicle,” claiming that “The novel’s structure is broken up to convey the sense of

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28 For early studies examining the relation between The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter’s allegorical and realist aspects, see Evans; Eisinger; Hassan; and Graver.
29 For recent revisionary scholarship examining the novel in light of queer studies, see Kenschaft; Adams; and Gleeson-White.
30 For recent studies that investigate the novel in light of disability studies, see Russel; and Rountree.
‘mutual isolation’” (211). Joseph Millichap likewise argues that the novel’s “disjunctive narrative structure,” in which the third-person narrative voice merges with the character’s own voice “to create a technique close to stream of consciousness,” fully articulates “the Modernist vision of personal fragmentation and alienation in the modern industrial town” (346).

This aesthetic exhibits a sharp contrast to the omnipresent narrator characteristic of literary naturalism. In contrast to Dreiser’s Social Darwinist perspective in *Sister Carrie*, or to Steinbeck’s statistical macro perspective offered in the interchapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, or to Richard Wright’s deterministic, possessive narrative voice in *Native Son,* *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* seems to indicate the absence of any all-embracing narratives or any sense of totality, instead stressing the modernist theme of fragmented individuals or the incommensurability of the particular. Indeed, as Jennifer Murray observes, “McCullers’s narrator offers no transcendental values against which to evaluate the characters,” and we can find “no ‘key’ perspective or philosophy” in the separate paths and decisions of the characters. (113). One might assume that such an absence of “transcendental values” and “key perspective or philosophy” in the novel indicates that there was no reliable social thought or theory that would convince McCullers as to the function and structure of the whole human society as well as of her fictional world.

It is noteworthy, however, that the novel does have an important structural element that draws readers’ attention to the existence of certain *patterns* inherent in it: the ways in which Copeland, Mick and Jake, as with other people in the mill town, describe Singer as they wish him to be. This helps the reader recognize that there are patterns shared by the principal characters and that these patterns imply the socioeconomic forces working beneath the fictional world. Barbara Foley, for instance, argues that the literary text’s “reliance upon thematic
patterning of characters and events” effectively foregrounds that “the social forces shaping characters and events correspond with the forces producing changes in the world of its readers” (Radical 278). Although redundancy is often seen as something negative, Foley insists that redundancy, defined as “patterns of repetition and stress,” is indispensable to “the process of narrative persuasion” (Radical 267). In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, as I will discuss below, McCullers provocatively emphasizes the existence of shared patterns among characters, delineating the ways in which her characters’ freakish desires and their projections onto Singer are ineluctably informed by socioeconomic factors, particularly by the issue of labor. In so doing, McCullers tacitly draws upon the epistemology of literary naturalism, underscoring the determining role of social forces. The point is, however, that this differs from a reductive sort of Marxist economic determinism and that the issue of labor survives, in the novel, ultimately only as a trace. In this sense, the novel symptomatically registers, I will demonstrate, the changing political climate in the age of the Popular Front.

From this perspective, it then becomes possible to shed new light on the sense of commonality that The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter brings to readers, which preceding studies have often addressed. Although the novel’s plot shows neither any successful communication between characters nor any achievement of political solidarity, critics point out that readers can feel a certain sense of “a community of rich, complex creatures” (Murray 113-14). Whereas critics illustrate the novel’s affective force in terms of McCullers’s masterful skills, including characterization and symbolic representations, I will show how the author harnesses the rhetoric of labor to evince a sense of community for those who struggle. In portraying her “freakish” people, who cannot find any common social bonds in the story, McCullers tacitly makes use of rhetoric reminiscent of physical labor, thereby charging these characters’ shared eccentricities
with a flavor of social content. Here, McCullers’s deployment of labor rhetoric, I argue, is symptomatic of the Popular Front paradigm, particularly in emitting a sense of community organized around labor without capital.

It will be instrumental here to recapitulate the epistemological shifts brought about by the rise of the Popular Front movement, which I addressed in Introduction. Through the emergence of the Popular Front, the relation between the social and the cultural underwent a significant change during the latter half of the 1930s. On the one hand, American culture incorporated the rhetoric of the working class, thereby generating a “flavor” of co-working—a feeling that people were sharing pain and difficulty—among different social groups and classes. Michal Denning calls this process as “laboring of American culture.” On the other hand, the transformation of socioeconomic terms—such as labor, work, and toil—into cultural rhetoric inevitably caused a gap between the social and the cultural, just as “the laboring of American culture” had nothing to do with the accumulation of capital or with a socioeconomic transformation. In this process, the issue of labor came to be seen as something severed from the specifically economic domain of production. Furthermore, the alliance between the working class and the middle class inevitably made it difficult to fundamentally criticize the liberal, capitalist social system, failing to fully address questions of exploitation and poverty. In this instance, categories such as “proletariat” and “the working class” came to be understood in terms of group identity or cultural differences, rather than as dialectical categories constituted in relation to their counterpart, the bourgeoisie. McCullers’s first novel—which was written during this very period of a cultural turmoil in American political history and which is seen as one of the last proletarian novels—actively engages with the transformation in the social and cultural realms centered around the shifting notions of “labor.”
In what follows, I begin by examining the relations between Singer and the other four main characters, that is, Mick, Jake, Copeland and Biff. Through this examination, I demonstrate that the characters’ socioeconomic circumstances fundamentally condition their subjectivities, determining how each of them views Singer. In this respect, McCullers employs literary naturalism’s epistemology and this strategy can be taken as designating her Marxist understanding of the determining of force of labor. At the same time, however, McCullers also presents mutually incompatible views on Singer as reflections of different cultural identities, rather than of socioeconomic relations. Here, we can see that McCullers ultimately translates social problematics into cultural issues. In this instance, labor is separated from the specific domain of production, just as in the Popular Front’s “laboring of American Culture,” which posits labor without capital, and thus has nothing to do with the relations of production. From this perspective, it becomes possible to see the ways in which the sense of community that the novel brings to readers derives from McCullers’s deployment of the rhetoric of labor. Finally, I will examine the full implications of the novel’s last scene, which describes the rumination of Biff Brannon, the owner of New York Café.

The Four Main Characters’ Relations to Singer

Shortly before beginning to work on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers submitted an outline for the novel to the publisher Houghton Mifflin in April 1938. In the outline, McCullers writes of the novel’s basic structure: “On the whole the interrelations between the people of this book can be described as being like the spokes of a wheel—with Singer representing the center point. This situation, with all of its attendant irony, expresses the most important theme of the book” (143). Indeed, as the author suggests here, the novel revolves
around the relations between the deaf-mute and others. Except for Biff, the other three main characters of the novel—Mick, Jake, and Copeland—project illusions onto Singer, describing him as they hope him to be. For Dr. Copeland, Singer is the “only white man” who “realizes this terrible need of my people” (181). Jake thinks that he and Singer “have a secret together” (190), since the latter appears to be “the only one in this town who catches what I mean” (24). In Mick’s mind, Singer can hear and understand music despite his deafness and is “the only person in the inside room” (212), that is, in her imagined space where she can preserve things precious to her such as music and her passion for foreign countries.

Examinations of the novel’s themes such as universalized loneliness and spiritual isolation have often led critics to read these character relations as being based on Christianity. Hassan, for instance, interprets Singer as “playing the role of an unwilling Christ for men whom, in the end, he is powerless to redeem” (213). Recently, revisionary scholars have investigated the novel’s central character relations from more specifically historical and political perspectives. Emily Russell employs the insights of disability studies to claim that Singer’s disabled body “seems so outside the norms of social life that the characters discover in its excessive materiality an apparent escape from the constrains of modern life” (75). Focusing on these “queer friendships” that oddly lack “reciprocity,” Kristen Proehl observes that these relations raise questions about the possibilities of “intersectional relationships between different identity categories, including race, gender, sexuality, and disability” (154). It is important to note, however, that in portraying these one-way relations McCullers vividly describes the extent to which the characters’ socioeconomic positions fundamentally condition their subjectivities as

31 For instance, see Hassan; Eisinger; and Champion.
32 For instance, see Spivak; Proehl; Russel; and Rountree.
well as their lives, determining how they see Singer. This viewpoint makes it possible to understand that the exceptionality of Biff, the only person who can objectively observe the relations around Singer, is also enabled by his particular social position, exempted from the necessity of labor.

Serving as a town doctor, Copeland witnesses “[t]he death of poverty” of black people all over the mill-town, losing five of his patients as a result of “[t]he diets of cornbread and sowbelly and syrup, the crowding of four and five persons to a single room” (221). He decides that education is the key to the social change, yet cannot make understood his “real true purpose”—his goal of achieving a world free of racial and economic inequality—by anyone else, including his family (74). This causes the doctor to see Singer as “a white man of intellect and true knowledge” (173). Moreover, in Copeland’s eyes, Singer is Jewish because this “wise man” seems to have “the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed” like himself (121). In this way, Copeland’s view on Singer—who is Jewish—directly reflects his own experiences of suffering as an African American intellectual worker in the Deep South.

As for Mick, a 13-year-old tomboy, the way she gathers “[f]oreign countries and plans and music” together in her “inside room” does not necessarily indicate her romantic, aloof aspirations (145). Rather, it bespeaks the fact that music could be for her one of the few ways with which to escape her family’s impoverishment and to achieve her ideal future life. After Mick’s father, a painter and carpenter, breaks his hip in an accident, he unsuccessfully attempts working as a repairman. As the story unfolds, Mick’s family is increasingly placed in a position of need, to such an extent that she and her brother George are “downright hungry for two or three days” (210). As Singer recalls, Mick confides to him, “I just got to get a chance to write this music in me and be a musician. I got to have a chance” (190). Her pathetic repetition of “a chance”
suggests her belief that she does not possess any opportunities, including the chance to escape from poverty. Her “chances” are further limited by her gender, as she learns, “A boy has a better advantage like that than a girl. I mean a boy can usually get some part-time job that don’t take him out of school and leaves him time for other things” (216). In the end, she is forced to drop out of school in order to work for a ten-cent-store at Woolworth’s, which exploits and exhausts her: “If she went home now she would lie down on the bed and bawl. That was how tired she was” (395). The store’s motto reads, “Keep on your toes and smile,” and after engaging in affective labor there, Mick has to “frown a long time to get her face natural again” (305). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly points out, therefore, the “foreign countries and plans and music” that Mick places in her “inside room” indicates “the dreams of a classbound free spirit, a girl who can think cannily about herself and her family” (133). In this way, when Mick associates Singer with music and foreign countries and allows him to enter the “inside room,” her views on him are deeply connected to her specific form of social alienation, rather than solely related to the abstract theme of interrupted adolescence or romantic aspirations.

Jake, a working-class heavy drinker attracted to the politics of Communism, is resentful of the failure of labor union activities in the South. Although there were a few strike attempts in the decade, he recalls how strikebreakers summoned by the mill owners defeated them. As he reads the books of Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen, Jake gradually comes to understand that an exploitative economic system is at work. In his eyes, the largest problem is that even though he “knows,” he “can’t make the others understand” what he calls “the truths” of capitalist society (64, 141). After repeated failures to enlighten workers, Jake thinks that he and Singer are among the “people who know” and thus adopts him as an imagined comrade as a sort of last resort (25).

As we can see, a careful reading of this pattern—the ways in which Copeland, Mick, and
Jake uniformly seek to project their desires onto Singer—discloses that their gazes on the
deaf-mute reflect their own specific social alienations. In this respect, McCullers writes the novel
within the tradition of American literary naturalism, foregrounding, in quite schematic ways,
how fundamentally socioeconomic circumstances—above all the working environments
entangled with racial and gender inequalities—condition people’s personalities, ideas and
attitudes.

Seen in this light, the role of Biff Brannon, the only person who can detach himself from
Singer, assumes considerable importance. Far from describing Singer according to his own
desire, Biff even asks himself, “why did everyone persist in thinking the mute was exactly as
they wanted him to be—when most likely it was all a very queer mistake?” (197). Focusing on
Biff’s exceptionality, Nancy B. Rich states that he is “clearly the main character,” whose task
involves “the survival of freedom under a democratic political system” (119, 118). Although Biff
commits himself to detached observation and refrains from actively participating into events
around him, Rich regards Biff as a heroic character, since “the nature of the democratic process
is like that of Biff, slow, and the condition of freedom is perseverance” (122).

While rightly pointing to Biff’s significance in the novel, Rich misses the fact that
McCullers depicts throughout the novel how the other main characters’ views of Singer are
socially determined. When paying attention to the extent to which the main characters’ views of
Singer are determined by their socioeconomic circumstances, however, readers realize that Biff’s
disinterestedness is equally presented as something conditioned by his social standpoint. It is not
incidental that Jake, a man concerned with working-class politics, most directly criticizes Biff’s
contemplative attitude: “You live a fine life. Just standing behind a cash register” (200). This
statement not only highlights Biff’s inactivity (“just standing”) but also reveals the fact that his
detachment is enabled by his social position as a middle-class owner (living “a fine life”). Indeed, in the final chapter of the novel, Biff himself makes clear that “the reason for keeping the place open all through the night” is “[n]ot money” (309), and that “[t]here was no profit in it” (310). While it is clear that Biff is friendly and generous to his customers, these words also suggest that he is well-off enough not to worry himself over how to make ends meet. Similarly, in Chapter 2, Part 2, after Biff’s wife Alice passes away, he feels as if “there was infinite leisure” (111). Even if this passage is read as evidence of Biff’s unspoken shock at his wife’s death, the term leisure constitutes a strong reminder of his middle-class privilege. Put differently, Biff’s exceptionality is characterized by the absence of labor. Furthermore, Biff is also exempted from racism. When Jake takes Copeland to New York Café, for instance, one of the customers says, “Don’t you know you can’t bring no nigger in a place where white men drink?” (24). Nonetheless, “Biff watched this happening from a distance” (24). In this instance, the owner, despite his being one eighth-part Jewish, is spared from racial inequality. Thus, while Jake, Copeland, and Mick struggle with their own socioeconomic disadvantages, Biff is by and large free from social inequality. This is what distinguishes Biff from the others and allows him to objectify the relations between Singer and himself. In this sense, one might gather that McCullers maintains a Marxist perspective in her first novel, insofar as she presents the principal characters’ ideas and interiorities as inexorably determined by the socioeconomic contexts in which they are placed, particularly in terms of labor.

Socioeconomic Relations and Cultural Differences

On the other hand, the following passage complicates such naturalist descriptions of the relations between Singer and the other main characters, suggesting the transformation of the
socioeconomic into the cultural. It is not only Copeland, Mick and Jake, but also other unnamed residents in the town, that project illusions onto Singer:

So the rumours about the mute were rich and varied. The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he had received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O. A lone Turk […] claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish. [...] One old man from the country said that the mute had come from somewhere near his home and that the mute’s father had the finest tobacco crop in all the country. All these things were said about him. (177)

That is, this passage says, for the Jews Singer is a Jew, for the merchants a merchant, for a worker an organizer, and for a Turk a Turk. This passage thus treats the category of ethnic identity (“the Jews” and “the Turk”) and that of economic class (“the merchants,” “one textile union” and “one old man from the country”) in exactly the same way, without addressing what social conditions make these people think of Singer in their own ways. In so doing, this description erases socioeconomic contexts, instead presenting all of these various social groups uniformly as different cultures, or different ways of life, predicated on assuming the incommensurability of the particular. In this light, while the three main characters, Jake, Copeland and Mick, do have their views on Singer fundamentally conditioned by their specific social circumstances, it is nonetheless suggested here that they are representing different cultural groups, rather than any broader social relations.

Here, it will be necessary to consider McCullers’s treatment of Marxist ideas in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, an issue that comes to fore most clearly through the political views of the two Marxists in the novel, that is, Copeland and Jake. In Chapter 6, Part 2, Copeland delivers a
speech at the Christmas party for African-American people living in the town. In the course of the speech, Copeland explicates Marx’s labor theory of value.

Why does a brick house cost more than a cabbage? Because the work of many men goes into the making of one brick house. There are the people who made the bricks and mortar and the people who cut down the trees to make the planks used for the floor. There are the men who made the building of the brick house possible. There are the men who carried the materials to the ground where the house was to be built. There are the men who made the wheelbarrows and trucks that carried the materials to this place. Then finally there are the workmen who built the house. A brick house involves the labour of many, many people—while any of us can raise a cabbage in his back yard. A brick house costs more than a cabbage because it takes more work to make. (168)

Copeland’s speech indicates his understanding that the value of commodities derives from human labor, and that what lies at the core of capitalist relations of production is, therefore, labor. Moreover, based on this understanding, he explains that Marx thought the world is not divided “into Negroes or white people or Chinese” but “into two classes, the poor and the rich” (167). Copeland also states that the white poor workers’ hostility against black people in this mill town should be understood in this vein, saying that these white working-class people are “as much in need as” black people in the town (169). Thus Copeland observes: “The injustice of need must bring us all together and not separate us. We must remember that we all make the things on this earth of value because of our labour. These main truths from Karl Marx we must keep in our hearts always and not forget” (169). Although his audience acclaims his speech this time, he feels he has always failed to educate people around him in a way that satisfies him.
As with Copeland, Jake, another Marxist in the novel, also reads books by thinkers such as Marx and Thorstein Veblen. Jake hopes to teach workers in the town what he calls “truth,” that is, the capitalist society’s exploitative systems. In Chapter 4, Part 1, Jake talks to workers he encounters on the street. In fact, these workers are strikebreakers who came to the mill town six years ago when one of the rare strikes occurred there. Albeit in a manner far less theoretically elaborated than Copeland’s, Jake endeavors to let them know of the problem of capitalist social systems: “What I’m trying to tell you is plain and simple. The bastards who own these mills are millionaires. While the doffers and carders and all the people behind the machines who spin and weave the cloth can’t hardly make enough to keep their guts quiet. See?” (62). Yet, Jake ends up being laughed at by these workers. For all their understanding of Marx and their passion to change the status quo, both characters eventually fail to build any solidarity among the people around them.

In fact, as Spivak acutely points out, Copeland’s and Blount’s problems lie in “putting theory into practice” since they are “both men of words” (137). It should be noted, however, that this problem stems not so much from these two Marxists’ lack of abilities but from the social circumstances surrounding them in this mill town located in the Deep South. There has been no strike in the town over the past six years and there will be none in the future, because, the narrative voice tells us, people “could not get together” (176). People in the town have been made shortsighted: “by habit they shortened their thoughts so that they would not wander out into the darkness beyond tomorrow” (176). This description aptly captures why Jake fails to organize workers around him. As for Copeland, he, over the course of Part 2, changes his ideas on interracial solidarity, particularly after Willy, one of his sons, has his legs amputated due to an entirely unfair treatment in jail at the hands of racist prison guards. In order to appeal directly to
the judge, Copeland goes to the courthouse, but he ends up in being unjustly jailed. This atrocious experience of racism makes Copeland feel that he was wrong in naively believing in “the good of the hypothetical whole” (264-65)—as if renouncing, or at least fundamentally questioning, his theoretical understanding of the world.

All of this is summarized in the aforementioned outline of the novel, in which McCullers briefly sketches the setting of the novel. Although the story could have happened “at any place and in any time,” she writes, “there are many aspects of the content which are peculiar to America of this decade—and more specifically to the southern part of the United States” (McCullers “Author’s Outline” 147). She continues:

Industrial organization has made no headway at all among the workers in the town.

Conditions of great poverty prevail. The average cotton mill worker is very unlike the miner or a worker in the automobile industry—south of Gastonia, S.C. the average cotton mill worker has been conditioned to a very apathetic, listless state. For the most part he makes no effort to determine the causes of poverty and unemployment. His immediate resentment is directed toward the only social group beneath him—the Negro. (148)

That is, the novel’s unnamed mill town, often regarded as modeled on McCullers’s hometown Columbus, Georgia, is designed as a place impervious to Marxist practice. This is how McCullers understood the Jim Crow American South. While Copeland and Jake are familiar with the labor theory of value and seek to elaborate solidarity among workers beyond racial differences, this mill town in the South, in which people thwart each other, makes it unfeasible for the two Marxist to put their theory into practice. Put differently, this is another moment of social determinism: McCullers offers the failure of communication between Copeland and Jake
as structural, rather than as for individual reasons.

In this context, it is important to look to the overnight discussion between Copeland and Jake in Chapter 12, Part 2, which marks the only occasion in which the two Marxists engage in a substantial dialogue. After Willie’s aforementioned tragedy, Jake and Singer visits Copeland’s house, where the doctor and the organizer set forth their views, but they fail to develop a fruitful exchanges. Jake and Copeland have an argument regarding the problems of modern society and the actions needed to be taken. Jake considers that the whole of capitalist society is “built on a foundation of black lies,” insisting that “you couldn’t see the forest for the trees” (267). On the other hand, emphasizing that “the cotton must be picked before the cloth is made,” Copeland argues that “it is impossible to see the full situation without including us Negroes” (267, 262). Concerning the solution, Jake proposes to “give a talk on the dialectics of capitalism” (267) accompanied by Willie, whose legs were amputated as a result of the unjust treatment in jail, whereas Copeland plans to “lead more than one thousand Negroes in this country on a march” to Washington (266). Without reaching any agreement, they end up quarreling, eventually bringing the chapter to a close. Spivak characterizes this failed dialogue between two Marxists in terms of a difference between social justice “based on class struggle as seen from a primitive internationalist ‘vanguardist’ perspective” on the one hand, and social justice based “on the race struggle as seen from the domestic perspective of the colonized” on the other (22).

I would suggest, however, that this unfulfilling discussion between Copeland and Jake ought to be grasped in terms of the ways in which The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter translates socioeconomic issues into cultural differences. In the course of the debate, significantly, Jake and Copeland address how they see John Singer, showing their views to be incommensurable with one another:
“I [Copeland] am positive that he is [a Jew]. The name, Singer. I recognized his race the first time I saw him. From his eyes. Besides, he told me so.”

“Why, he couldn’t have,” Jake insisted. “He’s pure Anglo-Saxon if I ever saw it. Irish and Anglo-Saxon.”

“But—”

“I’m certain. Absolutely.”

“Very well,” said Doctor Copeland. “We will not quarrel.” (263)

Here, the two Marxists, despite their claim that they know the “truth,” too quickly finish the issue, thereby preserving what each of them believes regarding Singer’s ethnic identity. This passage closely resembles the aforementioned one in which a variety of social groups describe Singer as they hope him to be. In this instance, Jake’s and Copeland’s truths become a question of cultural difference, rather than of different ideas or ideologies. The way McCullers inserts this exchange about Singer’s identity into Jake and Copeland’s political debates reveals that the author here likens socioeconomic issues and ideological differences to cultural differences. Just as McCullers describes the way they set forth their mutually incompatible views on Singer’s identity, so she ultimately presents their different sociopolitical ideas as if they were cultural differences.33

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33 Intriguing enough, when McCullers submitted the novel’s outline to Houghton Mifflin, as Joan S. Korenman points out, the author thought about an entirely different outcome for their discussion: “The inner purpose of each man is seen fully by the other. In the course of a few hours these two men, after a lifetime of isolation, come as close to each other as it is possible for two human beings to be. Very early in the morning Singer drops by the house before going to work and he finds them both asleep together” (McCullers “Outline” 143). The outline also reads, the similarity between the two Marxists is “so marked that they might be called spiritual brothers” (141). As we saw above, however, the published novel actually describes a fundamental disagreement between them. There is no biographical information available that elucidates why this alteration happened, but it is tempting to think that McCullers, in the course of writing, came to substitute the cultural for the socioeconomic, as if echoing the Popular Front’s aesthetics. How this change happened seems to deserve further investigation. For preceding studies that examine the argument between Copeland and Jake, see, for instance, Spivak, Kaiser and Korenman.
Only when we understand that socioeconomic issues in the novel are already culturalized, can we fully appreciate a striking scene. Although the four main characters always visit Singer individually, there is a single instance in which all of them by chance visit his room on Christmas Day, 1938. For all their usual eloquence, the four strangely fall silent on this occasion, as if they have nothing to share with each other:

Singer was bewildered. Always each of them had so much to say. Yet now that they were together they were silent. When they came in he had expected an outburst of some kind. In a vague way he had expected this to be the end of something. But in the room there was only a feeling of strain. His hands worked nervously as though they were pulling things unseen from the air and binding them together. (186)

Referring to this passage, Spivak argues that one of the primary concerns of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is that “people cannot discover a common bond,” and points out that in the novel “the irreducible separation is based on race-, class-, and sex-struggle” (131). Although her analysis is revealing, it also seems to be important that in this passage, Singer does endeavor to reconcile the others: “His hands worked nervously as though they were pulling things unseen from the air and binding them together.” Critics have generally regarded Singer’s hands as a signifier of spiritual concerns or sexual desires. Hassan interprets Singer’s hands, alongside the inner music of Mick and the lips of Jake, as a symbol of “the secret issues of soul” (215), whereas Gleeson-White, in light of queer theory, considers them to be a trope of “forbidden desire, masturbatory or homosexual” (51).

Yet his hand gestures in the above quotation can be better grasped in terms of the issue of labor. For one thing, one cannot appreciate the full significance of Singer’s gestures without recognizing the fact that Singer is a skilled laborer: “Singer crossed the street and walked on
alone to the jewellery store where he worked as a silverware engraver” (7). As if to bespeak his ability as a skilled laborer, his hands are “slender and brown and very strong,” and he “always tended them [his hands] with care,” using “oil to prevent clapping” (182). The way Singer tenderly takes care of his hands suggests not so much narcissistic desire, as some critics say, but the practical need for maintaining them in order to make ends meet. Nonetheless, none of the four characters, as with all the other unnamed people in the town, conceives of Singer as a worker, as if placing him outside of history.

In addition, it is crucial to note that Singer’s hand gesture—“as though they were pulling things unseen from the air and binding them together”—is also strongly reminiscent of cotton mill workers, whose jobs chiefly involve spinning yarn or weaving cloth from cotton. This deserves notice because, as McCullers clearly depicts in the novel’s very first chapter, this is a cotton mill town where the majority of the population work in mill plants: “the largest buildings in the town were the factories, which employed a large percentage of the population. These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were very poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness” (9). Of course, there is a distinct gap between Singer’s silver-engraving, which renders him a skilled laborer, and labor in textile industry where, as Michael Goldfield explains, “skill levels for most of the work were low” and therefore “there was always an abundant supply of strikebreakers from rural areas without the workplace experience that might have led them to join the strikers” (73-74). The point is, however, that it is only in a figurative and slightest of ways that Singer can adumbrate the trace of labor with his hands, in his attempt to suggest “a common bond” between the main characters in his room. In sum, Singer’s hands seek, albeit unsuccessfully, to make understood that he is not a mythic figure outside of history but a single worker and to remind
people of a larger socioeconomic structure that inexorably circumscribes all of them who live in the cotton-mill town. And such attenuated senses of labor also contribute to the communal sense that the novel brings to readers, as I will discuss hereafter.

The Rhetoric of Labor in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

Preceding studies on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* have investigated the novel’s aesthetics in terms of a sense of commonality that it brings to readers. Julian Symons, for instance, points to “a poetic vision” in the novel that “transforms our common loneliness into something rich and strange” (22). Similarly, Jennifer Murray claims that “the novel’s force is in the overall movement of empathy with suffering, hardship, and failure, but also with love, companionship, and desire that it provokes in the reader,” emphasizing “the overall impression of a community of rich, complex creatures” (113-14). Although these critics aptly articulate the affective force of the text’s aesthetics, they assume that such a sense of community derives either from “the depth of [McCullers’s] characterization” (Symons 24) or from “symbolic representation, structure, and narrative voice” (Murray 108). Less discussed, however, are the ways in which McCullers draws upon the rhetoric of labor to create a sense of community for those who struggle.

In Chapter 1, Part 2 of the novel, after the boys she dislikes spoil the prom party she held, Mick Kelly suddenly begins to hurt herself alone in the yard of a neighbor:

The night was very dark. Suddenly Mick began hitting her thigh with her fists. She pounded the same muscle with all her strength until the tears came down her face. But she could not feel this hard enough. The rocks under the bush were sharp. She grabbed a handful of them and began scraping them up and down on the same spot until her hand was bloody. Then she fell back to the ground and lay looking up at
the night. With the fiery hurt in her leg she felt better. (108)

Catherine Martin reads this passage from a feminist viewpoint, claiming that Mick’s injuries indicate “a lack of respect for the image of white womanhood” that Mick’s sisters promote, and thus pointing out a moment of resistance against the norm of respectable womanhood (9). Indeed, it is certain that this sort of protest against social stereotypes and oppression provides the novel’s main characters with their idiosyncratic freakish qualities. It should not be missed, however, that this passage harnesses the rhetoric of labor. Mick hits her thigh “with all her strength,” as if she were a construction worker. She thinks she needs to feel the pain “hard enough.” After “scraping” rocks “up and down,” she “[falls] back to the ground” and feels “better” just as a physical laborer would do after finishing work. Of course, this labor is without capital and has nothing to do with the relations of production. Nonetheless, making use of the rhetoric of labor, McCullers encourages readers to read this scene, and by extension Mick’s overall adolescent struggle, as a form of work.

The rhetoric of labor also informs the struggle of Dr. Copeland, a black doctor and Marxist intellectual, who is “full of books and worrying” (47). In fact, Copeland shares with Mick a certain eccentricity. In a conversation with Copeland, Portia, his daughter, speaks of Mick as “a real case” (77). Meanwhile, Portia also thinks that this is the case with her father: “My father not like other coloured mens,” she says to Mick, “[e]verybody who know my Father say that he was a sure enough crazy man” (47). Indeed, in Portia’s eyes, Mick closely resembles Copeland. To Mick’s words that “I don’t believe in God any more than I do Santa Claus,” Portia replies, “That’s why it sometimes seem to me you favour my Father more than any person I ever knowed” (48). Mick resembles Copeland, Portia says, not in the face or in his looks, but in terms of “the shape and colour of your souls” (48). It should be noted, however, that the commonality between
Mick and Copeland not only concerns spiritual issues but also involves the rhetoric of labor. Unable to control his “evil anger” (131) stemming from his failure to educate black people around him, Copeland is eventually separated from his family. When he reunites with his family, he paradoxically feels “isolated and angry and alone” (131). It deserves notice here that his feeling is accompanied by physical aches. Staring at his family “with angry misery,” he “clamped his teeth down hard” and even “hardened himself so that each muscle in his body was rigid and strained” (132). In a way similar to Mick’s scene above, Copeland’s inner struggles that make him eccentric are associated with rhetoric redolent of labor, such as “hardened,” “muscle,” “rigid,” and “strained.” In another scene, moreover, though Copeland, a medical doctor, will be classified as an intellectual worker, McCullers emphasizes how physically exhausting his daily work is. As a town doctor, he walks around the whole town to see his patients day by day: “All the day and frequently half the night there was work. Because of the tiredness in him he wanted sometimes to lie down on the floor and beat with his fists and cry” (125). In this instance, his inner agony (his passion to “cry”) is juxtaposed with expressions reminiscent of labor (his passion to “lie down on the floor and beat with his fists”) in such a way as to make his intellectual work approximate to physical labor. Through these representations, Mick and Copeland, despite their entirely different social positions and individual experiences, are shown to share something in common with each other, insofar as both of them—called “a real case” and “a crazy man,” respectively—are struggling in ways evocative of labor.

From this perspective, we may shed new light on the figure of “freaks,” whose omnipresence in McCullers works induce readers to characterize her fictional world as a “parade of deformed and confused people seeking human connections” (Chamlee 233). One of the clearest examples of such images is found early in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, when the
third-person narrator addresses the hospitable attitude of Biff, the owner of the New York Café, toward his customers with physical deformities:

[H]e did like freaks. He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples. Whenever somebody with a harelip or T.B. came into the place he would set him up to beer. Or if the customer were a hunchback or a bad cripple, then it would be whisky on the house. There was one fellow who had had his peter and his left leg blown off in a boiler explosion, and whenever he came to town there was a free pint waiting for him. And if Singer were a drinking kind of man he could get liquor at half price any time he wanted it. (23)

Louis D. Rubin Jr. provides a typical reading of these people, claiming that they are “exemplars of the wretchedness of the human condition” in general and that their physical grotesquery “merely makes visible and identifiable their isolation and anguish” (118). Hassan likewise views the freak as a “metaphor” for the “sacrificial hero,” in quite a figurative fashion (215). In this passage, however, the person “who had had his peter and his left leg blown off in a boiler explosion” may very well be seen as a victim of a labor accident, rather than as a spiritual symbol of a universal human condition. Inserted into such a figurative passage, this unnamed laborer functions in a subtle way: he provides the passage with a flavor of social content, while ultimately remaining an abstract figure insofar as he is never given any specific background. This “freak” laborer thus embodies the way the novel merges one’s spiritual sufferings, such as agony and loneliness, with the figure of labor. In other words, in the aesthetics of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter—McCullers’s first novel and her last proletarian work—being a “freak” does not exclusively concern physical traits and spiritual issues but carries a trace of labor as well, though this labor is separated from the concrete social domain of production.
From this perspective, it is also notable that two of the main characters, Biff and Jake, are also called freaks. In fact, these two join Mick and Copeland in engaging in the process of the laboring of American culture. Early in the novel, Biff has a quarrel with Alice, his wife, regarding whether he should drive Jake out of his bar, since this customer does not pay for his drinks. Clearly showing her hostility to Jake, Alice describes him as “nothing but a bum and a freak” (17), a statement to which Biff replies, “I like freaks” (17). Then, Alice says, “I reckon you do! I just reckon you certainly ought to, Mister Brannon—being as you’re one yourself” (17).

As for Jake, a heavy-drinking Marxist, he does give to the café owner the impression that “something was deformed about him,” though he is not a freak physically (22). Since “each part of him was normal,” Biff decides that Jake’s freakishness lies “not in the body” but “in the mind” (22). It is important here that Jake’s idiosyncrasy is emphasized not in terms of his working-class body or appearance, such as his skin “burned a rich, red brown by the sun” but in terms of the psychological feature of freakishness in his mind, just like Mick and Copeland, as seen above (201). Insofar as being a freak is linked to a sense of culturalized labor in the novel’s aesthetics, Jake joins Mick and Copeland in conveying a shared sense of labor, in ways separated from specific relations of production.

Additionally, Biff, the owner of the New York Café, is also called by his wife Alice a “freak.” In fact, as Alice suggests, he is quite unique and even “deviant” when it comes to the issue of his sexuality. He worries over his impotence (208); after Alice’s death, he begins to use her perfume “Agua Florida” and “lemon rinse,” both of which he “liked” (197–99); he wishes he were Mick’s “mother” (119); he has a crush on Mick as long as she is still a tomboy and later loses his interest in her when she grows into womanhood; and he thinks that “By nature all
people are of both sexes,” that is, androgynous (119). If the term “freak,” as we saw above, not only designates physical deformities and inner alienation but also carries a sense of labor in the novel, then Biff, who is called another freak and who worries himself over his unfulfilled love for Mick, may also be presented as committed to the same sort of struggles as the unnamed freakish people in the aforementioned passage are.

Here, noticing the ways in which characters’ internal struggles are linked to the rhetoric of labor offers a key to understanding the political aesthetics of the novel. Readers will realize that the novel echoes what Denning calls the laboring of American culture in that it embodies the ways in which characters’ various inner struggles are shown to be entwined with working-class rhetoric and figures. In this instance, as Denning explains in the aforementioned passage, laboring comes to designate a “painstaking and difficult” process, that is, “an incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture, with hesitations, pauses, defeats, and failures” (xvii). In the aforementioned outline for The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, McCullers explains the novel’s theme as “man’s revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible” (McCullers “Author’s Outline” 124). She continues: “Each man must express himself in his own way—but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society. [...] Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature” (124). Here, McCullers tacitly implies that one’s resistance to an oppressive social structure should take the form of full expressions of his or her personal feelings (“must express himself”), rather than the form of criticizing exploitive capitalist society directly. Additionally, this quotation suggests the degree to which McCullers conceived of political solidarity as something difficult to achieve (unnatural social traditions make people “uncooperative”). On the other hand, at the end of the same outline, McCullers also
writes, “there is the feeling that, no matter how many times [the novel’s characters’] efforts are wasted and their personal ideals are shown to be false, they will be united and they will come into their own” (149). This quotation suggests that McCullers posits certain “efforts” that may lead to the “unity” of the characters, though she realizes the difficulty of fostering people’s “cooperation.” It may well be that what McCullers mentions here shares with the Popular Front a commitment to a culturalized and psychologized concept of labor, which serves as a bond to connect people of different backgrounds, but in which labor is no longer understood in relation to its social context or to the accumulation of capital.

In sum, the sense of commonality or community, which we saw at the beginning of this section, stems not only from McCullers’s masterful skills, but also from the new way of understanding laboring—laboring as a shared sense of struggling—that the author learned and internalized in the late 1930s. At the same time, it should be noted that this labor is already separated from specific social domains of production. Indeed, as we saw in Introduction to this chapter, McCullers never again depicted Marxist issues in her literary works after first novel The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored socioeconomic themes in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, an aspect critics have usually ignored or downplayed as an aesthetic flaw, with a particular focus on the issue of labor. As if echoing the Popular Front’s revising of the notion of labor, the sense of community the novel awakens in readers is undergirded by the rhetoric of labor. While on the level of plot, the characters can never achieve any true solidarity, ultimately remaining lonely, their shared feelings of struggling enable these “freakish” people to emit a certain sense of
connections, involving them in the process of the “laboring of American culture.” This Popular-Front-influenced view of labor and connections, however, has little to do with the accumulation of capital and thus hardly serves as a launch pad for socioeconomic resistances. On the other hand, as Copeland’s speech on Marx’s labor theory value epitomizes, the novel also refers to the idea that what lies at the core of the capitalist society is none other than labor, pointing to the possibility of workers’ solidarities beyond races. Yet, the setting of McCuller’s fictional mill town in the Deep South, where people alienate each other, never allows them to achieve fruitful solidarities. Even the two Marxists, Copeland and Jake, despite their shared understanding of capitalist exploitation, fail to understand each other. The rhetoric of labor, as deployed in the novel, thus serves as substitute for the failure of solidarities between characters within actual sociopolitical contexts.

It should be noted, however, that here specific socioeconomic contexts already melt into the air, and consequently the problematics of ideology and thought is translated into the issue of cultural differences. Indeed, the relations between Singer and other main characters, which constitute the framework of the whole novel, are determined in a naturalist way, or in such a way as to designate the extent to which social contexts profoundly condition one’s interiorities, ideas and feelings. The three main characters, Copeland, Mick and Jake, have their views on Singer tightly constrained by their own experience of socioeconomic alienation, above all of working environments. Nevertheless, when other residents in the town also imagine Singer as they hope him to be, McCullers depicts this in a way suggestive of identity politics, predicated on the assumption of the incommensurability of cultural differences. Therefore, while the three main characters’ gazes on Singer are inseparably linked to their specific sociopolitical experiences, McCullers ultimately presents their relations in terms of different ways of life, as the Popular
Front aesthetics emphasized cultural divides at the expense of the notion of typicality.

Understanding *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*’s aesthetics in this way enables us to grasp the full significance of its ending, where Biff, alone in New York Café, loses himself in his meditations.

> [I]n a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valour. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labour and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. [...] One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. (312)

This passage highlights three important aspects of the novel’s aesthetics. First, when Biff feels his soul’s expansion, he places “labor” and “love” in the same category along with “human struggle” and “valor,” opposing them to “a warning” and “a shaft of terror,” which shrink his soul. Given the fact that Biff, immediately before this scene, listens to the radio news about “the crisis Hitler cooked up over Danzig,” what frightens him is obviously the spread of Fascism (309). Thus, Biff regards “labor” and “love” as combining to constitute a way to resist it, in a manner that is deeply resonant with the Popular Front’s efforts to form solidarity against the Fascism through the laboring of American culture. Readers will remember that Biff’s unfulfilled, motherly love for Mick is presented as something “freakish,” reminiscent of a flavor of labor.

Second, this passage inscribes McCullers’s historical consciousness at the end of the 1930s.
Focusing on the way the passage refers to both “the past” and the “future,” Rich claims that Biff “is beginning to get perspective on things” (122). More significant, however, is that this passage associates “the left” with “the past” and “the right” with “a future of blackness, error, and ruin,” as if to suggest that leftist politics has already become something residual and that Fascism inevitably leads to a catastrophic future. Ultimately, Biff seems “suspended” not only between “radiance and darkness” but also between “the left” and “the right,” as if echoing the emerging concept of liberalism as allegedly neutral and ideology-free.

Thirdly, it is not incidental that McCullers concludes the whole novel by describing the agony of a middle-class person. Indeed, Biff is placed in a somewhat ambivalent political situation. When seen in the rising paradigm of the Popular Front—a political coalition inclusive of the middle class—he is a member, and he joins in the laboring of American culture, especially in terms of his oppressed sexuality, sharing with Mick, Copeland and Jake a “freakish” quality. On the other hand, however, this middle-class, white male is characterized by the absence of labor, which enables him to detach himself from Singer, unlike Mick, Jake, and Copeland. Biff’s final question reads, “was he a sensible man or was he not?” (312). By closing her novel with Biff’s meditation, Carson McCullers offered her contemporary middle-class readers a mirror with which to reflect their own political standpoints.

In this way, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter’s* aesthetics bear witness to the process in which the Popular Front brought about the culturalization of labor and necessarily prepared the ground for the predominance of liberalism in the postwar period. Needless to say, my conclusion is neither that the novel’s political perspective is limited nor that its aesthetics merely reflects its historical moments. Rather, this masterpiece helps us realize the historical inevitability of this process by vividly showing us what the contemporary political climate felt like and by depicting
the issue of labor in ways that foreground its changing meaning. The novel’s aesthetics thus symptomatically registers the atmosphere of the Popular Front era. It is in this sense that The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter can be read as marking the last of the proletarian literature.
In the epilogue to his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” first published in 1936, the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin writes of Fascism’s strategy to dominate the proletarian masses:

Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. (241)

In response to the rise of Mussolini and Hitler in Europe, Benjamin here points to the ways in which fascism, understood as an extreme form of capitalist order, seeks to control the “proletarian masses” by replacing politics with aesthetic expression, the socioeconomic with the cultural. Such attempts to make politics aesthetic, Benjamin then maintains, will inexorably lead to war, in which the destruction of humanity will be experienced as something beautiful. Against this aestheticization of politics, Benjamin says Communism responds “by politicizing art” (242).

Benjamin’s insights touch on various problematics to which Steinbeck’s, Wright’s, and McCullers’s “politicized” artworks respond in their own ways, such as labor, property, and the relation between the social and the cultural, as we have explored. Benjamin’s use of the term “proletarian masses,” rather than “the people,” designates a Marxist perspective that sees power relations in light of the relations of production, and thus opposes his political view to the rising paradigm of the Popular Front. Despite the fact that the Popular Front emerged as a way to resist
the spread of fascism, its attempt to substitute the symbol of “the people” for that of “the worker” erased the issues of labor and antagonistic class relations in a way paradoxically similar to fascism. In contrast, Benjamin stresses the proletariats’ “right to change property relations,” never dismissing a critique of capitalist ownership relations. He also warns that “the chance to express oneself” should not supplant “political life.” Against the reification of aesthetic and cultural domains, Benjamin seeks to place artworks and cultural products back into history and specific socioeconomic circumstances. In this sense, Benjamin’s admonition seems to apply, paradoxically enough, to the Popular Front’s translation of social issues into cultural ones.

As has been explored, the aesthetics of the three proletarian modernist novels—Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wright’s *Native Son*, and McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*—respond to contemporary political situations in the age of Popular Front. Steinbeck was definitely against fascism, but he could not espouse communism as a solution to it, either. This is because both of them appeared to him to be the manifestation of the phalanx, or a group-men, an entity that acts according to its own will, regardless of the individuals’ wills. For him, the traditional value of individualism remained ultimately inviolable. On the other hand, he realized the necessity to have a macro perspective on social phenomena in order to change the status quo, and this realization made him count on the statistical data newly made available by the New Deal administration. The alternating interchapters and narrative chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* show two different worldviews, presenting a macro perspective on the migrant farmers’ statistical situations in such a way that does not predetermine the trajectory of the idiosyncratic, atypical individualists in the story. In the symbolic ending scene, we witness an imaginary synthesis of the two different realities represented in the two sorts of chapters, one holistic and the other individualistic. Steinbeck’s modernist formal experiment, which complicates the
determinist epistemology of literary naturalism, thus aesthetically mediates his political views.

I have read Wright’s *Native Son* in light of the rhetoric of possession as deployed in it. I argued that *Native Son*’s dream is not to give Bigger the “chance to express himself” within the existing social order, to borrow Benjamin’s above words, but to “change property relations” through its fundamental critique into possessive individualism, which lies at the core of the modern capitalist system. Though Bigger seems to achieve his own will and agency as the story unfolds, his new sense of freedom is in fact predicated on the possession of invaluable property, that is, his knowledge of Mary’s murder. In addition, Wright complicates the voice of the third-person, omnipresent narrator by charging it with the issue of narrative possession. When Bigger, at the end of the novel, defies the all-embracing narrative told by Max, Bigger’s story becomes unpossessable for both Max and the readers. By composing the whole novel—both in content and form—innovatively in terms of the rhetoric of possession and property, Wright’s proletarian modernism provocatively foregrounds the extent to which capitalist society builds upon ownership relations. The tenuous but indelible possibility of reconciliation between Bigger and Jan, in my analysis, indicates Wright’s hope to change property relations.

McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, her last proletarian work and first novel, bears witness to the process of “laboring of American culture” in the Popular Front era. On the one hand, McCullers tacitly draws upon deterministic epistemology in describing the relations between main characters, bringing into relief how socioeconomic circumstances, particularly working environments, profoundly condition one’s interiority, subjectivity and desire. The writer thus writes her text within the tradition of literary naturalism. McCullers also has her fictional characters speak about Marxist ideas, including the labor theory of value, showing her own understanding of Marx as well. On the other hand, however, she ultimately presents different
political ideologies and different social standpoints, which are represented by the main characters, as different ways of life, suggesting her assumption of the incommensurability of cultural differences. Instead of describing any actual solidarity between characters, McCullers’s modernist aesthetics employs the rhetoric of labor to convey a sense of community of those who struggle against their social oppressions, aligning itself with the “laboring of American culture.”

To borrow once again Benjamin’s words from the above quotation, the goal for “proletarian masses” in the novel, becomes not “a right to change property relations” but “a chance to express themselves.” Yet, the way McCullers concludes her novel with the meditation of Biff, a middle class owner of café who is exempt from labor, suggests that the author also provides her middle-class readers with an opportunity to reflect on their own political standpoints as well as on the contemporary political paradigm, which were to lead inexorably to the reign of liberalism.

To put it simply, throughout this dissertation I have attempted to clarify how the three proletarian novels, critically and popularly acclaimed, address the relations between Marxist ideas, political solidarity and American value of individualism both in content and form. I wanted to illuminate a variety of aesthetic responses to the political climate in the Popular Front era, in which it became increasingly difficult to fundamentally query capitalism and liberalism due to the disillusionment with Communism that writers, artists, and intellectuals experienced in those days. Far from just catering to the predominance of liberal capitalism after the end of the WWII, these great literary texts, through their amalgamation of naturalist epistemology with innovative aesthetics, show us a variety of ways to consider the relation between Marxist insights and lived experiences in the US, including the traditional value of individualism.

It is my hope that this study contributes to enriching our understanding of the convoluted relations between thirties proletarian literature, innovative aesthetics, Marxist perspectives, and
individualism, encouraging further discussion. As Wright emphasizes “a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired” (“Blue Print” 196) in setting forth important themes for politically conscious writers, society is in the process of becoming, and so is history. Therefore, what thirties proletarian modernism teaches us is not of nostalgic interest, but suggestive of how we can imagine a genuinely better world today, which will look radically different from the one we live in at this historical moment.
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