Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999);

William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

These are two excellent books about a rich, vital subject – African American literary work in the first half of the twentieth century. Though their respective focal points differ (Mullen's is Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s; Maxwell's is New York City in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s), both reach similar conclusions, that African American writing was a critical part of the American left, and that the American left was a powerful constructive influence on the development of African American writing. Both books seek to counter what has been the dominant interpretation of these relationships for the past half century, that the white left sought to dominate African American intellectuals, that its influence was nefarious, and that, in due time, African American intellectuals threw off this yoke and found their own voice.[1] There was a "spectrum of exchanges," Maxwell writes, not a pattern of "white connivance and black self-cancellation." (1) In their quest, Mullen and Maxwell employ similar methods – the excavation of previously ignored texts and the reinterpretation of well-known, even canonical texts, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*. They also reconsider the relationship between radicalism and commercialism, finding that this interaction could disseminate anti-racist and anti-capitalist ideas to a broad public even as it might also act to soften and mitigate the political thrust of cultural work.[2] These are substantial similarities, but they do not make the books redundant. The careful student of African American literary work and history will want to read both of them, as each opens a window onto new and fascinating material.

Richard Wright plays a central role in *Popular Fronts*, but in complex ways. On the one hand, Mullen wants to demonstrate that *Native Son* did not represent Wright's "break" with the Communist Party, but that the book was intended to be an "internal" critique within the left while Wright's definitive break with the CP came later, in 1945. On the other hand, Mullen also seeks to shed light on African American writers, cultural workers, and institutions which have long been hidden by Wright's "long black shadow." While Wright had a powerful influence on them, they also built their own relationships with the white left and they found their own way in the world.

Throughout the book, Mullen insists on "dialectical" rather than "dichotomous" readings of African American culture. He first applies this methodology to Wright himself, arguing that "[*Native Son*] and its commercial success adumbrated black aspiration and anxiety over tensions between gradualism and radicalism, cultural immersion and cultural revision, racial marginalization and racial legitimation, capitalist jouissance and capitalist

despair." (33) Mullen calls attention to "the numerous readings available in the text of *Native Son* ... and the dialectical debate within the black public sphere about the political utility of negative images of black life." (35) Mullen argues for a reading of this canonical text that maintains a dialectical tension between Wright and his character, Bigger Thomas, and between Wright's additional self-representation in *Black Boy* and his own persona. In this complex way, Mullen reclaims *Native Son* for the left but he also notes that it marks the beginning of Wright's alienation from both the left and the "black folk" more generally (a theme that Maxwell will explore through an analysis of Wright's relationship with Zora Neale Hurston).

As Wright leaves Chicago in 1939 and the left over the course of 1942-1945, Mullen puts his spotlight on the emergence of "a new modern black voice in the mass media" (47) in the Chicago *Defender*. While this newspaper was decades old, it entered a new era in the early 1940s under the direction of Robert Sengstacke, the nephew of *Defender* founder Robert Abbott. As the paper adopted a "dialogic" style of journalism, abandoning traditional lines of demarcation between news and opinion, poetry and prose, and fact and fiction, its circulation expanded from 1,276,000 in 1940 to 1,808,060 in 1944. (71) Though the paper's wider circulation initially brought a more militant self-representation to a larger audience, Mullen traces how commercial success also brought the paper to more of a political middle ground, as it criticized the role of black militancy in the 1943 Detroit race riots and endorsed Franklin Delano Roosevelt for president in 1944. These were, he writes, "the paradoxes and parameters of the black cultural front." (68)

Mullen brings a similarly dialectical analysis to bear on the experiences of the South Side Community Arts Center, the Abraham Lincoln Center, and the Interracial Conference of 1944. He probes how these institutions were affected not only by politics, aesthetics, and commercialism, but by the growth of an African American middle class in World War II era Chicago. Time and again, debates raged about whether these cultural projects were to institutionalize art for a new black elite or were they to provide opportunities for new African American artists, many of whom came from working class roots. Over the couse of the war years, Mullen argues, "the boundaries of American radicalism had been expanded, erased, and remade." (104)

In what is probably the most interesting chapter in the book, Mullen brings his readers into the milieu of *Negro Story* magazine, which published short stories by black and white authors and reached black and white readers from 1944 to 1946. *Negro Story*, edited by Fern Gayden and Alice Browning, brought together the influences of Richard Wright, the *Defender*, and the community-based arts movements. It promoted the short story form, whose appeal reached beyond the typical audience for fiction, and it incorporated older radical political perspectives (via Langston Hughes, Earl Conrad, and Frank Marshall Davis) with newer feminist perspectives (via the editors and

Gwendolyn Brooks). While the contributions were diverse, they tended to share an aesthetics of documentary style, reportage, and "plotless" fiction. Although the magazine itself failed after two years of intense activity, it laid a foundation, Mullen argues, for *Negro Digest* and *Ebony*, both of which emerged from the war period with a solid African American middle class base and an expanding working class audience.

Once again, Mullen shows, commercialization first broadened the audience for social critique and then incorporated and stifled it, as an "increasingly hegemonic black middle class culture" (187) came to the fore in 1950s Chicago. This outcome, he argues, was grounded in the complex overlaps between black communism and black capitalism, that both were about "making the system more responsive to poor people and blacks." (201) When the left alternative became marginalized, radical writers like Richard Wright and Chester Himes got squeezed out and moved on, and publications like *Ebony* absorbed the terrain. As of 1990, Mullen notes, its readership had reached 9,000,000. "The clearest cultural legacy of Chicago's Negro People's Front to postwar Bronzeville was its failure to adhere to and sustain a lasting cultural politics of class struggle." (203)

From a New York City vantage point, William Maxwell argues that "the history of African American letters cannot be unraveled from the history of American communism without damage to both." (2) Noting that "it is no accident that the headiest days of U.S. anticapitalism were those of its tightest rapport with black art," (12) Maxwell plunges his readers into the intensely passionate cultural scene of the World War I years and the 1920s.

Maxwell opens *New Negro, Old Left* with rich, convincing evidence that "black bolshevism" was central to the early years of both the American Communist Party and the Harlem Renaissance. He brings to life the world of the *Crusader* magazine and its key editor and contributor, Madagascar-born "Andy Razaf" (Andreamenentania Razafinkeriefo). For Maxwell, as for Mullen, dialectics rather than dichotomies provide a framework to understand the inner workings of radical African American culture. Razaf's work as an editor and writer (of sonnets and musical lyrics) confounds "the typically divided modernist enthusiasm for ostensibly premodern, primitive zones (Africa) and for modern, metropolitan ones (Harlem); the simultaneous achievements in formal literature (especially poetry) and popular music (especially jazz); the often dissimilar uses and significances of this music in Harlem and on Broadway and Tin Pan Alley; and the usually inimical conceptions of the Harlem movement as a rebirth of black cultural autonomy and a renewal of white appreciation for black culture's entertainment value." (26) Similarly, the *Crusader* linked black nationalism to communism, black bolshevism to literature, black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean to black migrants from the South, and the black left to the white left, while it employed popular as well as classical forms to reach an expanding audience.

Maxwell then follows another member of this cohort, the poet Claude McKay, to the Soviet Union in 1922. There, Maxwell argues, McKay (and his Caribbean American and African American comrades) have a direct impact on the Third International's views on the racial situation in the United States and the role to be played by African Americans in the transformation of the world's most advanced capitalist country. McKay's report to the 1923 convention of the Third International, published in Russian, argued that blacks wore "the most radical chains" in the American proletariat, that anti-racism was key to the class struggle, and that an emphasis needed to be placed on cultural work in that struggle. (80-92)

In his work on Razaf and McKay, Maxwell lays a foundation to argue that African Americans not only were able to express themselves within the left, but that they were able to shape the left's perspectives on issues of race and they influenced white writers as much as they had been influenced by them. Maxwell pursues this line of thought in his fascinating analysis of Mike Gold, the Jewish American communist writer and editor, and, particularly, Gold's long overlooked play, *Hoboken Blues, Or The Black Rip Van Winkle*. Fearlessly, Maxwell uses this text not merely to document McKay's influence on Gold (they had edited the *Liberator* together for a brief period), or the ways that Gold offered his readers an alternative (such as John Brown) to the acceptance of white privilege as a way to become "American" (consider the mainstream image of Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer"), but also to explore the ways that the power of racism and minstrelsy limited Gold's challenge to "whiteness." The challenge of this analysis, Maxwell's willingness to accept the messiness of his subject matter, to swim in its contradictions, reminds me of the best work in whiteness studies, such as that of Eric Lott.[3]

By the time that Maxwell takes up Richard Wright, his readers are prepared for yet more twists and turns. And they are not disappointed. Like Mullen, Maxwell wants to complicate our understanding of *Native Son* and what it suggests about Wright's relationship to the left. In *New Negro, Old Left*, Maxwell chooses to explore the complex relationships, mutual influences, and arguments between Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, on the one hand, and between Wright and Nelson Algren, on the other. The result is an interpretation of *Native Son* which contends that Wright both sought to "synthesize northern communism and black folk culture" (172) and that he borrowed heavily in the creation of the Bigger Thomas character from the protagonist in Nelson Algren's early 1930s novel, *Somebody In Boots*. While Wright was certainly on his way out of the Communist Party by the time *Native Son* was completed, Maxwell's interpretation offers him a vehicle to draw his whole argument together: "African American literary communists thus exited the Old Left much as they entered it, for compound reasons and at various moments but with a common obligation to the promise of interracial struggle and disclosure and their own and their racial community's self-direction." (201)

Both of these books, then, seem to end on notes of defeat, if not failure. Mullen's Chicago radicals end up laying the foundation for *Ebony*, a mass market, middle class magazine, while Maxwell's New York City radicals are, at best, able to leave the left under their own terms. But, in the process of these books, in their analyses, in the stories they tell along the way, there is great hope – hope of a cultural politics that links race and class in constructive ways, hope that links white cultural workers and cultural workers of colour in ways that expand them without diminishing them, hope that comes from understanding what earlier generations of radicals might have done wrong, and, perhaps most of all, the hope that comes from the inspiration of being exposed to the work of Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Nelson Algren, Mike Gold, Andy Razaf, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Browning, and so many, many others.

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[1] Wilson Record, *The Negro And The Communist Party* (Chapel Hill 1951); Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual* (New York 1967).
[2] These arguments are in a similar vein to Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring Of Culture In The 20th Century* (New York 1996). Both Mullen and Maxwell acknowledge their debt to Denning's work.
[3] Eric Lott, *Love And Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy And The Making Of The American Working Class* (New York 1993).

Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Adam Michnik's *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives* provides readers with rich and valuable resources to understand political dynamics in Poland and other East-Central European countries during the dramatic transition: from communist regimes to democratic ones, and then from multiparty systems to "quasi"-democratic regimes.[1] Although the book's subtitle focuses on the post-Cold War era, readers will also find useful information on historical and political incidents in these countries during the Cold War era.

Indeed, the history of the dynamic political transition in Poland can be traced by following Michnik's intellectual journey throughout the book as the author moves: from a communist who "believed then that a Communist was someone whose mission was to denounce injustice. So [he] did" (30) to an anti-communist intellectual leader of the Solidarity social movement, to a politician serving in the *Sejm* (the Polish lower house), and most recently to a journalist, editor of the popular newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In each of these roles,