# Subterranean Sound, Expatriation, and the Metaphor of Home: A Fictional Descent with Richard Wright

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**Abstract:** In 2021, the unexpurgated second novel of American author Richard Wright was at last unearthed from the depths of the archive. In a vivid demonstration of the affective capacity of written sound, *The Man Who Lived Underground* tells the story of a man who finds an unlikely refuge from imminent death in the sewer beneath the city streets. This article listens closely to Wright's portrayal of architectural acoustics and sonic distortion within the text, attending to sensory and metaphorical dimensions of urban and social stratification. Drawing on Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's co-conceived "fantasy in the hold", I push back against the overwhelmingly dystopian readings of Wrights subterranean as a scene of racialized subjection. Their "undercommons" allows me to reframe the undercity as a site of refusal and a source of collective empowerment. Returning to Wright himself, I connect the subterranean metaphor to deeper biographical themes of intellectual exile and his eventual expatriation to Europe. In a gesture redolent of the undercommons, he followed his character in locating a quality of freedom underground. I read this autonomous inversion of the Middle Passage—the lateral motion of the middle crossing—as comparable to the vertical mobility that frames the events and stakes of the story.

**Keywords:** Richard Wright; 1908–1960; African American men in literature; architectural acoustics; transatlantic slave trade; sound in literature; speculative fiction; symbolic inversion; urban infrastructure

## 1. Introduction

On May Day, 1936, the American author Richard Wright sat on a park bench in Chicago's Grant Park Plaza, processing a new feeling of numb disillusionment. He had just been ejected from a public procession of the annual labor demonstration by his former allies in the Communist Party. At the time, the author was working as a literary apprentice for the Federal Writers' Project—a federally funded WPA program that employed writers to document American cultural life—a position that complicated his local political affiliations. As he sat holding his bleeding hands, he felt his dazed confusion give way to an objective clarity. That evening, he sat alone in his room with pencil and paper. Years later, in the final passage of his autobiography, he would recollect the thoughts that ran through his mind that evening.

> Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human (R. Wright 1977, p. 135)[1].

In these ultimate lines Wright inscribes in sonic metaphor the political legacy he desires for his literary career.[2] He imagines himself using echolocation to assemble words into a bridge for connecting the hearts of readers with the realities of social life in America. Within this metaphor of the author as engineer, Wright surveys his worksite using sound

as his instrument, as would a whale or dolphin in the low-light expanse of the ocean. In characterizing this mode of sonic production and reception, Wright implies two worlds: an interior realm from which he writes about a nebulous world outside. As with the lightest of footsteps, he tentatively tests the space ahead, gauging its potential, probing its efficacy. The spatial and figurative gulph between them is dark and vast, and yet, not clearly delineated.

At the time of writing, Richard Wright had already given considerable thought to the metaphor of echolocation as mediation between worlds. On 24 July 1941, he notified his literary agent that he had begun work on a new book-length manuscript. *The Man Who Lived Underground* follows the story of the eponymous main character, who is falsely accused of murder and averts police apprehension by establishing first a hiding place and then a temporary residence belowground in the city sewer system. This environment, which I refer to as the "undercity", is a parallel landscape that at once coincides and exists-apart from the world aloft. The two locations share an acute proximity, for indeed the passages of the undercity mirror the lattice of the city streets above. However, in other ways, it lies a meaningful distance from the dangerous sociocultural conditions that the man has left behind.

Literary depictions of echo and other sonic effects including reverberance, envelopment, distortion, and fidelity perform crucial sensory and metaphorical roles within *The Man Who Lived Underground*. The "aural architecture" of Wright's resonant sewer signals safety and precarity, blurs hope and despair, and inverts beauty and the grotesque in a vivid demonstration of the affective capacity of written sound (Blesser and Salter 2006). This article builds upon Jennifer Lynn Stoever's identification of "writing sound, or more accurately, writing listening" as an important component within Wright's broader oeuvre of "social realist literary experimentation" (Stoever 2016, p. 183). Pushing back against dystopian readings of Wright's fictional underworld, I underscore the productive potential afforded to the eponymous character by the subterranean.[3] Not only a site of darkness, fetid water, and disorienting echo, the tunnels beneath the city are also the means by which he preserves his life, and even achieves tenets of security formerly unrealized in the open air above. Beyond the standard reading of the undercity as a "scene of subjection" (Hartman 1997), Harney and Moten help me to reframe under-ness as a place of empowerment in what they call the radical black commons. Their co-conceived "fantasy in the hold" offers an instrument for reading Wright's fictional and biographical undergrounds as sites for exercising "the right to refusal" (Harney and Moten 2013, pp. 84–99).

In a gesture redolent of the undercommons, Richard Wright—in a manner of speaking—himself went underground. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of diasporic citizenship and Black internationalism, I connect the subterranean metaphor to deeper biographical themes of intellectual exile, editorial censorship, and his eventual expatriation to Europe. I read this autonomous inversion of the Middle Passage—the lateral motion of the oceanic crossing—as comparable to the vertical mobility that frames the events and stakes of the story. Attending to these modes of stratification, I evoke Saidiya Hartman's speculative fiction of the slave ship hold, narratively listening to the faint, detached, and yet strangely familiar sounds that filter through the scuttles from above.

## 2. A Sonic Narration

*The Man Who Lived Underground* follows Wright's eponymous character, a young Black man named Fred Daniels, over the course of a late summer weekend. Organized into three parts, the story follows a simple ternary form that opens in the city streets, modulates to a subterranean setting, and recapitulates aboveground where it began. Wright balances this unencumbered structure with an omniscient narrator's privileged account of his protagonist's minute thoughts and sensory experiences. As Daniels moves between upper and lower realms, from blinding brightness to blanketing darkness, his eyes are slow to adjust. Sound replaces sight in a new sensory ontology, in which elevational shifts correspond to contrasting acoustic environments and a broad array of audible effects, distortions, and omissions. Sometimes muffled, sometimes echoing, often distant but occasionally close,

sound enables character and reader alike to parse material and metaphorical permutations. In this way, Wright's generosity of sonic description and reliance on sonic metaphor offer a kind of parallel narration of the story.

In the following synopsis, I use the plot as a framework for identifying and exploring three significant sounds that mediate above and belowground realms of the story. First, the sound of moving water is a consistent presence, sometimes as the soft hiss of rain splattering steadily on pavement and other times alternating between the faint trickle and roaring torrent of the sewer. Water, with its innate predilection for seepage, is a reliable reminder of the existence of two worlds. It plays by the single rule of osmosis and permeates boundaries between seemingly irreconcilably distant sides. Like water, which carries a certain inalienable association with birth and rebirth, the clanging sound of the falling manhole cover serves as a consistent reminder of emergent possibility.[4] It rings like a bell broadcasting an invitation for action, a declaration of free will, self-determination, and hope. In this way, the clang is the sonic antithesis to the story's pervasive accounts of police sirens and accompanying traffic rumblings. From beginning to end, from street to sewer, the siren serves as a profuse, explicit, sonic analogue for danger, torture, and imminent death. Together, the sounds of water, metal, and siren persist at the forefront of the man's consciousness, directly informing his and our assessments of safety and precarity, hope and despair, and beauty and the grotesque.

The story opens upon Fred Daniels at the close of a long week of work on the grounds of the estate of a wealthy white family. As he walks home to his pregnant wife, he fondles a wad of paper bills in his pocket, reflecting with pride and contentment on the hard labor his body has given for these wages. These domestic thoughts are violently interrupted when he is approached by a trio of police officers who wrongfully charge him for the recent murder of a white family. At the police station, Daniels is subjected to horrific torture and is eventually coerced into signing a false confession. Despite his physically battered and semi-conscious mental state, he manages to escape police custody and disappears into the dark and rainy streets. The abridged story opens upon him here, cowering in the dark corner of an alley.[5] His muddled mind vacillates between dissociation and terror and is arrested by the sound of a police car siren that "stab[s] [in]to his consciousness" (R. Wright 2021a, p. 49). Crouching in place, he hears the Doppler effect of rising and falling tones relay the proximity of danger that he cannot see. Amidst the threatening sounds of sirens and traffic, another voice "pipes up" an offer of safety. That agent of ironic salvation announces itself in the form of a small spurt of dark water that "snakes into the air from the perforations of a manhole cover" (p. 49). Like an invisible ally who beckons "psst" from a good hiding spot, the friendly water raises the disc of metal and, juggl[ing] it for a moment, lets it fall with a "clang" (p. 53). This sound announces a perforation between the two worlds of the city and the sewer below.

The following moments of action are suspended over several pages of metaphor-rich prose in which the reader lives the sensory minutia of the moment. The man tracks the siren with his ears as it moves at different speeds in different directions. The sound emerges and subsides within the soundscape of screeching brakes, whirring tires, and the muffled hum of rain. The changing qualities of the siren, its fluctuating volume and pitch, serve as an indicator of danger and safety, a cue for action and inaction. The man's wired thoughts and feelings follow the undulating quality of the sound as it "scream[s]" [with] thirst (p. 51), whine[s] hungrily, and "die[s] plaintively" (p. 49). These changing effects alternately strike Daniels "stiff with terror", beating on his tired ears (p. 52), and relax him into appreciative laughter, affecting his decision-making process to a degree that he himself does not fully register.

Remembering the alluring clang of the manhole cover and investigating further, he "stoop[s] and squint[s]" down into it, seeing nothing but hearing the "droning roar of water in the black depths of the underground" (pp. 51–52). It is a sound of steady constancy, so unlike the piercing taunt of the siren. Finally, with a "hoot of warning", the siren "g[ives] him the signal he [is] waiting for" (p. 51). Daniels dives beneath the manhole cover and it

is reinstalled with a clang that rings above his head rather than below his feet. Within the timescale of the story, these events transpire as a split-second impulse. The eponymous elevational inversion now complete, other subtler acoustic and social inversions begin to surface.

### 3. Acoustic Effects and Affects

From this new vantage, the man's eyes are plunged into relative darkness, save the meager light that his trembling fingers can muster from a few soggy matches. Though he can still hear the police car siren, its former "needle-point sharpness" is now a faint, muffled blare. He listens, motionless, in a kind of trance,

> He had never thought that cars could sound like that; everything seemed so strange and unreal under here. He did not know how long he stood there in the darkness, knee-deep in the flowing water, musing over the sound of the car (p. 54).

At first Daniels balks at the inner world of the sewer pipes, their slippery walls, noxious fumes, and even the sight of an infant's floating corpse. And yet, his fear is quickly overtaken by curiosity. He decides to explore a dry passage left untouched by the surging water, and stumbles upon a hollow cavity some five feet below the floor of the tunnel (p. 60). The enclosing walls temper his skittish nerves with a sense of sheltered security and sensory control. Here, in what he will come to call his cave, Daniels establishes a new home underground.

The more he acclimates to subterranean life, the more attuned he becomes to the behavior of sound underground. He listens closely to the spatial acoustics of his cave and the rest of the undercity, especially to its distortion of sounds from above ground. Sometimes the insulating property of the earth causes the absorption of sound, dulling the trajectory of vibrations. Wright conveys this material property using onomatopoeia when he describes the pacing steps of the police officer's hard shoe soles transformed into a muffled "bomp… bomp… bomp…" (pp. 124–25). Other sonic distortions are produced when impermeable human-constructed materials reflect soundwaves. The concrete ceiling of his cave bounces sounds back and forth across the room, producing the muddling effect that acousticians call reverberation.[6] Daniels repeatedly struggles to identify sound sources otherwise easy to deduce above ground. In one instance, blindly navigating toward a mysterious noise, he asks himself,

> *What was that?* The vast overhanging silence made what little sound that did trickle through seem off beyond description. Yet, those strange sounds were somehow very familiar to him; that was it: *strange* but *familiar*. It was as though he were trying to remember something almost erased from his memory. Was it music he was hearing? Or perhaps singing? Or was it a trolley crashing past over steel tracks? Or a siren? Or perhaps a baby crying…? (p. 61, emphasis original).

Though he eventually identifies the sound as a church choir filtering through the chapel basement and out into the undercity, he still cannot discern the expression on their tongues, whether it be joy or despair. The melody of their singing rises as if "from within some enclosed crater of the moon" (p. 61).

The voices of churchgoers and the heavy-booted footfalls of shop employees emanate from the buildings' interiors out into the undercity. The sounds lead Daniels to the cracks and crumbling places in the foundations, which he enlarges into human-sized orifices using a length of found iron pipe. By way of these outlets, he enters and explores the basements of contiguous buildings, collecting resources to stockpile in his cave. Invisible and otherwise undetected, he tunnels new passages into the basements of various business establishments, including the church, a movie theater, a butcher shop, an insurance office, a funeral parlor, a jeweler's shop, and a produce stand.

Throughout his daily activities, Daniels listens with hypervigilance not only to the aural architecture of the sewer, but also to his own contributions to the greater soundscape.

His embodied behavior reflects his desire for inaudibility. He tiptoes slowly to minimize the sound of his footfalls, laughs silently, and scrapes carefully with the screwdriver, mindful to remove and replace bricks gently. From below, he encounters other pleasing sounds: the clacking of a typewriter, the clicking of the dial of a safe, the "tinkle" of coins being dropped into a pile (p. 94). He observes the aboveground world from this unusual vantage like a fly on the wall, but with the perspective inverted. This liminal existence affords Daniels easy access to his basic wants and needs—he steals food, tools, and even cash and luxury items with ease and impunity.

## 4. Inversions and Resurfacing

The longer Daniels remains belowground, the more he appreciates the sensory conditions of the undercity, which afford him a degree of autonomy, privacy, and even self-expression not formerly attainable aboveground. He grows increasingly fond of the watery sounds of the sewer, deriving a pleasant comfort from that same rushing water that had nearly drowned him on first encounter. That the sound of water comes to represent not danger, but a kind of domestic security, signals an important shift in Wright's character. Sonic distortion underground tracks with a deeper ontological distortion. Topographic inversion equates with divergent epistemologies.

> Life aboveground was now something less than reality, less than sight or sound, less even than memory... (p. 105).

And later, upon resurfacing,

> For a moment his eyes were drowned in the terror of yellow sunshine and he stood in a deeper darkness than he had ever known during the long days he had lived underground (p. 134).

Inside, and outside, above and below, safety and danger, freedom and claustrophobia, honor and tyranny, reality and fantasy, are all turned upside down. Yet as time passes, Daniels begins to witness the ramifications of his actions. He hears and sometimes observes innocent people interrogated and accused of the disappearances of the objects he has stolen. The "soft whimpering" of the insurance clerk falls on his ears with such "poignancy that it seem[s] that the [clerk is] standing at his shoulder, weeping" (p. 122). A night watchman who slept through the jewelry heist professes his innocence in a "sing-song" voice that echoes Daniels' own bewildered pleas during his aboveground interrogation. The "thudding" (p. 128) sounds of the officers' violent blows draw hot tears of anger and a "burning fever in his loins" but also shame and humiliation (p. 129).

Hearing these sounds recalls for Daniels the memory of his own unjust treatment aboveground and affirms his newly realized cynicism. Gritting his teeth, he wonders incredulously, "How could one ever get used to such a thing?" (p. 120). But though the "friendly" churning water still instills in him a feeling of safety and comfort, a new sense of urgency begins to weigh upon his mind.

> ... deep down in him the ultimate decision [is] still to come, for, though the underground claimed him, it rejected him. The conviction that he c[an] not stay sle[eps] uneasily in his heart (p. 118).

Daniels wrestles with this knowing feeling, but the prospect of returning to the aboveground world is difficult for him to imagine. The more he toys with the idea, the more he realizes the extent to which his time underground has distorted his practical and moral outlook on life. He tests the idea by lifting the manhole cover a crack, and immediately the crashing sounds of traffic "scald" him with terror and paralyze his body.

> A heavy car rumble[s] past overhead, warning him to remain in this world of dark light, jarring the steel manhole cover back into place with an imperious clang. He st[ands] between that terrifying world of life-in-death above him and this dark world of death-in-life in the underground. His mind sa[ys] no; his body sa[ys] yes... (pp. 133–34).

Daniels lifts the cover once more and thrusts himself up and out into the open street. His ears are assaulted by the angry honking of car horns, besieged by the same sounds of his descent but this time in reverse. Staggering aimlessly through the streets, he finds himself on course to the police station and, in a whim of confidence, decides to return to profess the truth of all that has transpired since he disappeared. But when he meets the officers who had detained him days before, they show little interest in his story. They have already apprehended another man for the crimes they had accused of him, and they find his disjointed talk of caves and jewelry incomprehensible. They burn his signed confession before his eyes and try to brush off the earlier altercation as "just a bad dream" (p. 145).

When Daniels finally convinces the officers to visit the undercity, the streets are wet with rain. The weather and color of the sky remind him of the night that he first went underground, which makes him feel "at home, as though he were nearing the end of a long journey" (p. 153). Confidently, even ecstatically, he directs them to the spot and upon lifting the manhole cover, "it clang[s] against the wet pavement... the hole gap[ing] blackly" (p. 156). The officers order him to climb down first but are then distracted by sounds ahead. They gaze upward, and do not heed his supplications from below. Then one of the officers fires a gun at Daniels' chest, and he falls back into the familiar water gazing up at their faces in disbelief. He hears again the metal clang of the cover as they replace it above him, "shutting out forever the sound of the wind and rain. A muffled roar of a motor c[omes] to him and then the heavy swish of a speeding car rumble[s] overhead..." (p. 159). His mind fumbles with the irony of this familiar sonic recurrence. He lies suspended in the gray water, which he has come to associate with comfort and even enlightened rebirth, and which now holds him in the moment of his death. It carries him away from the manhole cover, back into the undercity toward "the heart of the earth..." (p. 159).

## 5. The Hold, and Other Under(s)

This final scene of Wright's subterranean fiction echoes his initial sensory account of the undercity, in which the man gazed upward at the underside of the manhole cover for the first time. From this novel vantage, Daniels had earlier observed,

> Several small holes through which many delicate fingers of hazy violet light were falling and weaving a mottled pattern upon the surface of the streaking current. He [had] stiffened as a car swept past along the wet pavement overhead, its heavy rumbling soon dying out, like the sound of a gigantic plane winging its way through a dense, wet cloud (p. 54).

In this passage, Wright spatially orients his character within a fictional environment that is distributed across multiple levels of elevation. Daniels is cut off from the sky which holds the sun that radiates down through the two finger-sized holes of the cover. The cover mediates the orifice that separates him from the other side above, from the aircraft and its hum and the cars and their rumblings.

The sensory and metaphorical qualities of these scenes are uncannily reminiscent of narratives depicting the slave ship hold where human "cargo" was imprisoned during the ocean crossings of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. More specifically, the "hold" refers to the lowermost storage compartment of the sailing vessels whereby—from the early sixteenth century spanning the following 300 years—people were systematically captured and forcibly transported from the African continent to western colonies. The slave ship hold was first identified as a defining site of the African diaspora by Paul Gilroy (1993) in his seminal monograph *The Black Atlantic* and has since been taken up across black studies discourse. Like the undercity of the urban sewer, the underbelly of the slave ship offers both material and metaphorical readings. The hold hatch and the manhole cover both serve as permeable membranes between two contiguous yet separate worlds. The hold was the *space* from which the enslaved *embodied* the transatlantic crossing, the *vantage* from which they *perceived* their enslavers. From the enclosed space beneath, an alternate world is perceptible above that is governed by a different set of rules.

[Daniels] saw the steel cover moving slowly and then it clanged into place. He was still; the upper world was shut from sight and its sounds were muffled. The whispering rush of the water now droned louder, creating an illusion of another world with other values and other laws (R. Wright 2021a, p. 53).

In a move similar to Richard Wright's subterranean fiction, several scholars have identified *embodied stratification* as a mode for addressing *figurative* hierarchies of power. Among them, historian Stephanie Smallwood has transcribed the physically erected hierarchies coded in the naval architectural plans of slave ships. Perhaps the most ubiquitously cited example, "Description of a Slave Ship" comprises the schematic drawings of "The Brookes" (Figure 1).[7] These illustrations represent the vessel from various perspectives, in cross section and from front and side views. In separate detail drawings, the "Description" instructs the design of two "slave decks", and the method for filling the hold to maximum capacity in accordance with legal regulations in place at the time.
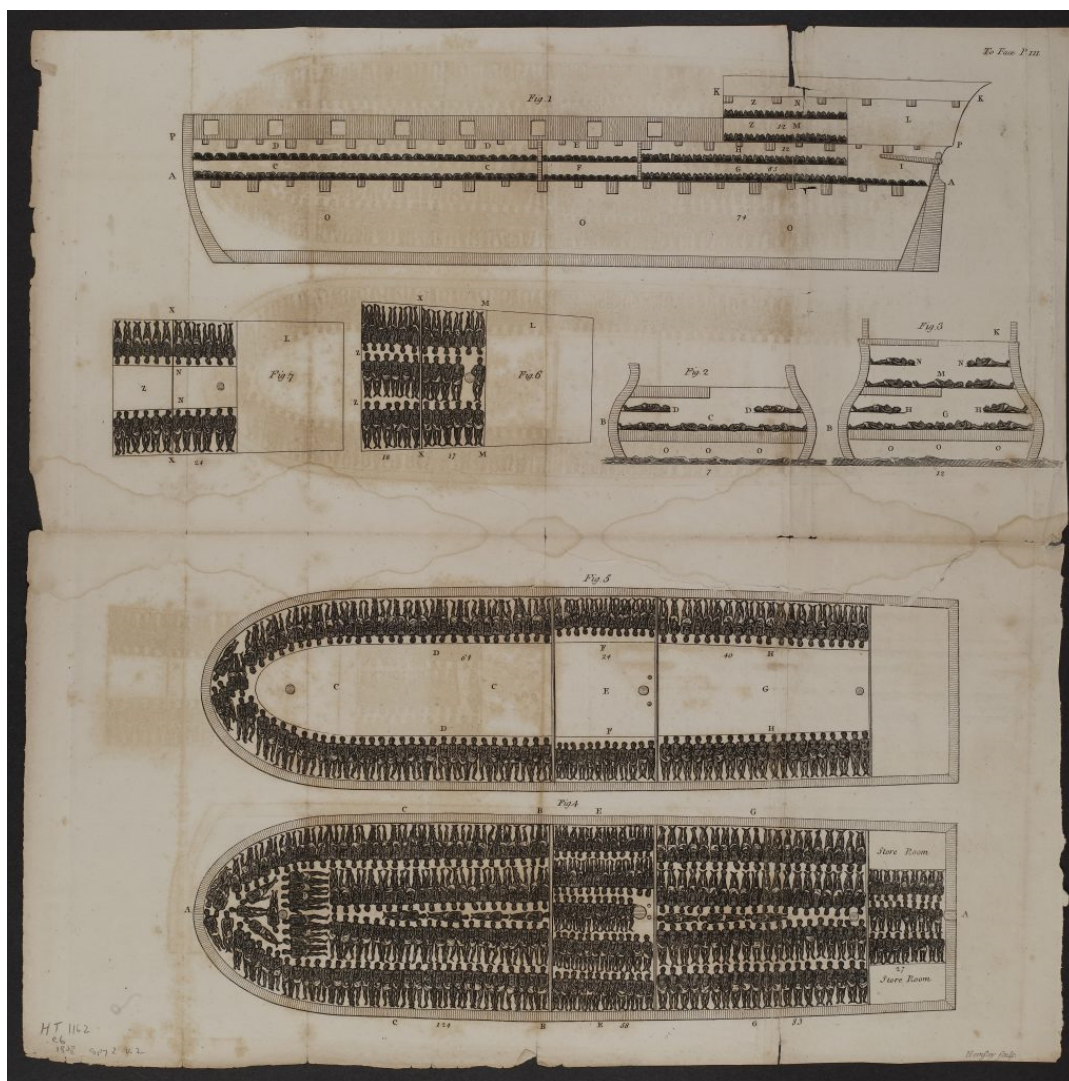
**Figure 1.** Clarkson, Thomas. The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament. London: Longman & Co. 1808. Print.

Describing the physical hierarchy coded in the plans, Smallwood connects this vertical expression of the vessel construction to the hierarchy of power instated by enslavers during the crossing. From the plans, she teases out evidence of a prescribed degree of permeability

between the built layers of that spatial hierarchy. From these visual objects, she extracts sensory impressions that inform her speculative narrative of the Middle Passage.

> Once the stowage of captives below-decks commenced, officers required that the hatchways remain covered at all times for the safety of the ship. Yet these three openings cut into the mid-, aft-, and forepart of the main deck, together perhaps with a few smaller openings or 'scuttles,' were the only means by which air reached the close quarters below. In outfitting a vessel to transport human cargo, it was necessary to keep the hatch openings covered, so as not to thwart security, while still allowing air to flow through to the Africans incarcerated below (Smallwood 2007, p. 73).

More than a century earlier, the French public intellectual Gabriel Honoré de Raqueti Compte de Mirabeau composed a similar narrative account of the hold that invited readers to consider its acoustic architecture and other sensory qualities. Like Smallwood, Mirabeau attends to the permeability of this topographical regime, and the capability of the ship's stratified elevation to *provide* and *withhold* the basic conditions necessary for sustained life.

> Have they at the least a sufficient quantity of wholesome air?... I see them, I hear them gasping for breath: their parched and protruded tongues paint their anguish and cannot further express it! How they hang to, how they cluster round, the grates! Listen to those groans—behold the last efforts of these wretches, who feel themselves suffocating—then all is silence! That air impregnated with grief, with despair, and with blood, is nothing better than a homicidal atmosphere of pestilential vapours... (Smith 1848, vol. 2, p. 151, Cited in Wood 1997, pp. 221–22).

This "account" is remarkable for the degree to which it *speculates* sensory life within the hold. With no first or secondhand accounts available to him at the time, the author relied on the Brooks drawings as his sole point of reference. As if to compensate for the absence of primary sources, scholars of the Middle Passage must riff on the available materials to guide them in "imagining the unspeakable and speaking the unimaginable" (Wood 1997, p. 211). Within the political economy of the slave ship, Mirabeau's speculative account *imagines* a parallel sensory economy. This method produces a narrative genre that straddles historical and literary forms.

Saidiya Hartman's work emphasizes the degree to which narratives from the hold depend on writerly and readerly imagination, rather than the more conventional scholarly mode of transcription. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Hartman 2007), Hartman attempts to exhume from the paper trail of the Middle Passage the story of two enslaved women who were murdered aboard the 1791 transatlantic crossing of the slave ship *Recovery*. The women's lives are known to history, if only abstractly, through a rare turn of events whereby the ship's captain was tried for their murder, and his logs and ledger books preserved as legal evidence. In Hartman's larger project to "fathom existence in the hold", she meditates on the muted voices and missing experiences of the archive's unnamed women. Grappling with this profound omission, she turns to a mode of speculative fiction to compensate for the deficiencies of the archive. Rewriting the story from the perspective of one of the victims, Hartman imagines the final moments of her life as she lay with one ear pressed to the deck. Eyes closed, the woman hears the soundscape of the ship at sea filtering through the stratified layers from above and below.

> The sound [of dancing feet pounding the deck] entered the girl's body in small tremors. She listened to the songs, uncomprehending. The din in her head prevented her from keeping track of what they were saying. The world clamored. In the jumble of sound, she discerned the creaking of the ship as it expanded and contracted, the grumble and complaint of the sailors, the men wrestling with their chains belowdecks, the barked orders of the captain, rats scuttling in the hold, the whirr of ropes, canvas whipping in the air, the ring and tug of the pulleys, the gulls squawking, the whales spurting, flying fish slicing through the water, the

low rumble of sharks, the high-pitched hum of the sea, and the cities of the dead laughing and crying out (Hartman 2007, p. 152).

Most readers will be more familiar with an alternate (and less sensory rich) telling of the story as reimagined in Hartman's subsequent essay "Venus in Two Acts". Describing her vision for the piece, she articulates her wish for something other than that which the archive offers, to "allow the narrative track to be rerouted or broken by the sounds of memory, the keens and howls and dirges unloosened on the deck..." (Hartman 2008, p. 9). Turning to a more experimental mode of speculative fiction, Hartman departs from the archive's story of disempowered death by making the two girls shipmates instead of strangers. Merging the fragments of their two stories, she gives to each the encouraging words of the other, the soothing sound of her voice, the comforting touch of a friend's embrace. Venus dies not alone on the deck but in the arms of a companion.

More recently, Hartman has since identified her interest in the "dimensions of *refusal* that arise in captivity" as a driving question of her essay (Hartman 2016, p. 213, emphasis added). "Venus in Two Acts" (Hartman 2008) refuses *not* the watery tomb, for though it rejects the narrative offered by the archive, it is not a revisionist history. Hartman's retelling instead refuses the abject loneliness of her subjects in their dying moments. "Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility" (p. 8). Her departure from the archive resonates with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's "refusal" from the undercommons. In their co-conceived "fantasy in the hold", they reframe *under*-ness as a place of empowerment and absolution from loneliness in what they call the radical black commons.

> The hold's terrible gift was to gather dispossessed feelings in common, to create a new feel in the undercommons. Previously this kind of feel was only an exception, an aberration, a shaman, a witch, a seer, a poet amongst others, who felt through others, through other things... But in the hold, in the undercommons of a new feel, another kind of feeling became common (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 97).

This collective galvanizing from below demonstrates—in Andrew Navin Brooks' distillation—a refusal of "the expectation of racialized subjects to perform acts of compliance [that reinscribe] their exclusion from the category of political subject" (Brooks 2020, p. 31). Thus, we understand that the undercommons is neither a geographical place nor fictional one. It is rather a collective mode of embodied resistance, "a kind of comportment or ongoing experiment with and as the general antagonism" (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 112).

Like the stories and missing stories from the hold, *The Man Who Lived Underground* is objectively a devastating account. It holds the blueprints of injustices perpetrated against African Americans for centuries: of racial profiling, physical and mental brutality, and inevitably murder at the hands of police. And yet, it also contains profound refusal. In refusing capture, Fred Daniels refuses to be complicit in a stratified system that "holds" him on the bottom. His autonomous decision to voluntarily confess—rather than succumb to false accusations—epitomizes the provision of self-determination afforded to him by his underground home. Paul Gilroy suggests a similar generative potential when he describes the "gloomy depths of the municipal sewers" as the location where "the existential dimensions of his wretched metropolitan life confront him with a new clarity which had not been possible while he dwelt above the ground" (Gilroy 1993, p. 165). Not only a site of darkness, fetid water, and disorienting echo, the tunnels beneath the city are also how Daniels preserves his life. He moreover achieves tenets of security and freedom formerly unrealized in the open air above.

## 6. "Carefully Dislocated Heroes"

Harney and Moten's undercommons serves as an instrument for reframing both Wright's fictional and biographical undergrounds as sites for exercising the right of refusal. They describe the inherited legacy of the Middle Passage in terms of both collective trauma and communality.[8]

> Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling... To have
> been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home
> with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest
> with the ones who consent not to be one (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 97).

Several years after writing *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Richard Wright confronted his own domestic choice. Having endured compounding editorial rejections of his literary portrayals of Black alienation at home, he encountered the opportunity to adopt a new home in a distant land. In a gesture redolent of the undercity and the undercommons, Wright himself went underground in a manner of speaking. He expatriated to Paris in 1947.[9]

Both Wright and his character voluntarily removed themselves from their land of birth, choosing self-imposed exile that afforded a degree of self-determination not otherwise attainable. The irony is both tragic and transgressive that both character and author discover underground elements of freedom, safety, and personhood still ill-afforded to men of color by contemporary American society. For Wright, this was the freedom from the editorial censorship that barred the publication of *The Man Who Lived Underground* until long after his death. For his character, it was the freedom to live apart not only from unjust criminalization, but virtually all societal accountability. Admiring the walls of his cave, he laughed with the satisfying thought,

> He had triumphed over the aboveground world! He was free!... He wanted to
> run from the underground and yell his discovery to the world (R. Wright 2021a,
> p. 95).

The aural architecture of the fictional undercity merges with the figurative echo of the author's words, hurled into darkness and resounding in the deep (R. Wright 1977, p. 135). Relishing a similar flavor of triumph, Wright shouted his own discovery of freedom to the world. After several years of living abroad, he was approached by the American magazine *Ebony* to write an article on "what happens when a Negro goes overseas and suddenly finds the freedom he has long been seeking".[10] In this essay titled "I Choose Exile", Wright poses the rhetorical question, "why did I choose to expatriate?" (Wright 1951).

> It is because I love freedom, and I tell you frankly that there is more freedom in one
> square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America!... My
> decision is predicated upon this simple fact: I *need* freedom... Unless I feel free to
> let my instincts range, free to come and go as I please, free to probe and examine
> my environment, I languish, I wither, I die. In short, freedom to me, is equated to
> concrete reality, to life; it is not something abstract, something to be won or hoped
> for; it is life itself, each day, each hour, each moment... (emphasis original)[11].

Just like the man who kept the aboveground streets in earshot for the duration of his time underground, Wright held his former home close. He continued to write about race and social life in the United States from afar—from the outside looking in—and to highlight the contrasts between his born and adopted homelands. He also continued to pursue the level of authorial freedom first realized in writing *The Man Who Lived Underground*. a mode that he later characterized as improvisatory. In the posthumously published essay "Memories of My Grandmother", he writes,

> ... I improvised as freely and recklessly as I wanted, all the images that my
> mind could conceive... I could burrow into places of American life where I'd
> never gone before and link that life organically with my basic theme... in a way
> that carried—to my mind and feelings—an unmistakable relationship (R. Wright
> 2021a, p. 190).

In Paris, untethered from the editorial constraints of his New York publishers, Wright relished a new level of freedom to voice direct social critique. On 8 November 1960, he delivered a speech titled "The Situation of the Black Artist and Intellectual in the United States", to an audience at the American Church in Paris. He died two weeks later at the premature age of 52, thousands of miles from his birthplace.

### 7. Reverberating Legacy ("An Old Story That Still Lives")

In the Afterword to the new edition of *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Malcolm Wright tells of his grandfather's preoccupation with the kind of world into which he would bring a child. The author indeed became a father the very same year that he composed *The Man Who Lived Underground.* Even more so than the expurgated versions published during the author's lifetime, the intact novel portrays a world in which "race is supremely deterministic, eclipsing notions of truth and justice" (M. Wright 2021, p. 218). Through expatriation, he hoped to locate an alternative.

It is tempting—and many critics have been tempted—to fixate on the eerily prophetic quality of this story. Many have written provocatively about the fortuitous timing of its reintroduction to American readers, more-or-less explicitly linking it to the guilty verdicts handed down in the trial of former Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. Some have even characterized the story with awe as if it were a message in a bottle, lost at sea for eighty years only to pop up at this timely moment. Perhaps Imani Perry put it best when she said that "Wright tells an old story that still lives" (Perry 2021). This simple statement flattens the temporal wrinkle between the work's inception and expurgation. Teasing out the commonalities between these interconnected stories of flight, a kind of slippage between literature and biography occurs. This conflation is not dissimilar to the temporal slippage implied by Saidiya Hartman when she equates her own life with the lives of her enslaved ancestors with the proclamation, "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007, p. 6).

Recalling the autobiographical scene that Richard Wright conjured at his writing desk, the reader watches his hand grasping the pencil, hovering over a blank page. Casting hesitation aside, Wright vows to "hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo", and upon hearing one, to send more words "to tell, to march, to fight" (R. Wright 1977, p. 135). It may be impossible to know whether the metaphor is a reference to the subterranean acoustics of his story's character, or whether it reflects his broader "desire to merge the lived sonics of black life with the power of written words as historical testaments and weapons of protest" (Stoever 2016, pp. 182–83). Both explanations present acoustic metaphor and listening practice as modes of self-possession. *The Man Who Lived Underground* renders audible the percussive rapping of the man's screwdriver as he strikes the invisible walls of his cave. We stand beside him, listening for the hollow tones he seeks. We prick our ears for the sounds that could guide him to the discovery of a new passage. An outlet, an adventure, an opportunity, a trail of sound leading someplace else. Echoing across pages and between cavity walls, these sounds yield less sensorially available information about the architecture of society in which they resonate.

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### Notes

1.   This passage is omitted from the first published edition of Richard Wright's autobiography, titled *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (Wright 1945). Archival research will be required to determine whether the passage was expurgated from the original edition, added to the manuscript later by Wright, or added by editors in the process of compiling the posthumously published "unexpurgated" version, *American Hunger* (R. Wright 1977).

2.   In other autobiographical writing, Wright describes his fascination from a young age with the sound of spoken language, with hearing its "simple, melodious, tolling, rolling, rough, infectious, subjective, laughing, cutting". . . . qualities (R. Wright 2021b, pp. 182–83). The author recounts listening to his grandmother's voice and trying to isolate qualities of her vocal inflection and rhythmic phrasing from the semantic meanings of her words.

3.   The dominant interpretation by reviewers reads the undercity as "morbid, disturbing analogy" (Fabre 1991, p. 167) "frightening narrative" (ibid.) and a "prison metaphor" (Baer 2018, p. 263). Thomas Heise aims to situate Wright's story "next to a history

of underground living in illegal, squalid cellar apartments in mid-century New York (Heise 2011, p. 27). That said, he later acknowledges that "the appalling home [in the sewer] is turned into a showcase of his inventiveness, self-sufficiency, and empowerment" (p. 129).

4      Michel Fabre likewise identified this connection between the sewer water and "the rather obvious symbolism of the rebirth of man. We can surely find the myth of the old man and the new which is transposed into images of childbirth" (Fabre 1971, p. 172). Some critics have emphasized Wright's depiction of the sewer water as "warm, pulsing, womblike", and that when Daniels enters it, he "regresses to a world that offers both security and ignorance out of which he must finally climb" (Mayberry 1989, p. 72).

5      For a comprehensive overview of the different versions of this work, see Douglas Field's (2021) chronology and Sonaiya Kelley's (2021) reporting on the 2021 Library of America edition.

6      In their anthology of "sonic effects" Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue attribute such corruptions of clarity and fidelity to "conditions of propagation", the organization of the space through which sound travels to a point of perception. They differentiate these effects from other sonic effects which occur at the "level of utterance" (Augoyard and Torgue 2006, p. 30).

7      The Brooks was designed and constructed to imprison 454 people within her hold. According to the British Library, the institution that holds the original drawings, the images were widely known across the United Kingdom and Europe more broadly, "appearing in newspapers, pamphlets, books and even posters pasted on the walls of coffee-houses and taverns". https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship/ (accessed on 13 October 2022).

8      In *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy introduces the protagonist of *The Man Who Lived Underground* as "one of Wright's carefully dislocated heroes" (Gilroy 1993, p. 164). Here, my discussion shifts from the audible underground to the political underground and from the resonant voice to the authorial voice.

9      Wright's decision to expatriate was grounded not only in professional frustrations (grievances with publishers) but also in significant personal and political factors. For more detail, see (Dolinar 2012, pp. 35–49; Zeigler 2015, pp. 58–96). In Europe, Wright immersed himself within the political community of the Paris Underground, which sought to provide radical alternatives to the socially accepted French Communist Party that dominated working-class politics through the mid-1960s. He contributed to underground newspapers and literary magazines such as *L'Arbalète* and the left-leaning Existentialist review, *Les Temps Mode*. This intellectual underground expands the topographical metaphor to encompass figurative spaces of "movement, diversity, encounter, refuge, and political action" (Lindner and Hussey 2013, p. 17).

10     Correspondence with Ebony Magazine managing editor Ben Burns. (Burns to Wright, 3 October 1951. Richard Wright Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 100, folder 1412) Cited in Zeigler (2015, p. 83).

11     Like so many of his works commissioned by American publishers before, "I Choose Exile" did not appear in print as planned. The essay was withheld from American readership because it would have been a "nearly unprecedented departure from the magazine's optimistic portrayal of progress on race" (Zeigler 2015, p. 83). This late-career instance of editorial censorship illustrated the persistent opposition by the American press to his pointed critiques, even from the distance of an ex-patriot.

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