“Making a Difference Where None Existed:”

Reading Ideological State Apparatuses in William Attaway's Blood on the Forge

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By

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Dedicated in memory of Carol B. Rauch and Bebop
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ABSTRACT

“Making a Difference Where None Existed:”
Reading Ideological State Apparatuses in William Attaway’s Blood on the Forge

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Set in 1919 during the Great Migration, William Attaway’s 1941 Proletarian novel, Blood on the Forge, a text too often overlooked by the mainstream of literary studies, follows the three Moss brothers from their experience tenant farming in the agrarian South to steel working in the newly industrialized North. Seemingly anticipating Louis Althusser’s highly influential work, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” Blood on the Forge portrays indissoluble cultural, ideological, and material conditions. The cumulative spectrum of the novel’s portrayal links the Mosses’ immediate struggles to a broader system of exploitation. Attaway’s depiction of the South foregrounds dialectical relationships between black folk culture and the white aristocracy, while undercurrents in the text emphasize ideological underpinnings that work to maintain dominance in these dialectical relationships. An overwhelming presence of violence pervades all aspects of the Mosses’ lives. Work life, family life, social engagement, and thus conscious and subconscious ideologies are shaped by repression consisting of physical and mental violence.

While Attaway portrays racism and repression dominating the South, and although the dialectics of race discrimination persist in the North, the role of ideological
and repressive state apparatuses become more qualitatively distinctive as separately functioning institutions, and ideological state apparatuses are the dominant means of manipulation in the class warfare waged against the Mosses and the working community in the industrial setting. The issues of racism that were overt and foregrounded in the Southern setting slip into the background of the text and operate more covertly as part of the substructure of the Northern mill town culture. The novel depicts racism persisting in Northern culture; however, it is clearly different from the racism of the South, and it reveals fluidity in the conceptualization of race, of which variations depend on the exploitative relationships in the local culture. As the Mosses come from a violently racist culture, their individual ideologies reflect such violence and racism, as well as resistance to it. In the North, however, the Mosses are swept away by the currents of social recreations that are ritualized in a manner comparable to those described in Althusser’s theoretical system. All the while, racist ideology continues to factor into policymaking in the North, as it is in the South, dictated by demands for labor. Although Attaway portrays a tenuous hold on authority by both repressive and ideological state apparatuses in contrast to Althusser’s model, by showing the continuity from South to North of exploitative relationships that produce the Mosses’ material conditions interconnected to institutionalized manners of thinking and corporal enforcement within Southern and Northern cultures, Blood on the Forge reaffirms as well as informs Althusser’s theory through representations of the powerful yet tenuous influence of the state apparatuses, the dialectical clash of humanistic freewill, ideological determinism, and the deterministic effect of brute force in relation to institutionalized racism and labor exploitation of early 20th century America.
Chapter One:

An Introduction to William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, and Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses

*The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life … Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.*

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

The June 1939 issue of *Daily Worker* featured William Attaway, author of *Blood on the Forge*, sharing with readers his father’s allegation that black “kids brought up in the South unconsciously accept the whites’ estimate of them, and they never get to know what it is to be a human among humans” (Yarborough 299). Attaway explained further that his father relocated their family to the North in the hope that his children would not “absorb these false Southern ideas” (299). Possessing a progressive insight into the problem of false consciousness regarding racialized ideologies, Attaway’s father anticipated a better life in a different ideological environment. *Blood on the Forge* focalizes similar concerns by contrasting the main characters’ experiences in and outside of Southern culture. As tenant farmers in the South and steelworkers in the North, the novel’s Moss brothers are almost continually conflicted by false consciousness resulting from culturally institutionalized ideology. Thus the novel demonstrates pervasive commonalities as well as crucial differences inherent in the ways institutionalized ideologies maintain false consciousness, regardless of geopolitical differences between the North and South.
Attaway’s engagement with these issues came roughly three decades before renowned philosopher, Louis Althusser, would break ground with a theoretical system describing the roles that cultural convention and physical restraint plays in the ideological makeup of individuals, as subjects. Althusser shows how ideology and ideological institutions are major factors in determining the actual life processes of individuals. Althusser’s perspective challenges the idea expressed in the epigraph to this chapter, which is taken from Marx’s classic *The German Ideology*. Althusser sees greater connectivity between the influence from the ideological process of the individual, as it affects the material outcome in society. Anticipating Althusser’s highly influential theory of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, *Blood on the Forge* portrays indissoluble cultural, ideological, and material conditions. The novel’s significance lies in its complex portrayals of racism connected to cultural ideologies, as well as in the cumulative spectrum of its representations of immediate struggles as these relate to broader issues of exploitation.

My intention is to show how *Blood on the Forge* engages ideas about the significance of the interior world of individual consciousness as it relates to and departs from the outer world of physical and societal action. *Blood on the Forge* engages the question of cause and effect in regard to whether ideology is the effect of physical experience or the other way around. The picture that Attaway gives us shows both happening at once. At times conflicting and at others coordinating, ideology both causes and is affected by the material experiences of the protagonists. Thus, *Blood on the Forge* can be read as Althussarian for the weight that it gives to false consciousness as an influential factor in the lives of its protagonists. Nevertheless, the novel achieves its
Althusserian effect without underplaying the humanism or the impact of the physical experience on the ideological and psychological development of its characters. *Blood on the Forge* reflects the way that conventional ideology, combined with repressive forces, manipulates the lives of people for the purpose of exploiting them, and, importantly, it shows how such exploitative measures of manipulation extend to ideologies of race, which ultimately also function on behalf of the exploiters.

**William Attaway and Proletarian Literature**

Attaway developed as a writer within the burgeoning Proletarian literary movement of the 1930s and 40s. While his younger sister had encouraged him to start writing in high school, it was reading Langston Hughes, a major literary figure and proponent of Proletarian literature, who inspired him to become a writer. Attaway “had always assumed that Negro success was to be won in genteel professions like medicine, but upon first reading Langston Hughes, his outlook was transformed” (Margolies 63). While in college, he was writing plays for his sister and her theater friends; however, following the unexpected death of his father, Attaway left the university for a transient life of travel. During this time, he gained experience by working in various labor trades, including steelwork (Yarborough 40), writing all the while. He eventually returned home, went back to school, and became a member of the Federal Writers’ Program, a government-funded employment project for writers. The prominent authority on both African American literature and William Attaway, Richard Yarborough believes:

> It was probably during this period that Attaway became acquainted with Richard Wright, then another young, aspiring black author. Having heard
Wright lecture on organized labor, Attaway once invited him to address the university literary society. Attaway recalled the event this way: “He started to read that swell story . . . and when he got to the second paragraph, half the audience had fled. [Wright] went on, set on giving it to them, and at the end, the room was empty of the literary set and only [Wright] and I were there.” The piece Wright read that evening was “Big Boy Leaves Home.” (300)

Hearing Wright read his work and seeing the audience reject Wright’s words deeply impressed Attaway, in that he “understood that the issues he would address in his own fiction might disturb readers” (Accomando 12). The experience was a landmark in Attaway’s development as a writer of Proletarian fiction, in that it did “not dissuade him from providing blunt depictions of racism and struggle” (12) in his own work. Wright had a profound influence on the writer that Attaway would become, and this is further evident in his most revered work, Blood on the Forge, as “critics compared the novel to Wright’s Native Son” (12), a novel now considered a landmark achievement in African American and Proletarian literature.

By the time Attaway had finished his B.A., the University of Illinois had produced his play Carnival (1935), and the journal, Challenge, had printed his story “The Tale of the Blackamoor” (1936). Attaway published his first novel Let Me Breathe Thunder in 1939, and two years later published his second, Blood on the Forge, a powerful depiction of race and class struggle. Reviews of both Let Me Breathe Thunder and Blood on the Forge, while fairly positive, were consistently tempered with negative commentary, and neither book was commercially successful. The critics acknowledged
potential in Attaway’s work; however, they almost invariably complained that it fell short of his potential. *Let Me Breathe Thunder* was treated somewhat dismissively due to its white protagonists, and widely viewed as a failure to sufficiently address issues of racism, while *Blood on the Forge* was often criticized for its lack of progressive characters and misinterpreted as defeatist.

Although he later published a second short story, “Death of a Rag Doll,” in 1947, *Blood on the Forge* is Attaway’s final novel and marks the highpoint of his contribution to the Proletarian literary genre. Nevertheless, he continued to be creatively productive as a songwriter and writer for television. In 1957, Attaway published the *Calypso Song Book*, and in 1967 *Hear America Singing*. In 1966, he wrote the television script *One Hundred Years of Laughter*, “a television special on African American humor,” and later “[h]e wrote a screenplay adaptation of *The Man*, Irving Wallace’s novel about the first African American president. Attaway’s version, foregrounding racial conflict and emphasizing African American voices, was ultimately rejected by the producers” (Accomando 13). Attaway also continued to be politically active and concerned with civil rights beyond his involvement with the Proletarian literary movement, as is evident in his participation in the voting-rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. William Attaway passed away in 1986 at the age of 75 in Los Angeles, California. (12-13)

**The Mosses of Blood on the Forge: A Family History**

Set in 1919, during the Jim-Crow era of the South and the early industrial boom of the North, *Blood on the Forge* is the tragic story of the Moss family’s struggle to
survive violent racism and dangerously punishing labor exploitation. As tenant farmers in the South and steelworkers in the North, the Mosses toil relentlessly to find their place in a world that is seemingly determined to destroying them.

At the outset of the novel, Melody, Chinatown, Mat, and Hattie Moss are sharecroppers in the red clay hills of Kentucky. Melody, being deeply emotional and creatively expressive, plays guitar and sings the blues. Chinatown is flashy and primarily concerned with his outward appearances, a characteristic symbolized by the gold tooth for which he had a healthy tooth pulled to make space. Big Mat, the most conflicted of the Mosses, is physically strong and given to violent rages, which he tries to suppress by studying the Bible and by aspiring to become a preacher. Hattie, a tremendously hardworking and resilient woman who has suffered through a number of miscarried pregnancies, is married to Mat, and Melody and Chinatown are her brothers-in-law.

Living in the close quarters of their dilapidating shack of a farmhouse, the Mosses quarrel over their material conditions, poverty, hunger, failing crops, and the lack of signs of relief. Regardless of their arguing, the Mosses are closely knit, and the recent loss of their mother is crucial to their narrative. She died working in the fields at the reins of their landlord’s plow mule. Enraged by grief at the loss of his mother, Mat kills the mule, and Mr. Johnston, the Mosses’ landlord, adds the value of the mule to his ledger of debts against the Mosses.

There is a looming sense of futility, as Mat, neglecting his family’s crops, toils at Mr. Johnston’s farm trying to work off the family’s insurmountable accumulated debt. Back at home, Hattie, Melody, and Chinatown, pass the time talking and hungrily awaiting Mat’s return. Their conversations reveal the extremity of their poverty as well as
the high level of racist violence that continually threatens their lives. They discuss the
danger of being black in the South, stating that black men are lynched for interacting with
white women, and black women are in danger of being raped by white men after dark
(Attaway 17). Their conversations describe an environment discouraging any sense of
hopefulness, yet the Mosses find some reprieve in Melody’s blues music and in a ritual of
imaginative thinking called “the wishing game.”

Mat arrives home with food and the unlikely promise of a new mule on loan from
Mr. Johnston. The Mosses are skeptical of Mr. Johnston’s uncharacteristic gesture of
goodwill and rightly so. The day that Mat anticipates receiving the mule, Mr. Johnston’s
riding boss confronts Mat, insults the memory of his mother, and strikes him with a
horsewhip. Mat strikes back, seriously injuring the riding boss, and, as a result, knows he
must flee to avoid repercussions, most likely lynching. Leaving Hattie behind, Mat,
Melody, and Chinatown crowd into a boxcar of a freight train going north to
Pennsylvania steel country, their new home.

The Moss brothers arrive in the North, and the change in social climate, especially
with respect to race, is soon detectable. However, on their first day in the industrial mill
town, the Mosses are targets of racial violence motivated by labor issues. The arrival of
new black workers from the South signifies to the existing workers that the steel
company is preparing to counter a labor strike. The company hires black Southerners to
replace striking workers. Nevertheless, the racial tensions among the workers deescalate,
and the Mosses acclimate to the mill community and forge friendships with fellow
workers in the international and multi-cultural setting.
In the North, the Moss brothers enjoy a new sense of liberty. They earn a tangible wage, in contrast to the debt that they accumulated sharecropping. They favorably impress their bosses and colleagues on the job; they can afford to go out drinking and gambling on dogfights, and socializing with the local prostitutes. However, eventually the workload of the steel mill and the mill community’s fast paced rituals of recreation overwhelm and take their toll on the brothers. Soon they are physically and emotionally exhausted, alienated from one another, and ultimately spiraling downward into mental and physical ruination, guided there by the local ideological institutions.

In the end, Mat is killed in a labor riot that he had incited shortly after being deputized as a union buster, Chinatown is blinded in a mill accident, and Melody is devastated by his family’s misfortunes. As Blood on the Forge concludes, there is little hope for improved conditions ahead for the surviving brothers. Once again, Melody and Chinatown board a train going northward into an uncertain future. As the Mosses’ train departs, other trains arrive bringing more African American Southerners who will replace the Moss brothers as workers in the mill.

In its time, Blood on the Forge received little attention, as Attaway’s friend, John Oliver Killens recalls, “Bill […] could be moody and depressed, especially by the manner in which the Establishment critics had rendered him invisible—as if Let Me Breathe Thunder and Blood on the Forge had never been written. Obviously, the proletarian politics of his novels were verboten” (7). Furthermore, within the Proletarian literary movement where proletarian politics were not forbidden, Blood on the Forge was considered too apolitical, unprogressive, and pessimistic.
However, what has been interpreted as unprogressive and pessimistic about *Blood on the Forge* can instead be read as a powerful critique of the repressive ideology, racism, and exploitation dominating the social formations of the South and North. Thus, through dialectical mediation, that is, by tracing relationships of exploitation to immediate material conditions, lines between individual circumstances and sociopolitical conditions can be clearly drawn, highlighting networks of exploitative relationships that are represented in the narrative and form a complete circuit. The interconnectedness throughout the various exploiter/exploited relationships in the novel suggests that their ultimate collective function is to ensure the continuation of the entire system in place, a reproduction of the existing social formation.

*Blood on the Forge* clearly connects the exploiters’ modes of production and the material conditions of the exploited. In the South, the Mosses’ miserable conditions are related to racist policies that are, moreover, integrally linked to economic exploitation and the reproduction of exploitative relationships. The outright racism that dominates the portrayal of the South can be read as a conservation of the exploitative relationships of slavery. In the North, racism persists somewhat covertly in comparison to the South, yet a culture of exploitation is maintained and propagated, in which race continues to factor. In both cases, South and North, capitalistic exploitation is the driving force behind the Mosses’ despair. Attaway’s novel de-romanticizes the South through its violent and bleak depiction of the Mosses’ deprived living conditions as tenant farmers and de-romanticizes the North through its portrayal of the mechanistic lifestyle of heavy labor, degenerative recreational vice, and psychological alienation. Through its portrayal of racism as an institution of capitalism, *Blood on the Forge* stands up to scrutiny as a
progressive work of Proletarian fiction, as it achieves a sophisticated dialectical engagement with Marxist theory.

Ralph Ellison’s Influential Critique

Attaway’s depiction of the Mosses’ defeat by the forces of ideological indoctrination and physical exploitation certainly sounds a warning to the reader; however, the narrative’s underplaying of specifically revolutionary elements drew negative criticism from major literary figure and then proponent of Proletarian literature, Ralph Ellison, whose critique has followed Blood on the Forge throughout its critical and academic reception history. Ellison advocated for fiction depicting political and social progressiveness, elements normally associated with Proletarian literature, in contrast to Attaway’s tragic vision. Ellison first assessed Blood on the Forge in his essay, “The Great Migration,” published in the December 1941 issue of New Masses, in which he states:

Conceptually, Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level. The writer did not see that while the folk individual was being liquidated in the crucible of steel, he was also undergoing fusion with new elements. Nor did Attaway see that the individual which emerged, blended of old and new, was better fitted for the problems of the industrial environment. As a result the author is so struck by the despair in his material that he fails to see any grounds for hope for his characters. (24)
Ellison’s conclusion that *Blood on the Forge* fails on these grounds emphasizes his formal expectations of the Proletarian literature movement, which for reasons of practicality and praxis sought to demonstrate the potential of the marginalized working classes through literary representations of social activism. In this context, Ellison stated, “the Negro writer is to create the consciousness of his oppressed people” (26), suggesting a basis for leading by example through exemplary characters. *Blood on the Forge*’s strengths certainly reside in a somewhat different set of qualities, though certainly not unrelated.

Ellison’s position on literary aesthetics and his criticism of *Blood on the Forge*, for all its practical purposes, also reflects Ellison’s nostalgia for the Proletarian literature of the 1930s, which in 1941, the date of *Blood on the Forge*’s publication, was coming to an end as a literary movement. In its heyday, inspired by Marxist revolutionary enthusiasm, Proletarian literature focused on social activism as well as on connections to the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Often writers of the movement addressed the connection between the exploitation of the poor and racist policy in America, and issues of race and representations of Marxist activism and the CPUSA came to the forefront. Such major literary figures as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright were addressing, in their writing, the crisis as well as the hopefulness of the class-conscious and anti-racist literary movement, in clear terms. Focusing on the issues of class and race, Hughes wrote, “[W]e can’t join hands together / So long as whites are lynching black, / So black and white in one union fight / And get on the right track. / By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led / Come together, fellow workers / Black and white can all be red” (177). With such heightened levels of political activism and social awareness
prominent at the height of the genre, it is clear why Blood on the Forge left Ellison feeling let down.

The spirit of the 30s, with its sense progressiveness and immediate potential, informs Ellison’s formal expectations, but in contrast Attaway’s novel seems to portray paralysis devoid of potential. In reaction to Blood on the Forge, Ellison explains, “[W]hen we examine the conclusion of the novel to see how the struggle has registered in the consciousness of Attaway’s characters, we are disappointed […] One gets the impression that the book is simply a lament for the dying away of the Negro’s folk values” (90). Ellison’s perspective is reductive and certainly oversimplifies the novel’s potential readings; nevertheless, it is easy to sympathize with his position. Blood on the Forge is radical in its portrayal of exploitative relationships of power and the human devastation caused by those relationships, that is, Attaway’s radicalism certainly feels pessimistic, with its focus on devastation and despair; nevertheless, there is radicalism in its portrayal of devastatingly exploitative cultural socioeconomic relationships.

Ellison’s disappointment should have been alarm at Attaway’s brutal depiction of capitalistic destructiveness. There is dire urgency, heightened by the pessimistic quality, in Blood on the Forge that calls for progressive social change. Blood on the Forge spotlights the exploited, and their horrors are made ruthlessly vivid. Attaway’s writing effectively depicts the extremity of the Mosses’ material and ideological condition that leads them into severe mental and physical devastation. Attaway represents folk culture as deeply affected by the violence and racism of the South, lamentable in its suffering but certainly not over idealized in the text.
From the outset of the narrative, the traumatic effects of violence, racism, and exploitation are evident in the Mosses’ tragic character flaws. Each of them struggles with their specific burdens of false consciousness borne of racism and class exploitation in the South. The Mosses, surely wanted for dead as a result of Big Mat’s confrontation with the riding boss, narrowly escaped Kentucky, signifying the dead-end quality of life that Southern folk culture represents. Attaway’s portrayal of folk culture is defined by an outward expression of internalized poverty, exploitation, and racism, which are the premises of the Mosses’ self-conceptualization. Ellison finds fault in the attention Attaway pays to the brothers’ disintegration and false consciousness, discrediting it as unrepresentative, as he writes:

Attaway has sought to depict the essential meaning of the migration, to show the Negro entering industry, and, through a system of symbols, to light up broader regions of Negro experience than are specifically dealt with in this volume. He is especially sensitive to the disillusionment sustained by Negroes through the migratory experience. (23)

The Mosses’ disillusionment can be understood through their relationships to their cultural environments. These are the social structures that influence their lives and ultimately facilitate their exploitation and dispossession. Showing how institutions of racism perpetuate existing conditions of labor exploitation, Blood on the Forge transcends idealization of the South and the North. The Mosses’ development, from the South, along the train ride, and into the North, represents a changing ideological order and means of manipulation; however, the exploitative ends remain the same.
In spite of regional histories and mythologies concerning racism, the North and South are comparably exploitative in *Blood on the Forge*. Ellison took issue with this harsh portrayal of the North, for he associated the North with political enlightenment and progressiveness. In contrast, Attaway’s North is an environment of mindless escapism and hyper-paced labor exploitation. In this way, the North is similar to the South. The North’s distinction is industrialism, and, while racist policies are carried out less flagrantly than in the South, they are certainly underlying factors within the social structures of the North. Part of *Blood on the Forge*’s strength lies in its disturbing and unconventional portrayal of the North as being both exploitative and fatally efficient in its exploitative tactics, as the Mosses have been exhausted of their exploitable labor as well as psychologically depleted within a year of their arrival in the Northern steel mills.

Ellison’s critique of *Blood on the Forge* established a model of criticism that makes up the majority of the subsequent scholarship on the novel, which resoundingly identifies Attaway as a fairly pessimistic member of the Proletarian school of writers. Of course, the intense brutality and chaos represented in the novel suggest pessimism on the surface; however, on a deeper level, there is much more to it than sheer pessimism. Attaway’s aesthetic is sophisticatedly Marxian, and it projects forward to the Marxist structuralism of philosopher Louis Althusser, whose philosophical perspectives can be considered quite pessimistic with respect to psychological and material determinism, which is very different from the focus or themes more generally associated with the Proletarian genre. Thus, in addition to Attaway’s indictment of the North, certainly his pessimistic aesthetic makes the novel even more incongruous with Ellison’s sociopolitical literary outlook, as Lawrence P. Jackson points out in his 2011 book length
study titled *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*. Jackson writes:

For optimistic Marxist critics like Ralph Ellison, Attaway had represented the working class but failed to offer a vision of triumph. Attaway had teased out the differing ethnic relationships among Hungarians, Slavs, Irish, Mexicans, and blacks, striving to make their way from peonage to urban modern life. *Blood on the Forge* emphasized the destructive side of migration and values in flux. (128)

While Jackson points out the contrast between Attaway’s pessimistic Marxism and Ellison’s optimistic Marxism, he seems to make the same oversight as Ellison, in that Jackson only sees Attaway’s pessimism as a criticism of the North or a vexation over the passing of Southern folk culture, while the substance of *Blood on the Forge* lies in its challenge to cultural and regional mythologies and idealizations in its sharp denouncement of both Northern and Southern cultures of exploitation.

In contrasting representations of the North and South, what Attaway achieves is a show of overwhelming physical and psychological forces that override the differences and reveal the commonalities uniting the North and the South under the same capitalistic symbolic order. While Ellison complained, “There is no center of consciousness, lodged in a character or characters capable of comprehending the sequence of events” (24), Attaway’s relentlessly shrewd engagement with the destructiveness of capitalist exploitation, his refusal to offer mere wish fulfillment through triumphant characters, proves to be enduringly profound and incisively grounded in Marxist thinking, an
element of the novel that posed a new problem for literary scholars of *Blood on the Forge* throughout the Cold War era.

**Cold War and Contemporary Criticism**

While the Marxian representations of *Blood on the Forge* have always been marginalized for one reason or another, during the Cold War era, William Attaway and *Blood on the Forge* were considered strictly in the context of African American literature with an emphasis on cultural nationalism. The novel’s Marxist overtones were minimalized or discredited completely. In 1958, Robert A. Bone’s book, *The Negro Novel in America*, treats Attaway’s and other writers’ involvement with the Proletarian literary movement as misguided, as he writes, “Many young writers, both white and colored, succumbed to the flattering publicity which the party was willing to bestow—at a price” (114). He concludes without qualification, “By thus enjoining the Negro author to explore his own tradition, the party inadvertently advanced the legitimate development of Negro art. It is not the first time in its history that the American Communist party has done the right thing for the wrong reasons” (116). Nevertheless, in spite of his anti-Marxist tone, Bone’s reaction to *Blood on the Forge* reverberates Ellison’s critique, when he states, “[T]he novel almost sideslips into sentimental revolt against modern industrialism” (137). Unlike Ellison though, Bone seeks to disarm the legitimate Marxist concerns of the novel for the purpose of focusing on it as a work of African American literature, downplaying its elements of Proletarian literature.

Though he does recognize, in Mat’s epiphany, the novel’s strong alignment with Marxist ideas, Bone reiterates his disregard for class-consciousness in art, as he claims
that this brief but profound moment in the text is its undoing. He asserts, “By granting vision to Big Mat, Attaway reduces his protagonist from a tragic hero to a mere mouthpiece for his own political views. In the process he damages the aesthetic structure beyond repair” (139). Bone is representative of the general Cold War era reaction to *Blood on the Forge* and, more broadly, all Proletarian literature in regard to representations of Marxian class-consciousness, as he reduces the Marxism of the proletarian writers to “sentimental revolt.”

In defense of Attaway’s depiction of Mat’s class-conscious awakening, I would point out that early on in the text, Attaway establishes Mat as a deep thinker beneath all his rage and brawn, and the narrative reaffirms his contemplative character at key points. Much earlier in the events leading up to his death, Mat can be found considering the effectiveness of the labor strike against the steel mill’s ability to function, evidencing his developing line of thought and showing that such profound thoughts are within his character. Representing Mat’s complex ideological consciousness as including profound thoughts coinciding with his naturalistic false consciousness, emphasizing Attaway’s aesthetic of constriction, misperception, and struggle under exploitative capitalist control. Cold War era literary scholars were thus critical if not repelled by Mat’s Marxian conclusion.

As Barbara Foley puts it in *Radical Representation: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*, “The early years of Cold War witnessed the appearance of influential works of cultural criticism effectively driving the nail into proletarian literature’s coffin” (21). Thus, *Blood on the Forge*, along with other lesser known titles from the Proletarian literary genre, were exiled from academia until the Civil Rights
Movement of the 1960s reignited an interest in African American literature of protest. This renewed interest, however, retained the anti-Marxist tone of the Cold War era scholarship. This anti-Marxism also distorted the assessments of *Blood on the Forge* during the Civil Rights era of literary scholarship.

After Bone’s study, *Blood on the Forge* all but disappears from American literary studies until 1968 when Edward Margolies published *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors*. Margolies’s comprehensive study, which includes Attaway and other African American writers of the Proletarian literature genre, such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, features a chapter titled “Migration: William Attaway and *Blood on the Forge*.” In this chapter, Margolies discusses *Blood on the Forge*’s complicated reception history and its commercial failure as due to its enigmatic clash of art and politics. Although Margolies’s tone is disparaging toward the Proletarian literary genre, what can be salvaged from his analysis is his attention to the poignancy of the novel’s meaning, as *Blood on the Forge* engages extremely painful subject matter with the sparest possibility of relief and resolution.

While the novel was too defeatist for Proletarian movement leaders such as Ellison, later it was interpreted as too radical by Cold War era scholars, thus bereft of readership, and obscured for decades despite its artistic merits and complex social critiques. Margolies somewhat dismissively speculates, and yet at the same time indirectly addresses past criticisms, including Ellison’s and Bone’s. Margolies writes:

The failure of the novel to attain popularity may perhaps be ascribed to this paradoxical achievement. On the face of it, *Blood on the Forge*—even its title—suggests simply another of the interminable working-class novels
dealing with the downtrodden and their efforts to succeed to a dignified life. Or perhaps the novel was read as naturalistic fiction, but because it did not quite fit the “uplift” formula of its day, it was relegated to the dustbin of the ideologically confused. Whatever the reason, it is clear that neither the “aesthetes” who wanted their art to eschew all sociological comment, nor the “socially committed’ [sic] who wanted their art to point the way, would have looked favorably on Blood on the Forge, since in form and subject matter it seems to lie somewhere in a no man’s land. (49)

Margolies approach to Blood on the Forge differentiates art from social politics and treats these two elements of the novel as not only separate entities, but mutually exclusive and unmixable. Through this separation of art and politics, Margolies speculates as to the cause of the novel’s relative obscurity. He recognizes that the novel has merits, but he presents them as outside of or in spite of its Marxist perspective, which is typical of Cold War era criticism of the novel.

**Althusser’s State Apparatuses in Blood on the Forge**

In his pathbreaking essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser presents an unsettling portrayal of consciousness as an extension of cultural repression. This idea is revealing when applied to the story of the Moss brothers. The discrimination and exploitation that the brothers experience can be understood in terms of Althusser’s theory of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, which function continually to reproduce capitalist culture. Althusser explains that our cultures not only
depend on production but, moreover, “the reproduction of the conditions of production,” which he refers to as “[t]he ultimate condition of production” (127).

According to Althusser, a mode of production is reproduced through two kinds of influence over a cultural community. First are the repressive state apparatuses, and they are institutions, such as federal armed forces, state, and local police, which physically enforce the superstructure’s policies and laws. Althusser argues that “[r]epression suggests that the state apparatuses in question ‘functions by violence’—at least ultimately” (143). Government and law enforcement agencies maintain productive modes by enforcing the policies of the symbolic order, controlling the behavior of societal subjects. Definitively, the repressive state apparatuses use physical violence to uphold their regulations. In Blood on the Forge there are profound differences in the way the repressive state apparatuses take form and function from the South to the North; however, they are the same in their basic means and ultimate function.

Secondly, the ideological state apparatuses are the influential ideals and value systems of convention, which are represented as universal to culture. The ideological state apparatuses are responsible for passing on such values and ideals, as well as the subconscious framework that determines conscious autonomous perspective. Ideological state apparatuses include the cultural institutions of family, religion, education, and employment, and these institutions influence the ideology of a culture or social formation through institutionalized rituals, such as attending sporting events, watching television, patronizing the arts, or recreational / social drinking for example. Certainly families and social relationships constitute more than just state apparatuses. However, as institutions these things ultimately maintain and govern exploitative relationships by infusing such
relationships with cultural ideology. Althusser describes how individuals become subjects of ruling-class culture through ideological conventions that are both consciously and subconsciously internalized and formalized through ritual and tradition. Similarly to the changing role of repression throughout *Blood on the Forge*, the ideological influences of culture shift dramatically from the South to the North, while ultimately maintaining their function.

In Attaway’s novel, the Moss brothers can be read as ideologically defined by the institutional pulls of their cultural environments, in both their compliance and resistance to it. In both cases, these institutions influence their perception of their circumstances. As Althusser explains, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (162). Moreover, as he establishes early on in the essay, “Ideological State Apparatuses [constitute] a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (143). These distinct and specialized institutions influence the daily lives of individual subjects, binding them together into a social order.

There are signs of ideological social order similar to Althusser’s state apparatuses present throughout *Blood on the Forge* in the form of social influences filtered through institutions of family, religion, and employment as well as ritualized drinking, prostitution, and gambling, all of which give the illusion that exploitative conditions are natural. Hardship such as poverty and exploitative conditions are filtered through a worldview that valorizes hard work and formalizes a work ethic. Social experience, such as in employment as well as the family dynamic are ideologically ritualized, that is,
validated through cultural convention because it is a necessary means of meeting the demands of participation within the symbolic order.

*Blood on the Forge* can be read as complicating Althusser’s theoretical model by blurring the line of separation between ideological and repressive state apparatuses. However, by obscuring these distinctions, the narrative actually indicates macro and microcosmic dimensions to the relationships among ideological and repressive forces, which Althusser accounts for by describing how ideology and repression work within the state apparatuses respectively. He theorizes that repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses work inseparably, that is, they not only operate in tandem, but they work within each other as well. Ideology plays a role within repressive institutions, and repression plays a role in ideological institutions. Althusser elaborates:

> [E]very State Apparatus, whether Repressive or Ideological, ‘functions’ both by violence and ideology, but with one very important distinction which makes it imperative not to confuse the Ideological State Apparatus with the (Repressive) State Apparatus [. . .] This is the fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. (There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus.) For example, the Army and the Police also function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the ‘values’ they propound externally. (145)
They work together in varying proportions to ensure the maintenance of subordinate subjects; that is, repressive state apparatuses depend on ideology for regulation, and likewise, ideological state apparatuses depend on some level of repression.

The phenomenon of interpellation, wherein individuals recognize and affirm their own subjugation, is integral to the processes of physical oppression and ideological influence. Althusser uses the example of an authority figure, specifically a police officer, calling upon or hailing an individual as a societal subject. By answering the call, the individual subconsciously confirms his or herself as a subject within an ideological symbolic order. In answering the call of the law enforcement agent, the individual becomes a subject of society and, therefore, ideologically internalizes social regulation. Althusser’s exemplary scenario of the hailed individual undergoing the process of interpellation is metaphorical for something that is actually determined or takes place as one enters the cultural community, at birth. It is an analogy of an event that has already happened to the individual, meaning that the individual is born into a signifying system that defines social norms. Therefore, at birth and even before, interpellation takes place symbolically. Being born into a particular symbolic order is itself the instance of interpellation in that it sets in place the invariable conditions that govern a subject’s perception of reality.

The unconditionally influential power of the ideological apparatuses and the cultural phenomenon of interpellation accounts for the deterministic or anti-humanistic quality of Althusserian philosophy. He states plainly “that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)” (174). This kind of
ideological process is reverberated in *Blood on the Forge*, as there are key moments that signify ideological interpellation. The Moss brothers can be read as an embodiment of the tragic and, according to Althusser, unwinnable struggle to be an individual under the influence of cultural subjectivity.

The symbolic order and ideological state apparatuses in the North and South overwhelm the Moss brothers, although not without resistance. Class-consciousness is always on the verge or in the background of the narrative, at the outside edge of the Mosses’ consciousness, or it is fleeting, as it is in Big Mat’s dying moment, when he momentarily gets a clear perspective of the economic forces that have shaped his brothers’ and his fellow workers’ existences and conditions. After receiving a blow to the head, Mat realizes:

> he had been through all this once before. Only at that far time he had been the arm strong with hate. Yes, once he had beaten down a riding boss. A long time ago in the red hills he had done this thing and run away. Had that riding boss been as he was now? Big Mat went farther away and no longer could distinguish himself from these other figures. They were all one and all the same. In that confusion he sensed something true. Maybe somewhere in these mills a new Mr Johnston [who was the Mosses’ oppressive landlord, a personification of Jim Crow exploitation, from back in the South] was creating riding bosses, making a difference where none existed. (233)

Mat’s epiphany is nullified by the fact that he is dying as it comes to him; however, the reader is witness. Mat’s indoctrination and absorption into the exploitative system of
production becomes clear to him in very Althusserian terms: he recognizes the reproduction of the riding boss’s role within himself; he sees capitalism as the creator of riding bosses, figures of authority such as he has become, such as the other strike-busting thugs in the North and Mr. Johnston’s riding boss in the South. In his epiphany, Mat describes the overall similarities between the exploitative practices of the South and the North. Mat’s vision addresses the cyclical and repetitive quality in reproducing productive conditions and relationships, and it represents the production and the reproduction of oppressive forces within the symbolic order.

While its progressiveness lies in its myriad of thoughts and actions mediated in relation to the overarching theme of exploitation and class warfare, the content, in its immediacy, appears defeatist, pessimistic, and perhaps even nihilistic. Furthermore, the conclusion suggests a dire uncertainty. After Chinatown is permanently blinded from injuries suffered in a mill accident and Mat has been killed in a labor riot, Melody and Chinatown leave the steel mills. They board a northbound train, on which they meet a WWI veteran who has been blinded in battle. The soldier’s similarity to Chinatown is significant in its comparison of the industrial workplace to war, and it invokes the notion of capitalistic exploitation being class warfare against the poor and working class. Chinatown and the soldier exchange a cigarette, and together they listen for the imaginary report of war cannons and steel mill smokestacks. As Melody watches helplessly, Blood on the Forge concludes. It is a scene of implicit hopelessness, and in this way Attaway’s vision reflects Althusser’s pessimism in regard to the absoluteness and inescapability of ideological and repressive force, although Attaway’s representations also reveal cracks in
the absoluteness of the Althusserian model, which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

*Blood on the Forge*, for all its pessimism, tragedy, and despair, is a compelling work of Proletarian fiction. Although it may be perceived as out of step with the genre, it is important to note that, as *Blood on the Forge* suggests, the generic form attributed to Proletarian literature is often overestimated. *Blood on the Forge* follows some of the perceived guidelines of the genre as much as it diverges from them. Most works of Proletarian literature, simultaneously, follow and vary from the generic form on their own terms. The generalization of Proletarian literature as formulaic applies when observing the genre from a distance, in the broadest sense. Closer attention more often reveals unique characteristics, as is true with *Blood on the Forge*. Novels, such as Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnddio*, Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* certainly qualify as Proletarian fiction, but they are diverse. Through the 1930s to the early 1940s, the Proletarian literary movement produced many works of literary art, and what binds these literary works into a genre are the shared themes of class-consciousness, class struggle, and internationalism. *Blood on the Forge* refuses any generic template, yet the totality of its narrative effectively encourages class-consciousness through its depiction of class struggle. *Blood on the Forge* also has an internationalist theme that is relayed through depictions of the immigrant workers at the steel mills, the relationships formed among them regardless of nationality, and the deeper connection among them in the commonalities of their struggles.

The preceding is the foundation for an ideological and Althusserian analysis of *Blood on the Forge*. The following chapters will explore the spatial representation of the
South and the North in regard to racism, exploitation, and cultural ideology. As different as the Southern and Northern systems of exploitation may appear at one level of the novel, it also reveals their essential similarities. While outright racist policies in Kentucky seem to contrast sharply the race relations in Pennsylvania, race continues to factor into policy on the job and in the community. In the South and the North, ideological and repressive tactics are used to ensure sustainable exploitative relationships. In the agrarian South, tenant farming, debt servitude, and racist legislation and policy compel the Mosses to unremitting toil so that their landlord will continue to profit. In the industrialized North, ritualized recreation encourages an ongoing cycle of work and recreation, which, of course, in the end, benefits the exploiters.

In the end, the Mosses are used up, worn out, and replaced. Blood on the Forge is an indictment of exploitative culture in general, in the North and South, and certainly discourages the tendency to romanticize either Southern agrarian or the Northern industrial culture. The novel deprives the reader of any kind of wish fulfillment, and its bleakness and focus on despair are its profound achievements, as is it expresses urgency and immediacy interceding with the broader scope of social forces devastating the Mosses and their coworkers. The sophisticated representation of personal crisis in relation to cultural order makes Blood on the Forge a progressive work of Marxist protest and Proletarian fiction, while together with its nightmarish depiction of the Mosses’ life on the farm in Kentucky, traveling northward in the dark boxcar, and the fiery world of the steel mills collectively make Blood on the Forge a stunning and haunting work of literary art.
Chapter Two:

Southern Ideologies of Repression and Rituals of Escapism in *Blood on the Forge*

_Night bird call out the deathwatch . . . But it don’t last long, ‘cause she say, ‘Git along, ‘an’ be nothin’, ‘cause black ain’t nothin’, an’ I is black . . . ._  
—William Attaway

Attaway’s depiction of the South foregrounds dialectical relationships between black folk culture and the white aristocracy, while undercurrents in the text emphasize ideological underpinnings that work to maintain dominance in these dialectical relationships. An overwhelming presence of violence pervades all aspects of the Mosses’ lives. Work life, family life, social engagement, and thus ideological consciousness and the subconscious are shaped by repression consisting of physical and mental violence. This has ideological consequences that play out in the Mosses’ material experiences. Each Moss brother, in his own way, develops an ideology that reflects and reifies the repression of the existing social order, early 20th century Jim Crow culture. The brutality that Attaway depicts in the South complicates the notion that Althusser’s state apparatuses are clearly distinguishable. Attaway’s novel describes repressive state apparatuses functioning like ideological state apparatuses by constantly threatening violence, and, visa versa, ideological state apparatuses frequently become violently repressive. Nevertheless, Althusser’s theory stands up to Attaway’s complications by accounting for the variable degrees to which repressive state apparatuses employ ideological tactics, and, likewise, ideological state apparatuses use disciplinary measures. Furthermore, Althusser’s model helps reveal the Mosses’ motives and circumstances in that it describes the ideological function of cultural influence to maintain the dominating cultural order. That is to say, it is not the obscuring of state apparatuses that tests the
limits of Althusser’s system in *Blood on the Forge*. Notwithstanding the fact that they are compelled to work for and within the symbolic order of the South by repressive and ideological forces, the Mosses represent a measure of instability in the state apparatuses’ influential hold. The Mosses do this by acting and thinking in ways that suggest elements of humanism amidst signs of Althusserian determinism.

The Mosses’ journey from the South to the North is part of the Great Migration, in which a substantial number of black Southerners moved northward, both to escape the racist Jim Crow culture of the South, and for the lure of work in the developing industrial region of the country. When Attaway was a child, his family took part in the Great Migration, relocating from Mississippi to Illinois. As noted in chapter one, William Attaway Senior’s reason for the move was to spare his children from the psychological and ideological influences of Southern culture. The Moss brothers represent Attaway’s father’s worst fears, as Melody, Chinatown, and Big Mat bear the brunt of Jim Crow violence and psychological indoctrination. Their experience sharecropping in rural Kentucky is dominated by dehumanizing violence, exploitation, and poverty made worse by the constant threat of more violence. Of the five parts of the novel, only the first is set in the South, and while it is merely 37 of the novel’s 237 pages, it is concentrated with representations of racist and exploitative violence, and this establishes a theme that will carry throughout the novel.

*Blood on the Forge* shows how the South enforces racialized ideology through pervasive violence and racist policy that protects and sanctions violence against black Southerners. In this environment, he Mosses develop their own ideologies of self and race, as well as there own means of psychological escape from the persecution and
exploitation. In analyzing representations of racist violence and its ideological resonances, I will, at times, compare *Blood on the Forge* to other Proletarian works that engage similar themes. Comparisons to Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” that describes racist violence in the South as a kind of education for black Southerners, as well as Peters and Sklar’s *Stevedore’s* and Langston Hughes’s criticism of the blues as an hopeless response to racist violence in the South, illuminate the psychological depths reached by Attaway’s novel.

**Ideologies of Jim Crow Violence in *Blood on the Forge***

In the Southern setting, the Mosses undergo ideological conditioning consisting of violence and exploitation psychologically internalized, and the result is a kind of naturalism in which depravation and marginalization are imagined as part of a natural order. This naturalistic perspective of the local Southern culture reflects the Mosses’ interpellation into the symbolic order of the Jim Crow South. The Mosses’ demonstrate this in several ways throughout their candid conversations, especially in reference to their landlord, Mr. Johnston. As the Mosses are out of food credits, starving, and hoping that Mr. Johnston will give Mat the meat of sick pigs for them to eat, for some relief from their starvation, Melody exclaims, “Mr Johnston ain’t givin’ no niggers no well hog an’ he ain’t givin’ ‘em no sick hog. He ain’t given’ ‘em no hog a-tall” (3). There is further evidence of the Mosses’ naturalistic perspective in their distrust of Mr. Johnston’s offer of a new mule, as Chinatown responds, “It ain’t natural for a white man to get mealy-mouth overnight” (19). This statement suggests that Chinatown frames his perspective of Mr. Johnston’s abusiveness toward them as a natural disposition rather than a civil
injustice. Mr. Johnston’s ruthless exploitation, the violence of Jim Crow repression, and the resultant ideologies reflect Althusser’s definition of ideology as an imagined relationship to reality.

The nature of these imaginary relationships is also exposed in other characteristics of the Mosses, such as Chinatown’s gold tooth and Big Mat’s curse. While Chinatown’s gold tooth is tangible to him, its function is to create an abstract relationship to reality, and this is addressed when Hattie reports Chinatown’s obsession with looking at it in the mirror (5). The tooth gives him an enhanced sense of self worth within a culture that marginalizes and devalues him. Inversely, Big Mat’s curse is an abstract concept, and it is certainly part of his imaginary relationship to his material conditions. He reasons, “The Lawd don’t love no child of sin. That’s why he don’t love me. That’s why he put the curse on me” (24). His curse mediates and gives meaning to his hardship and despair. The curse and the gold tooth are both borne of hardship, despair, and the psychological processing of hardship and despair. The psychological process creates the imaginary relationship to the real conditions behind the despair, which are physically and ideologically violent in nature and exploitative in essence.

Each of the Moss brother’s ideological perspective is based on their repressive experiences, which they have psychologically internalized. Among other examples of this, their ideologies of repression are reflected in their compliance to Mr. Johnston’s terms as landlord, as he denies them both food credits and payment for their crops. While the Mosses are certainly discontented with their circumstances, they demonstrate a level of submission. Their endurance of poverty, exploitation, and marginalization represents the Mosses’ interpellation into their respective roles within the symbolic order. This links
Blood on the Forge to Althusser’s concept of state apparatuses, which function, like the forces acting on the Mosses, to produce subjects that will perform according to the prevailing cultural order. That being said, maintaining the Mosses’ ideological frameworks and exploitative relationships requires that the state apparatuses operate with high levels of fear-inducing violence.

In Attaway’s depiction of the South, violent repression and ubiquitous threat of violence predominantly account for the ideological indoctrination of the Mosses. The deep psychological impact of Jim Crow policy on the Mosses is summed up plainly in Attaway’s words, “Just to be hiding filled them with mad-dog terror. Hiding […] was something always in the back of their heads. It was something to be thought of along with bloodhound dogs and lynching” (35). Their ideologies develop through personal experience and intimate knowledge of repressive practices as severe as lynching. While Althusser distinguishes between the repressive state apparatuses and the ideological state apparatuses, he also explains, as noted in the previous chapter, how they are inextricably related; repression sets the stage for the ideological symbolic order, while the ideological functions to justify or validate repressive culture. Blood on the Forge, in its portrayal of the South, shows how physical repression and ideological influence not only enforce but also maintain and reproduce what is required by the prevailing social order. Anticipating Althusser’s state apparatuses, Attaway’s novel depicts the direct correlations among racist ideologies, the physical enforcement of those ideologies, and economic exploitation.

The brief exposition at the outset of the novel works like a montage of images and events, in culmination, portraying the Mosses’ miserable conditions of living as black
sharecroppers in the South. The Mosses’ mother, Maw Moss, has died while working behind the reins of a plow mule in the fields. In a passage describing the recently passed matriarch of the family and revealing of the Mosses’ background, Attaway writes, “Four weeks had stopped them from wailing. It was better for her to be in heaven, in Hattie’s words on their maw, than making a crop for Mr Johnston. . . Still, you couldn’t stop her from working. If that mule went to the same place she did she probably started in right away to plow for God” (7). Big Mat had killed the mule that had dragged his mother after her death in the field; however, whatever relief, if any, he may have felt, after venting his grief ridden rage on the unsuspecting animal, is certainly countered when subsequently Mr. Johnston increases the Mosses’ debt as a result. Further complicating their lives is the loss of the mule itself, which they need for working the farm. The Mosses’ conditions steadily worsen throughout this short segment set in the South.

As the Mosses’ living conditions spiral downward, violent tensions escalate. In addition to controlling the Mosses’ money, Mr. Johnston exercises a kind of corporal authority over them. This authority is maintained through an ongoing assurance of violent retribution for insubordination. This blends both psychologically and physically coercive tactics, functioning similarly to Althusser’s description of ideological and repressive state apparatuses. Mr. Johnston seemingly represents both state apparatuses. This is apparent in the text when Big Mat asks Mr. Johnston for another mule. Of all the members of the Moss family, Big Mat most clearly represents the extremely high tension and volatility within these dialectical relationships, and he demonstrates how ideological state apparatuses work, though not without fail, to temper the frustration and indignation building within him. Mr. Johnston responds to Mat, “What makes you think I’m going to
give you anything, Mat? [. . .] It ain’t my fault your folks ain’t got nothin’ to eat” (13). He continues, “I contract with you for a crop. It ain’t my business how you make it. Them hills has always growed a crop and they’ll grow one this season if you folks have to scratch it outen the bare rocks” (14). He berates Mat until eventually, as Attaway describes, “Mr Johnston caught Big Mat with his eyes. He came forward. Big Mat looked doggedly into the hard eyes. For a long second they hung on the edge of violence,” when Mr. Johnston asks, “‘You ain’t kickin’, are you, Mat?’” (14). Mat replies, “Nosuh, I ain’t kickin” (15). With those words, the incident deescalates. Mat backs down now; however, moments later, he foreshadows the ebullition to come, when he says, “They don’t jump till they ‘most dead” (15). While he is referring to livestock being slaughtered, these words are prophetic as well as profound in the context of Big Mat’s life. When later pushed to the edge of what can be described as a spiritual death, he jumps, in that he, almost reflexively, lashes out against his oppression.

For now, however, the standoff is pacified. “You a good boy,” Mr. Johnston tells Mat, “What I really come over here for is to tell you I’m goin’ to let you have a mule tomorrow” (15). It appears that Mr. Johnston is rewarding Mat for backing down and returning to work peacefully, although in actuality, the issue is unresolved. Below the surface of his demeanor, Mat’s despair and indignation continue rising in spite of Mr. Johnston’s influence over him. Amidst the Southern Jim Crow culture, Mr. Johnston is only part of the serious troubles afflicting the Mosses, and setting into motion the series of events leading to their exile from the South.

At home, Mat’s family waits hungrily, until he arrives with paltry scraps of entrails and the empty promise of a new mule. The atmosphere of deprivation and
desperation overshadow Mat’s seemingly good news, and Hattie begins criticizing him for failing to entreat Mrs. Johnston for decent food, suggesting that she might have been charitable in contrast to her husband. Hattie’s comments instigate sharp retorts from Melody and Chinatown that reveal the high level of violence that the Mosses face beyond the abuses and boundaries of Mr. Johnston and his farmland:

“Keep shut Hattie,” said Melody. “He got more sense than to talk to a white lady—don’t care who she is.”

“It’s dangerous,” agreed Chinatown. “‘Member young Charley from over in the next county got lynched jest ‘cause he stumble into one in the broad daylight. She scream.”

“I stumble anywhere I feels like,” declared Hattie.

“You is a colored woman. White man ain’t gonna do much to a colored woman in daylight. He gonna do somethin’ to her at night,” said Chinatown. (17)

This passage demonstrates how Jim Crow violence translates into the Mosses’ ideologies. Melody suggests that having “sense” means being intuitively aware of the social codes of the racist culture, showing how their Jim Crow based ideologies develop “from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experiences of the struggle” (Althusser 186). In the South, class struggle, for the Mosses, is shrouded in issues of race and race-based discrimination; nevertheless, in the course of the novel, Attaway exposes the capitalistic motivations beneath the shroud.

The Mosses psychologically internalize their persecution on an ongoing basis, as the above passage from the novel exemplifies. Sharing in the experience of Charley who
was lynched, the Mosses construct ideological perspectives accordingly, conceptualizing their view of “sense” or wisdom in response to their experience of the struggle, in their case, racial persecution and hyper exploitation. Their ideological outlooks manifest in their practices, as the psychological effect of experiencing Jim Crow culture regulates the Mosses’ behavior. This is evident when Chinatown explains, “Melody and me was in town […] when who come walking along but old Mrs Johnston. The plank was so narrow we have to jump out in the mud to keep from brushin’ her” (18). This incident is, among other things, an implication of Chinatown and Melody’s interpellation as subjects of Southern culture, considering Althusser’s statement:

[A] subjected being […] submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission [. . . ] the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’. (182)

This interpellated submission that Althusser discusses can be recognized in Chinatown and Melody’s actions and, moreover, in the retelling of the story, in which they hold themselves accountable for their own actions. They take responsibility for their behavior, taking possession of it as a sign of their good “sense,” constituting their imagined relationships to the culture.

The Mosses’ conversation shows that they have acclimated to their extreme state of deprivation and marginalization, and by means of interpellation, they interpret it as naturally given. Through the ideological lenses of Jim Crow culture, brutality is viewed
as fairly commonplace, and as Melody and Chinatown express in their discussion with Hattie, intuitiveness in regards to survival tactics against Jim Crow violence constitutes commonsense. In this way, Attaway obscures Althusser’s clearer distinction between ideological and repressive state apparatuses. The Mosses’ ideologies are predominantly based on repression because the institutions represented in *Blood on the Forge* that would qualify as ideological state apparatuses operate through violence. Therefore, while the dominance of violent influences in proportion to those more purely ideological may appear incongruent with Althusser’s theory, the incongruence can be accounted for by the peculiarity of Jim Crow policy and legislation operating on racist ideologies and sanctioning violence against black Southerners.

While the telling of Charley’s encounter in town and his subsequent murder informs the reader that sanctioned racist violence plays out in public arenas, at the same time, the Mosses’ discussions are punctuated by violent images of Big Mat working on Mr. Johnston’s farm. This the reader sees firsthand, and the accumulative effect emphasizes repression in the form of hyper-exploitation. *Blood on the Forge* complicates the distinctive characteristics of the state apparatuses; however, there is still the clear connection among cultural institutions and the function of maintaining and reproducing conditions of production. Althusser discusses how repressive and ideological state apparatuses not only function in concert but within each other, and considering the condition of “super-exploitation or extra-oppression due to racism” (Dawahare 19) in the South during the Jim Crow era, discrepancies between Althusser’s model and the complexities of Attaway’s novel are resolved. Althusser explains that institutionalized state apparatuses, both repressive and ideological, use repression and ideology to regulate
and reproduce not only means of production but also themselves as institutions. Althusser gives the example of the police and military, as they “function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the ‘values’ they propound externally,” and furthermore:

In the same way, but inversely, it is essential to say that for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, if this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.) Thus Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family. . . . The same is true of the cultural IS Apparatus (censorship, among other things), etc. (145)

Althusser’s demonstrates how ideology and repression are internally and integrally related, and Blood on the Forge certainly reflects this to an extreme. To analyze Attaway’s intense use of violence as an ideological state apparatus, it is important to recognize that citizens like Mr. Johnston and the riding boss possess the authority that, in correlation with Althusser’s model, could be considered law enforcement, and in fact they act as a kind of law enforcement in regards to the Mosses. In “Part One” of Blood on the Forge, the Mosses’ experience in the South is represented as a complex amalgamation of violent repression and repressive ideological forces, which are eventually further complicated by Mat’s impulse to fight back against the authority oppressing him.
The Intertextual Perspectives of “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and

*Blood on the Forge*

Attaway’s bleak depiction of the South describes a racist social order that maintains power and its modes of production by physical violence and psychological debilitation. As I have reiterated for emphasis and clarity, hereof Althusser’s theory of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, *Blood on the Forge* obscures the distinguishability of the ideologically influential and the repressively coercive institutions, as the Mosses’ ideological perspectives are so heavily influenced by violent oppression. This obscured vision is further complicated by the violence embedded in ideological institutions, such as the institution of family and the workplace. While the violent nature of Jim Crow culture is a priori by this point, what is peculiar of *Blood on the Forge* are the representations of institutionalized ideologies in the Southern folk culture. Attaway portrays aspects of folk culture as ideologically overrun by Jim Crow consciousness. While this perspective is uncommon, Attaway’s vision of the South is not unique, as Richard Wright depicts, with striking similarities to *Blood on the Forge*, the folk-culture experience in the first section of *Uncle Tom’s Children* titled “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch.” Wright’s collection of numbered vignettes together conveys the violent and hatful atmosphere of the South as well as the psychologically stifling effects of living in such a hostile environment. Focusing on racist violence as a form of ideological indoctrination and conditioning, throughout the narrative Wright makes references such as, “My Jim Crow education” (7, 13), “gems of Jim Crow wisdom” (2), and “I learned my Jim Crow lessons” (13). Wright effectively juxtaposes violent imagery with references to learning and education, which
demonstrates the overlapping elements that Althusser would define as repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

Richard Wright’s “first lesson” in Jim Crow ideology comes from his family, when his mother beats him after learning that a bottle thrown by some white children in a childish game of mock war had injured him. Wright reports:

She would smack my rump with a stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart on me gems of Jim Crow wisdom. I was never to throw cinders anymore. I was never to fight any more wars. I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle. Didn’t I know she was working hard every day in the hot kitchens of the white folks to make money to take care of me? When was I ever going to learn to be a good boy? (2-3)

Like Blood on the Forge, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” shows how ideological state apparatuses, such as the institution of family can regulate themselves through repression while still functioning as ideological state apparatuses. From this incident with his mother, Wright is meant to learn subordination and subservience to his white counterparts. This describes the reproduction of productive means by showing Wright’s initiation into the institution of employment in the Jim Crow South.

Some years later while working at his first job, two of Wright’s white coworkers, suspecting his aspirations of job advancement, assault him after enquiring about job training. Here again the act of physical oppression is used for its psychological effect, that is, to reinforce in his consciousness his subservient position on the job, and again,
similar to *Blood on the Forge*, ideological institutions such as employment rely heavil

y on the tactics of repressive state apparatuses. The incident is psychologically magnified

when fellow black Southerners reiterate what Wright’s white coworkers had impressed

upon him. Echoing his mother’s words from years earlier, he recalls, “When I told the

folks at home what had happened, they called me a fool. They told me that I must never

again exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to

‘stay in your place’ if you want to keep working” (7). This response from Wright’s fellow

black Southerners evidences the state apparatuses at work in the folk culture, and the

sentiment expressed is along the same lines of thinking that Hattie expresses in *Blood on

the Forge* when she berates Chinatown for resisting his role in the Mosses’ relationship to

their sharecrop contract holder and landlord, Mr. Johnston. Insisting that Chinatown

should be ashamed of himself, she says, “Lawd, you never will be no good,” but

reconsiders, “Maybe you git straightened out if you gits a woman of your own to feed”

(4-5), perhaps further explaining Big Mat’s excessive work ethic in relation to the

institution of family as ideological state apparatus. The common element in Wright’s

autobiographical account and Hattie’s statements contrasts with representations such as

“Sterling Brown’s southern blacks who, in spite of hardships, find a nurturing folk

culture of resistance” (Dawahare 121). Both Wright and Attaway emphasize the

ideological acceptance of and submission to the hierarchic labor system in the South and

workplace relationships among black and white Southerners.

These works by Attaway and Wright intertextually relate in their representations

of racism’s psychological effects and the violence reinforcing those psychological

effects. In *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A*
New Pandora’s Box, Anthony Dawahare points out in reference to Wright’s work, although also applying to Blood on the Forge, “the dynamics of psychological development are subconsciously mediated by racist ideology” (118), and as “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” demonstrates repeatedly, racist violence in the South dominates racist ideology. Wright reports having witnessed his white boss beating a black woman for being late on her debt payment. The incident itself represents Jim Crow violence, that is, it represents the repressive tactics sanctioned in the South based on race. The ideological effect is represented when fellow black workers, tell Wright that the woman was “lucky” not to be raped in addition to being beaten (8).

Wright also recalls that his “Jim Crow education broadened and deepened” (11) while working at a hotel where a fellow bellboy “was castrated and run out of town” (12) for being caught sleeping with a white woman. After the incident, hotel management threatens the remaining bellboys with similar or worse repercussions. These threats of violence are meant to affect psychological as well as physical manipulation and restraint.

Wright’s examples of Jim Crow violence recall the racist violence described by Chinatown and Melody, discussed in the previous section of this chapter, concerning young Charley’s lynching and the danger of rape that black women face after dark. However, each of the violent encounters in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” is immediately linked to exploitative relationships whether by employment or debt, which is significant because in each case the violent act and the ideological effects reaffirms the existing mode of production. The violence Wright endures, together with psychological impressions of that violence, is very similar to the relationships among racial discrimination, repression, and ideological subjugation represented in Attaway’s Blood
on the Forge. Both “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and Blood on the Forge can be read as Althusserian in this way.

Where Blood on the Forge clearly connects the relationships among ideology, repression, and exploitation is in representations of Big Mat’s confrontations with Mr. Johnston and the riding boss. Mat’s run in with the riding boss, following the confrontation with Mr. Johnston, exemplifies how Althusser’s theory relates to the South as a hyper exploitative system functioning by means of repressive and ideological power complicated by the relationships among the protagonists and social forces determining their living conditions. With a horsewhip, the riding boss strikes Mat, and it immediately affects him psychologically because it signifies “trouble” for his family. After the riding boss whips him:

Big Mat looked out of dull eyes, watching the quirt from a great distance within himself. A picture of the unplowed land came into his mind. When the land was not being worked folks were hungry. Maybe after this trouble Mr Johnston would take back all he had promised. Hattie and the boys should not have to go hungry when they were not to fault. He wondered why he had talked up to the riding boss. He had known what would happen. (27)

Mat strikes back at the riding boss, acting out against the social framework of the Jim Crow South. Despite ideological and repressive forces set against him, Mat turns the tables in the power dynamic and delivers a blow to a social order that otherwise appeared so absolute and inescapable.
Mat’s actions speak to the deterministic qualities of Althusser’s theory. Mat disrupts the bonds of subjugation on which, according to Althusser, the status quo of labor relations depend. To maintain power over an exploitable labor source for:

the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words.’ (Althusser 132-33)

Mat’s outburst against the riding boss reveals a gap in the manipulability and a limitation to his submissiveness. His actions would certainly warrant his criminal arrest under Jim Crow policy, for “[a]lthough indispensible to racist oppression, the legal arrest of black men signifies the failure of the ideology of racism” (Dawahare 118). Such a failure on the part of the state apparatuses challenges the absoluteness of Althusser’s structuralism.

Nevertheless, Blood on the Forge finally arrives at a similarly cryptic conclusion as “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” which concludes with a looming tension of suppressed violence, just as Blood on the Forge ends with an ambiguously mixed sense of possibility for some kind of improvement as well as ominously looming defeat.
The Hungry Blues and the Wishing Game: Ideological State Apparatuses and Ritualized Escapism

*Blood on the Forge* opens to Melody singing and playing music on his guitar, “the hungry blues,” and through the themes and tones set by his music and lyrics, he gives the reader a glimpse into the Mosses’ living conditions and ideological perspectives. The opening line of the novel states that Melody “never had a craving in him that he couldn’t slick away on the guitar” (1), introducing the theme of deprivation, dispossession and the struggle to endure hardship. “[S]hare-cropping,” Attaway writes, “and being hungry went together” (1), and Melody endures his hunger by playing the blues. The music offers him some kind of relief, but it is temporary and principally amounts to escapism. Therefore, although it expresses crisis, it is passive in its relationship to the crisis. The text seems to hint at this passiveness, stating that Melody was “making music when he should have been fighting over the little balls of fat left in the kettle” (1-2), and in this way, Melody’s hungry blues resemble Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses, insofar as they represent ritualized escapism as a method of enduring and persisting in spite of everyday exploitations and abuses.

While Althusser discusses music as a part of the cultural ideological state apparatuses, he describe something all but completely unlike Melody’s blues; nevertheless, there is a key similarity between them, and it lies in their symmetrical and polar opposition. Althusser concentrates on the music of the dominant class, as he describes music and musical concerts functioning to reinforce and bolster cultural pride in the bourgeoisie. “Ideology of the current ruling class,” Althusser writes, “integrates into its music the great themes of the Humanism of the Great Forefathers” (154), while
Melody’s blues integrates themes of immediate destitution, loss, and death. They represent a reification of the Mosses and reaffirm their interpellation into the South’s racialized caste system. Thus, despite its counter perspective to the music and musical experience described by Althusser, Melody’s blues ultimately function like an ideological state apparatus.

Melody’s blues dialectically relate to the state apparatuses. Contradictions arise, such as the blues’s helpfulness and comforting quality to the Mosses amidst their despair and, at the same time, exposing defeatist content related to the Mosses’ similar sense of defeatism. Although Hattie claims, “It ain’t no two ways about it […] Blues sure is a help” (3), there are two elements at odds in Melody’s blues. Contradicting Hattie’s notion of help or the consoling element of the blues, its themes of fatalism pervade the Mosses’ ideologies, which go on to be realized in their actions. Note that the details described in Melody’s song, except for the projected death at its conclusion, coincide with the Mosses’ real life circumstances in the South, as he sings:

Done scratched at the hills,

But the taters refuse to grow. . . .

Done scratched at the hills,

But the taters refuse to grow. . . .

Mister Bossman, Mister Bossman,

Lemme mark in the book once mo’… (3)

Melody identifies hardship and alienation in relation to labor, debt, and hunger as the root of their suffering. While these observations may seem provocative of class-consciousness, they are overshadowed by the sense of defeat in the song’s conclusion:
*Hungry blues done got me listenin’ to my love one cry*. . . .

*Put some vittles in my belly, or yo’ honey gonna lay down and die*. . . (3)

Melody’s lyrics connect the origin of his hungry blues to exploitation and poverty and to its effects on his family’s immediate conditions represented in the song by the loved one’s cries. Starvation prevents the speaker’s response to his loved one’s physical and psychological suffering. It robs him of agency and, moreover, threatens his life. Life threatening deprivation, and an ideology of repression develop together with ideological and repressive state apparatuses to clear the way for labor exploitation, which is represented in *Blood on the Forge* as super-exploitative and extra-oppressive. Melody’s blues ritualizes endurance of exploitation and oppression, as ideological state apparatuses are devised to do, and simultaneously reveal the exploitative essence of Jim Crow culture and its race-based ideological state apparatuses.

The ideology of defeatism ritualized in Melody’s hungry blues and the fact that Attaway portrayed the blues in such a critical light reflects a revaluation of the blues emphasized by the Proletarian literary movement. Dawahare describes the Proletarian reaction to the blues as an expressive literary form, showing Langston Hughes as exemplifying the development of this critique. In the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes had adapted a literary style based on the blues, and he established blues-form poetry; however, by the 1930s, during his involvement with Proletarian literature, he took a more critical stance. In an exposition of Hughes’s shift from
nationalistic themes of race to internationalist themes of class-consciousness, Dawahare explains Hughes’s engagement with blues and other forms of folk art. He writes:

[A] weariness bred of a sense of hopelessness about oppression infuses Hughes’s blues poetry. [. . . ] The multiracial solidarity and militancy that Hughes experienced in the 1930s could not be adequately expressed by the nationalism, despondency, loneliness, or even the cultural rebelliousness associated with these forms. In short, he views the collective optimism that imbued the proletarian movement as incongruous with the blues.

(105-6)

Dawahare continues with a quote from Hughes: “The time has passed for us to sit by and bemoan our fate. We need now an art and a literature which will arouse us to our fate. Already we have had too much literature in the vein of spirituals, lamenting our fate and bemoaning our condition, but suggesting no remedy except humbleness and docility” (106). Blood on the Forge’s portrayal of the blues evokes similar ideas as those expressed by Hughes, as Melody’s hungry blues express a sense of defeatism strikingly similar to that which Hughes had discussed. To further account for the similarities between Hughes’s critique of the blues and Attaway’s representations, I will restate that Hughes’s work had inspired Attaway to start writing, and Blood on the Forge suggests that Hughes continued to have a profound influence and effect on Attaway as a writer beyond that of his original inspiration. While Attaway’s representations of the blues are much less clearly expressed than Hughes’s, there are certainly implications of defeatism in Melody’s expression of the blues.
Hughes turned away from the blues in his Proletarian poetry; however, there are other examples of the blues put to use in Proletarian literature pertinent to *Blood on the Forge*, such as, *Stevedore: A Play in Two Acts* by Paul Peters and George Sklar. Comparing the play to Hughes’s skepticism over the blues’s effectiveness as an expressive form, Dawahare points out that the play “dramatizes this militant rejection of the blues for proletarian political struggle” (106) distinctly in the second act, third scene, as local black dockworkers sit in a small coffee shop, Binnie’s Lunchroom, frightened of a posse of white men just outside, as the opening stage direction states, “*Over the radio comes a mournful blues*” (Peters and Sklar 77). Ending on a note of dissolution similar to Melody’s hungry blues, the song on the radio plays:

Double crossing mama,

Oh, you double crossing mama;

Broke your papa’s heart,

Pull it all apart—  (77)

After the introduction to the scene, the dialog among the characters conveys the tone of apprehension, and “[t]he radio still moans its blues” (77). Frustrated by her patrons’ fearfulness, Binnie exclaims, “What you all sitting around moaning for? Never saw such a bunch of wet hens in all my life. If that’s all you can do, go on home. Get de hell on out of hyar” (78). As she criticizes their immobility, she is also sub-textually criticizing the moaning of the blues, further emphasized “when the protagonist, a black longshoreman who struggles with his black coworkers to unite with the white workers and fight for their labor and human rights, shuts off a blues-playing radio before he begins to argue for the necessity of struggle” (Dawahare 106). Melody’s blues reverberate the fatalism
associated with the blues genre, as portrayed by Peters and Sklar and criticized by Hughes, though Melody’s blues display an element of ritualization along with escapism that gives them an Althusserian quality in addition to the generic theme of defeatism.

Similarly, Blood on the Forge’s representations of the blues can be read as symbolizing Southern folk culture on a larger scale, beyond the scope of just the Moss family. Edward E. Waldron addresses this, as he interprets the novel as representing “the death of the blues—at least the blues as representative of the folk culture” (58). In this way, Waldron’s point of view is eventually reminiscent of Ellison’s critique, covered in chapter one, referring to the novel as “a lament for the dying away of the Negro’s folk values” (23). Similarly, Waldron states, “Attaway effectively dramatizes the loss of the folk culture which accompanied the Great Migration of Black people from the rural South to the industrial North” (58), and moreover, notes that this loss is key to the novel. He writes, “There are various themes of protest […] most particularly, against the loss of the folk culture” (60). I argue that Blood on the Forge indicts the murderous and super-exploitative Jim Crow culture of the South as responsible for the death of folk culture. Waldron, like Ellison, did not overestimate the destructiveness of the North but did understate the devastating effect of the South.

Nevertheless, Waldron’s metaphor of death is appropriate in relationship to Melody’s blues and the South. As Melody’s music fades, it is as if the song, the Mosses, and even the surrounding environment including the sun were starving to death on the page. Chinatown, Hattie, and Melody hungrily await Mat’s return from work, hoping he will bring home food. Attaway writes:
Melody’s sang softer and softer. Soon he was just singing for himself. Going onto verse fifty, or there about, he got weary and barely hit the strings. He looked away over the rolling country to the place where the sun had about given up fighting the dark hills. Most of the country beyond Vagermound Common was bunched with crab-apple trees, posing crookedly, like tired old Negroes against the sky. Big Mat was going to come walking out of those hills [ . . . ] He was going to have a greasy sack over his shoulders, Melody hoped. (8)

Considering the severity of the Mosses’ worsening conditions in addition to the symbolically bleak circumstances surrounding Maw Mosses’ fate, who, as stated in chapter one, died while laboring in their landlord’s fields. What seems like candid banter actually reveals the deadly violence of the South. It is safe to say that—as the Mosses’ would surely suffer the same fate as their mother, eventually, or worse, as it is likely a lynch mob would soon be looking for Mat—the Mosses barely escape the South with their lives.

After the blues have died away and talk of the local dangers subsides, Melody engages Chinatown in an imaginative dialogue with a similar effect as the blues. While Melody’s blues had concentrated on the family’s hardships, the “wishing game” is an inversion of the blues, a shared daydream of easy living, as Melody vocalizes a fantasy of exultant prowess and symbols of wealth. In this wishful narrative, Melody is dressed as a wealthy man, his guitar is silver and mother of pearl, and he drinks corn whisky while gambling. Melody imagines he is wearing expensive clothes and sporting a gold-watch chain and silver guitar “smack in town—and it’s Saturday noontime” (8) and, after
showing off his silver guitar and playing pool,” Melody continues, “Come night—come night . . . Well, I guess I spark around the gals and drink a little corn” (9). As Melody tells the story, Chinatown listens attentively becoming a part of the exercise in make-believe. Attaway writes, “Chinatown hunched forward in the dust. He liked the wishing game. They had played it all their lives, most of the time wishing they were at the grand places pictured in the old newspapers that livened the walls of the shack” (8). This imaginative ritual speaks to the contradictory relationships of the Mosses’ material realities and their ideological perspectives, and as Attaway contrasts images of “grand places” and the Mosses’ “shack,” the contradiction is emphasized, and, furthermore, the images of wealth featured in the newspaper pictures and elaborated on in Melody’s wishing-game narrative also represent the Mosses’ desire to escape the anguish of their poverty and oppression.

The details within the game’s narrative signify affluence in contrast to the reality of the Mosses’ dire poverty. The wishing game is in essence, like the hungry blues, a form of escapism. This is made clear as Attaway states, “To keep from hoping too hard […] he set out to play the wishing game” (8). Melody and Chinatown ritualize the game as a pastime, and through its ritualization, it operates and functions as an ideological state apparatus. The wishing game offsets the sorrow of the blues; nevertheless, both of these rituals work to ensure the continuation of their current state of being, propagating conditions as they are. The wishing game and the blues are interconnected in what appears to be their polar opposition. While one has elements of optimism and the other is pessimistic, both have a pacifying effect. The imaginative escape from their immediate
and acute poverty keeps Melody and Chinatown grounded in their existing conditions, making their worsening conditions superficially tolerable.

The wishing game and the blues show how rituals intended to counteract the oppressiveness of the Jim Crow social order actually preserve and maintain the status quo. The Mosses continue to produce as sharecroppers generating profit for their landlord, in spite of their poverty and in spite of Mr. Johnston’s abuses. Rituals of escapism have a stifling effect on the Mosses that maintains the dialectical contradiction, accommodating the Mosses’ ongoing impoverishment and Mr. Johnston’s continued wealth and power. In *Blood on the Forge*, these ideological state apparatuses function by giving the Mosses expressive outlets for their discontent, expressive outlets that pacify their frustrations and pent up energies. The consequences of these rituals include the calmative effect of ideological fatalism and escapism. Through repetition, these rituals reproduce the current conditions and relationships, ultimately replicating labor resources for exploitation.

Even as the hungry blues and the wishing game work to ease anxiety for Melody and Chinatown, Big Mat’s responsibility for his brothers and wife, and to his desires to be a father and a preacher, maintain the delicate balancing act involved in his willingness to carry on as he does, laboring for Mr. Johnston. Mat’s unfulfilled desires and struggle to support his family are his equivalent to the wishing game or the blues, in that Mat ritualizes his unfulfilled desires by rehearsing readings from the Bible and investing himself wholly in Hattie’s pregnancies after previous miscarriages. He ritualizes his responsibility to his family with an almost penitent submission to extremely laborious super-exploitation on Mr. Johnston’s farm. All of these rituals function as ideological
state apparatuses in that they maintain the hyper-exploitative relationship between the Mosses and Mr. Johnston. Regarding the relationships among the Mosses’ rituals, Samuel B. Garren points out, in “Playing the Wishing Game: Folkloric Elements in William Attaway’s _Blood on the Forge_,” that several of the characters in the novel are metaphorically playing their own wishing game. Garren scratches the surface of the wishing game’s ideological significance, in almost Althusserian terms, as he states:

> Throughout the novel, Attaway shows the critical yet ambiguous role of wishing in black life by juxtaposing playful and serious manifestations. At times, the reader cannot determine which of the two forms is being expressed by a character, and one senses that the characters themselves are sometimes equivocal. (12)

Althusser defines ideology as the imaginary relationship with the actual material circumstances of life (162). While in the context of the wishing game, the delineations between fantasy and reality are clear; however, as the novel progresses, as Garren suggests, such differentiations between illusion and actuality become increasingly strained and unclear. While at first appearing to be merely a temporary distraction from the misery of living in the Jim Crow South, the wishing game represents a complex interconnectedness among the Mosses’ experiences in the South, with respect to their personal perspectives, hopes, and ambitions in contrast to their real-life repression and impoverishment.

The wishing game and the blues serve ideological functions, and through the juxtaposition of images and elements of fantasy, bereavement, and the actual hardship of living experienced by the Mosses, Attaway portrays a network or web of contradictory
relationships verging on violence, often breaking out into violence, but always tempered by complex ideological institutions that function analogously to what Althusser would later define as ideological state apparatuses.
Chapter Three:
Northern Ideological State Apparatuses, Race, and Internationalism in

*Blood on the Forge*

*Through the things under their vision they sensed the relationship of themselves to the trouble in the mills. They knew all of those men herded in the black cars. For a minute they were those men—bewildered and afraid in the dark, coming from hate into a new kind of hate.*

—William Attaway

In contrast to Attaway’s depiction of the South, the roles of ideological and repressive state apparatuses become more qualitatively distinctive as separately functioning institutions in the North where ideological state apparatuses are the dominant means of manipulation in the class warfare waged against the Mosses and the working community in the industrial setting. The issues of racism that were overt and foregrounded in the Southern setting slip into the background of the text and operate more covertly as part of the substructure of the Northern mill town culture. The Moss brothers arrive in the North to a new kind of cultural influence, one far less violently repressive and overtly racist than the South, yet nonetheless domineering in its power to persuade and to manipulate their ideological framework. The local culture, like Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses, affects their unconscious and conscious perspectives, ultimately manifesting in a willingness to perform conventional roles and physical labor. Attaway’s North is under the watch of repressive apparatuses operating separately and with a level of independence from the ideological institutions of the social community. The community’s influences are effective in maintaining the productiveness of the steelworkers, for the most part. However, eventually the stability that the ideological apparatuses seeks to sustain prove tenuous, breaking down into self-
destructiveness and desperation for the Mosses and requiring the intervention of repressive forces to restore order, suggesting a breach in the absoluteness of ideological influence that Althusser proposed.

After the grueling train ride from Kentucky, the Moss brothers arrive to a new cultural landscape vastly unfamiliar to them. As they make their way through a crowded bunkhouse, their new home, they are introduced to the interracial and international community of the Pennsylvania steel mill town. Most of the veteran steelworkers are gambling on dice games played on the bunkhouse floor, while others break from the gaming to inform the newcomers of what to expect from their new job. They describe a confining inferno containing workingmen toiling in the unbearable heat of the furnace, often losing consciousness, or worse, losing their lives to one of the various dangers on the jobsite. Meanwhile, the Mosses take in their new surroundings with a feeling of horror. Attaway expresses the trepidation and regret felt by the Mosses and the other newcomers, writing, “What men in their right mind would leave off tending green growing things to tend iron monsters” (44). Here Attaway emphasizes the unnaturalness of the industrial environment to men accustomed to the Southern rural landscape; however, it is only a hint of the true horrors that follow these grim descriptions of steelwork in the mills.

The Mosses’ new environment is violent, although even the violence is in forms unfamiliar to them. It is made up of the violence of anxious and restless men crowded in close quarters and under the constant threat of accidents occurring in the volatile steel manufacturing process. The brothers hear one man say:
Mebbe they start you new boys out on the skull buster. That’s a good way to git broke in. But jest keep minded that you got to be keerful o’ that old devil, skull buster. Kill many a green man. How? Well, magnet lift the steel ball thirty feet up and drop her. Steel ball weigh nigh eight tons. That eight tons bust the hell out of old scrap metal. Got to be keerful not to git some of it in your skull. Yessir, many a green man long gone ‘cause he couldn’t keep old skull buster from aimin’ at his head. (45)

The chaotic atmosphere of the bunkhouse and the ominous warning foreshadows the Mosses’ forthcoming tragic experience; however, it does not describe the extent of the cultural contrasts that the North will oppose to their learned Southern sensibilities now that they are out of their element.

Representations of Racism, Social Structuralism, and Ritualized Escapism in the Industrial North of Blood on the Forge

A major difference in the North is the absence of the extreme cultural racism that was so prevalent and violent in the Jim Crow South. However, the decrease in racist attitudes in the North is not immediately revealed to the Mosses, for as it happens Chinatown and Melody encounter racist violence during their first day in the mill community. The two brothers venture outside of the bunkhouse to get a broader view of their new surroundings, and they are pelted with rocks thrown by the children of Slavic steelworkers. The incident reveals much about the way racism works in the industrial setting. Racism, here, is used to divide the workers on such issues as labor disputes and job opportunity. The children have learned over time, most likely from their parents or
other members of the community, that the arrival of black workers from the South signifies unrest in employee relations with the steel mill company, and moreover, it signifies counteraction on the part of the company against unionized workers. The two Moss brothers are oblivious to the fact that labor struggle is the catalyst behind the attack.

Fortunately, Chinatown and Melody happen upon Bo, an experienced black steelworker, who assures the brothers, “Everythin’ be smooth in a coupla weeks […] Always hate new niggers round here […] Well, company bring them in when there strike talk. Keep the old men in line” (51). This is the Mosses’ first glimpse at the new order of racial discrimination among the workers in the steel mill community, and it is different from the ideology of Jim Crow racism in the South in that, here in the North, the ideology has a fluidity in regard to the most current state of the labor struggle. Bo’s assurance that the racial tension would subside in time turns out to be accurate, and soon the Moss brothers are working and forging friendships among the interracial, international community that would be unimaginable in the South as Attaway represents it.

While issues of race still pervade the living and working conditions of the Mosses, it is important to note some of the major differences between the racist ideology of Jim Crow culture and the manipulative orchestration of race tension in the workers’ community of the steel mill company. Attaway depicts Southern culture as rigidly divided into two tiers, a master race and a servant race, in which even poor white Southerners are given entitlement to an absolute authority over black Southerners. Mr. Johnston’s riding boss, as discussed in chapter two, exemplifies this as he had grown up part of a poor sharecropper’s family as did the Mosses, yet the riding boss had access to upward mobility unavailable to the Mosses, and eventually he is given power over the
Mosses far beyond that of the authority given bosses over their employees in the steel mills of the North. In the North that Attaway describes, racial divides are indefinite on the surface of the social formation, and there is a vague but present sense of self-determination in regard to race relations. This fluidity of racial conceptualizations in the North will be analyzed further in connection to its function in the steel mill community as an ideological state apparatus manipulating and maintaining the relations of production against the developing labor struggles.

The role of racism in the social formation of the steel mill community is more sophisticated than that of the outright and overt racial division and inequality of the South. While white workers are entitled to no special authority over black workers in the Northern setting of *Blood on the Forge*, racial tension continues to exist among the steelworkers. The steel company leverages racial tension to create a class of worker segregated from union representation and, therefore, available to counteract labor lost to striking. As the company is invested in the means of production, “raw material, fixed installations (buildings), instruments of production (machines), etc.” (Althusser 129), it must simultaneously maintain a labor force that can keep up with its investments and put the means to use. This means that the company needs to maintain the relations of production, and the manipulation of race relations and racial tensions works to the advantage of the steel mill company, thus to state power.

Among the steelworkers, racism operates with a level of coverture unheard of in the South. Covertly, through the ideological influence of cultural institutions, the company manipulates race relations among the working class. This becomes increasingly apparent as Attaway reveals more details about the labor struggle and the advantage
taken of black workers as leverage against organized labor unionization, which is made possible in part by the company’s dissuading black workers from unionized representation. However, evidence of the social manipulation is established early on, when Bo explains the hostility behind the incident of the thrown rocks. Company manipulation of the steel mill’s social structure, pertinent to Althusser’s structuralistic theory, ultimately dictates, sustains, and regenerates the order of productive operations and the relations of production. Althusser suggests, “[I]n order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. the productive forces, 2. the existing relations of production” (128). In Blood on the Forge, racism is tied to this process of controlling the forces and relations of production, which also holds true and describes the situation in the Jim Crow South; however, the difference is in the covertness of such ideological influences, making the institutional factors of the North more qualitatively Althusserian as ideological state apparatuses. This is apparent in the way steel-mill culture orchestrates the behavior of its inhabitants. It creates psychological obstacles that exact certain participation from the working class, and this is analogous to what Althusser identifies as the ultimate requirements for a capitalist social formation.

In the steel mill community, concepts of race, race relations, and racism work together in complex ways to establish the social structure that can sustain “the infrastructure, or economic base” of the steel mill and its community of workers, which, it is important to note, represents “the ‘unity’ of the productive forces and the relations of production” that Althusser points out in his theoretical analysis (134). Racism functions to regulate the relationships within the forces of production and, therefore, racist ideology
is part of the ideological state apparatuses. This can be seen in the way racism is used to manage and pacify the dialectical contradictions among the steelworkers and the steel company. This can be observed, firstly, in the novel’s representations of black Southerners hired to leverage labor strikes; secondly, in the strategic promotion of Bo, the only black shift boss in the mill; and, finally, in the separation of black workers from labor unions. These three elements are interconnected as means of dividing and playing groups of the working community against each other for the company’s benefit.

In the novel, the steel company hires black Southerners to counteract or offset the loss of productive forces to labor strikes. By manipulating productive forces in this way, the relations of production are maintained despite the fluctuations of dialectical contradictions at the heart of labor struggle and labor dispute. Bo’s position as shift boss is an extension of the company’s manipulation of the workers through concepts of race and racial inequality, and the ideological implications of the company’s manipulation are evident in Bo’s psychological state in relation to his circumstances at work. While giving Melody a kind of unofficial orientation on jobsite safety and labor struggle in respect to race, Bo says, “I’m the only nigger in the mill got micks workin’ under me […] That’s how come I got to be so short with you when you come in […] I got to show no favorites and be eight times as good as the next man […] Somebody all the time gunnin’ for me. Don’t like to see a nigger in my job” (126). Bo’s comments show the effect of his circumstances on his conscious perspective and his constructed work ethic. He knows he must outwork his white colleagues by eightfold, which relates to the super-exploitation, as described in the previous chapter, burdening black workers based on a tradition of racial discrimination. Bo has psychologically internalized the conditions of super-
exploitation reifying these conditions through his constructed and performed work ethic; however, the underlying contradictions are not lost on him. When Melody asks Bo how he came to be shift boss, he responds, “Same way all us niggers got here in the first place—’cause o’ trouble. If it wasn’t for trouble wouldn’t be no niggers in the mills at all” (126). The issues of race discrimination and race relations, while they have retracted into the backdrop of the novel’s action, remain part of the mill community’s underlying structure, and they continue to be influential factors in the material conditions of the community.

Meanwhile, despite the pervasive role of racial discrimination in the underpinnings of the steel mill community’s social formations, the Mosses experience a decrease in outwardly racist attitudes. Again, in the Jim Crow South, the extremity of violently racist practices kept the brothers in constant danger so that fear was an influential factor in their ideological developments. The change in attitudes concerning race from South to North is made quite clear when a drunken steelworker belligerently refers to Melody as “a hell of a nigger,” and the bunkhouse goes silent in suspended tension (65). Attaway writes:

The black men in the room looked out of the corners of their eyes. A couple of whites, standing by the door, kept their heads down. Everybody was waiting for something to happen [...] Then Big Mat got up [...] The Irishman swelled. He swelled his neck nervously [...]“Wot the hell! Wot the hell!” chanted the drunk Irishman. He looked all mixed up. Perhaps he didn’t even remember calling the name that had lifted every
black face in the room. Perhaps he didn’t know that at the mills “nigger” passed only between black men. (65)

This incident demonstrates a sharp contrast in ideological perceptions and conceptions of race in the new social atmosphere. There is violent tension in this moment that reflects the violence of Southern culture, that is, the violence of the Mosses’ past, transposed in signification of suppressed rage and resentment towards cultural racism and racist violence. Reacting to the mounting tension of the bunkhouse, the drunken steelworker “was backing out fast. He was running from the pressure of the eyes” (65). The incident emphasizes a dialectical push against the racist ideology of the old South as it persists in some forms in the diverse community of the newly industrialized North.

However, while the Mosses can express themselves more freely in the North, the steel company and their advocates continue to use racist ideology and policy to manipulate race relations to benefit themselves, to maintain productivity and profit. This is already evident in the hiring policies and practices of the company, described above, that set up black and white workers against each other by making one’s loss another’s gain. The company hires black Southerners and occasionally extends job promotions to black workers to counteract labor disputes. Likewise, white workers are made eligible for job opportunities that are tactically unavailable to black workers when relations of production are stable with white workers. This makes any possibility of prosperity mutually exclusive between black and white workers, effectively reinforcing a level of racial division among them, and at the same time, this exposes the racist ideology that governs company policy and reaction to labor struggle.
Further complicating the race relations among the steelworkers, the steel company undermines the labor unions by effectively discouraging black workers from joining them. While there is a history of labor unions discriminating against or altogether excluding black workers, this is not the case in *Blood on the Forge* as the novel portrays the steelworkers’ union encouraging and promoting black membership, which in itself suggests a progressive mindset and potential concerning interracial camaraderie among the steelworkers. There are other scenarios in the novel, including the socialization among the workers at the local eatery, the lunch car, that reinforces the theme of interracial and international connectivity. This is an important characteristic of the novel because it highlights the ways in which the powers that be—the state and steel company interests—manage to drive a wedge between black and white workers for the purpose of managing and maintaining the existing relations of production. Describing how the steel company counteracts the work of the labor union, Attaway reveals:

The union organizers made a desperate effort to induce the black men to join the movement towards a strike. But the steel interests had bought the black leaders. Big Mat and Melody found that out through Bo. Bo had brought two Negro politicians to speak to their own. These politicians both said the same thing. A victory for the mill owners would be a victory for the Negro worker. The black worker, they said, had never advanced through unions. He had only advanced fighting alongside the owners.

(180)

These words certainly indicate a manipulative ideological message being sent by the steel company. The black leaders representing the company draw connections between the
white workers in the unions and white racists, and this is effective, as evident when Attaway writes, “Melody and Big Mat had been deeply impressed by that talk” (180). Here, one can see how these tactics relate to the theory of ideological state apparatuses through their intention to complicate further the existing race relations for the sake of managing the dialectical contradictions posed by the company’s exploitative practices. This complication contributes to the Mosses’ imaginary relationships to their material conditions.

The alienation of the black workers from union representation works to impede the potential for developing comradeship between the Moss brothers, as black workers, and their unionized white counterparts. As Mark Noon states, in regard to Blood on the Forge in his study of African American strikebreakers, “At first, racism is subordinated as Attaway depicts a hierarchy of Irish, Slavic, Italian, and black workers struggling for survival. But when issues of unionization and strikes arise, tolerance quickly erodes” (434). One day as Melody approaches the lunch car, a social hub of the steelworkers, where he has become accustomed to being welcomed, he can see his coworkers talking amongst each other, but the conversation “died when he entered. He knew many of these men but he was black. As yet nobody knew where black men stood with respect to the union. They called his name but kept a suspicious eye on him” (Attaway 167). While the scene in the lunch car marks a level of distrust of Melody from the unionized workers, distrust soon turns violent when Big Mat and Melody happen upon a group of Slavic women and children. In an almost identical incident to when the Mosses first arrived to the steel mill community, the children throw rocks at Mat and Melody for the same reason that they had the first time; black workers signify, to the Slavic children, labor
disputes between their fathers and the steel company, or simply hard times for their families. Furthermore, the repetition of incidents involving rock throwing gives a cyclical quality to the labor conditions emphasizing the push and pull of dialectical contradictions between the workers’ labor struggles and the steel company’s management of the relations of production.

Equally important to the analysis of ideological manipulations in the North of *Blood on the Forge*, the interim period between the incidents with the rock-throwing Slavic children is marked by ideological factors unlike those that they were exposed to in the repressive Southern social structure, in that, in the North, the brothers are welcomed and swept up in the fast paced social scene of the mill town nightlife. After backbreaking days of dangerous labor, the steelworkers blow off steam by drinking heavily, betting on dogfights, and patronizing the local prostitutes. These activities serve as a form of escapism for the workers, a way for them to alleviate their anxieties through ritualized drunkenness, commoditized sex, and recreational gambling and socializing. This kind of escapism is in itself institutionalized as part of the mill culture or mill ideology, and the workers habitually perform them. Attaway writes:

A lot of the men had been drifting out of the bunkhouse. The corn whisky was giving out. All of them stayed full of the stuff from the time they got off until they were checked in at the mills again. Of course the hot-metal workers had to keep liquored up. There was always a craving in them that wasn’t to be satisfied. Even when they had all they could drink their insides still felt parched. (67)
This passage demonstrates the workers dependence on ritual drinking to perform the
daily laborious tasks associated with working in the steel mill. In this way, recreational
drinking and other rituals of escapism operate as ideological state apparatuses of culture
within the mill community. The key effect of these escapist rituals is that they keep the
working class ritualistically showing up for work each day, as Althusser proposes, “All
ideological State apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the
reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation […]
Each of them contributes towards this single result in the way proper to it” (154). This
ultimately describes the underlying function of cultural activity and ideological influence
over the steelworkers.

As cultural institutions of the mill community, drinking, gambling, and
prostitution, as the novel gradually reveals, leave no one among the workers and their
families untouched, for their purpose is the regeneration and management of the culture
that sustains the production of steel for the profit of the steel company and their interests.
_Blood on the Forge_ clearly depicts the connection between cultural rituals and the
management of the community as a productive force. Inculcation into the steel mill
culture begins almost immediately on arrival, as first, the Mosses are informed of the
hazardous nature of steelwork, and secondly, in the same discussion, they are informed of
the regularity of prostitution as a false reprieve from the hardships of steelwork. One
experienced worker warns the newcomers, “Skull buster don’t git as many as whores git.
Roll mill help the gals out. Feller sees all that hot steel shooting along the runout tables,
all them red-and-white tongues licking ‘twixt them rollers. Feller go hog wild fer any gal
what ’ll take his money” (45-46). And, finally, after three weeks of nothing but a rotation
of heavy labor and sleep, the Mosses have adjusted to their new work schedules, and they begin participating in the social activities of the bunkhouse. Now they are drinking whisky and playing dice games on the bunkhouse floor after work each day.

The ritualistic drinking and gambling cannot be confined to the bunkhouse for long, however, and the desire for excitement and sexual companionship sends Chinatown and Melody following their coworkers out into the night, as Chinatown calls out with enthusiasm, “Somewhere there’s gals and a moon strong enough to throw a shadow […] Melody and me goin’ out to git some bitches […] We git some more whisky too” (66). Before long, Chinatown and Melody have developed a steady habit of heavy drinking, and they are eventually depicted in a similar manner and in the same condition as the workers (described in the passage above) who stay drunk from the end of one work shift to the beginning of the next. While Mat has yet to seek out solace in drunkenness, Melody and Chinatown already appear consumed by it, as Attaway describes:

Almost before they closed their eyes it was time to go back to the mills. Every Monday after the long shift it was the same. They had to drink almost a pint of corn whisky to give them the heart for another shift. Chinatown and Melody shared a bottle, but Big Mat did not need the stuff. He was ready to go, so they took a last drink and followed him toward the mills […] Chinatown’s eyes were red rimmed. The whisky was burning his eyes. Melody, too, was shot through with the stuff. Yet they were sober. Sometimes steel workers were sobered by the foggy evening. Away somewhere in the fog was the clank and pounding of the plate and sheet mills. (83-4)
Attaway’s juxtaposing as well as overlapping of the state of drunkenness with the sobriety of work and labor suggests a strong interrelationship and codependence between rituals of escape and submission to the conditions of the job. In broad perspective, the accumulation of all the carousing has a mind-numbing and pacifying effect on the steelworkers in relation to the dialectical contradictions confronting them. In ritualizing the devices of winding down after work, they ritualize the act of work itself, that is, the act of being a consistently productive employee. The result is that the Mosses and their coworkers ideologically, in addition to physically, submit to the job despite the contradictions of the exploitative relationships.

The Moss brothers, eventually Big Mat as well—as “each in turn seeks some form of transcendence of victimization,” (Barthold 82)—succumb wholly and even passionately to the nightlife scene; however, their daily routines suggest a kind of mindless repetitiousness. In the throws of drunkenness, Big Mat finds companionship in Anna, a young prostitute for whom Melody has also developed strong feelings. The two brothers’ affection for the same woman puts an emotional rift between them, yet, for the purpose of my analysis, it is important to note that each brother continues to show up for work at the mill each day, although not without some disruption. And while Chinatown resists work for the thrill of mill-town recreational vices, he too, however begrudgingly, continues to show up for work. Regardless of the Mosses’ turmoil, the steel company continues to profit, and, as haphazard as it all appears, there is a system at work, and it is apparent in the continual production of steel, as Cynthia Hamilton puts it:

Everything centers around the mill. There are no diversions except those usually practiced by groups of men in such situations, serving to lull the
pain of the hours before the furnace. As many labor historians have noted, industrialists manipulated the production and provision of alcohol, drugs, and sex; religious education; and dancing and sports to induce patterns of obedience, servility, and acceptance of the debilitating conditions of work […] In mill and mining towns, men paid women for a bit of pleasure and attention; the rest of their salary went for liquor and gambling. The emphasis was placed on those “things” which money could buy. (149) Hamilton’s explanation emphasizes the Althusserian element that Attaway depicts in the industrial setting of Blood on the Forge. Institutionalized diversions surround the Mosses here in the North. Alcohol, gambling, and prostitution are attempts to escape from their anguish, but offer no real resolution to their suffering, and, more importantly, these vices divert the Mosses’ attention away from the true source of their demoralization, which is the same in the North as it was in the South. Despite temporary psychological escape, as Bonnie Barthold puts it, “The shadow of their victimization […] falls on these attempts, all of which ultimately fail” (82). The Mosses are commodified, exploited, and ideologically manipulated through cultural institutions, such as the social vices of the mill town. Acting as an ideological state apparatus, the ritualization of these vices contribute to the Mosses’ commodification and exploitation by facilitating and perpetuating their imaginary relationships. Meanwhile, the Mosses’ actual deteriorating living conditions are obscured from their consciousness under the influence of ideological and exploitative forces.
Portraying Exploitation and Ideological Manipulation Across Cultures: The Internationalist Perspective of Blood on the Forge

From where the Moss brothers had come, ideological divisions based on race were rigidly in place regardless of the possible commonalities among Southerners based on other factors, such as economic class. This is made explicit when Big Mat speaks to the white riding boss back on Mr. Johnston’s farm. While “Mr Johnston had always been a landowner,” Attaway writes, “the riding boss had been a poor white share cropper. Big Mat remembered him as a little ragged boy singing the hated chant” (12):

“Nigger, nigger never die.
Black face and shiny eye,
Kinky hair and pigeon toe—
That the way the nigger go . . .” (11)

When Mat reminded the riding boss, “Us used to play together when your folks was sharecroppin’ next to mine” (27), the riding boss reacted by striking him, and Attaway describes, “He felt like he had struck unfeeling, dead flesh” (27). Attaway’s description relays the deep ideological division reinforced by the cultural hatred existing back in the South, while in the North, there is significantly less racial animosity.

Unlike the social structure of the South, here outside of Jim Crow culture, the Mosses develop bonds of friendship with some of their white coworkers. Representing this shift in attitude regarding the conception of racial identity, a fellow steelworker named Zanski befriends the newcomers from the South, and at the same time, representations of Zanski and his family demonstrate important parallels between the Mosses and the Zanskis regarding the destructiveness of commoditization and
exploitation for those commoditized and exploited across conventionally constructed cultural boundaries.

The relationship between the Moss brothers and Zanski underscores issues of racial division as well as ideological state apparatuses operating among the relations of production in the Northern mill town. The first thing that stands out about this is the genuine sense of friendship that develops, as expressed by concern for each other’s wellbeing at key points in the text. The Mosses first meet Zanski on the job, when he helps Melody look after Chinatown, who has collapsed from heat exhaustion, and while Chinatown is sleeping it off, Zanski notices that something is bothering Melody. In goodwill, Zanski earnestly offers advice, advice unhindered by racial animosity or manipulative labor politics. On one level, this is important because of the sharp contrast to interracial relationships the Moss brothers had experienced back in the South, and on another, Zanski’s advice in itself gives substantial insight into his reified way of thinking about the world around him.

As he gives Melody advice concerning the attainment and meaning of happiness, Zanski describes his conception of happiness as being the same across racial divides. He insists that black workers would be happier to move out of the bunkhouse, that is, to get away from the social activities centered on alcohol, gambling, and prostitution, for the sake of having families. Zanski’s advice is significant for its sentiment across racial divides. His conception of race is quite different from those expressed in Southern culture, namely by Mr. Johnston and the riding boss, who both show a sense of complete disconnection from the Mosses. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mr. Johnston explains that he contracts to black sharecroppers for what he considers to be traits
distinctive to black workers, claiming that “niggers ain’t bothered with the itch; they knows how to make it the best way they kin and they don’t kick none” (15). The riding boss shows a total disregard for Big Mat’s humanity, considering him “unfeeling, dead flesh” (27). In contrast, Zanski recognizes a commonality or sameness between his black coworkers and himself, and the contrast between Zanski’s point of view and those of Mr. Johnston and the riding boss emphasizes that concepts of race are unfixed and fluid. On a broader scale, Blood on the Forge demonstrates how ideological state apparatuses, according to social conditions and the state of relations of production, manipulate this fluidity.

Likewise, as well intentioned as he is, Zanski’s perspective suggests his own interpellation as a subject of the symbolic order, also manipulated by ideological state apparatuses to regulate the relations of production. He associates happiness exclusively with the institution of family, and, consistent with Althusser’s model, Zanski’s family ideology and structure are interconnected to the institution of employment. This interconnection shows how family and employment ideological apparatuses function together for the same ultimate cause of sustaining the conditions of production, and to some degree, Zanski recognizes his part in the relations of production. His recognition of this relationship is evident when he refers to his “kids growin’ in the yard,” and he predicts, “Them kids work in the mill sometime. Their kids grow in the yard” (83), demonstrating how ideological state apparatuses work to reassure the regeneration of exploitable labor.

Althusser discusses the link between the reproduction of labor power (precisely meaning the reproduction of the working class) and the family ideological state
apparatus. Of course, a continuous source of labor is vital to a capitalistic social formation, as labor is one of the most basic conditions of production. Since “the reproduction of the conditions of production” is “[t]he ultimate condition of production” (Althusser 127), sustained production depends on the continuous regeneration of an exploitable labor pool, and this is where the manipulation of family ideology becomes paramount to the success of the state. In the section of “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” titled “Reproduction of Labour-Power,” Althusser explains that “the reproduction of labour power […] is ensured by giving labour power the material means with which to reproduce itself: by wages,” and elaborating further, he writes:

[W]ages represents only that part of the value produced by the expenditure of labour power which is indispensable for its reproduction: [namely] indispensable to the reconstitution of the labour power of the wage-earner (the wherewithal to pay for housing, food, and clothing, in short to enable the wage-earner to present himself again at the factory gate the next day—and every further day God grants him); and we should add: indispensable for raising and educating the children in whom the proletarian reproduces himself […] as labour power. (130-31)

While Blood on the Forge reverberates Althusser’s point concerning “every further day God grants” throughout the narrative relentlessly, beginning with Maw Moss’s death working in the field and continuing with the countless number of deaths occurring at the steel mill, it also, however subtly, addresses the idea that the family unit, even procreation, is commodified and exploited in the process of manipulating the relations of production. Zanski and his family are evidence of the proletariat reproducing themselves
through their children. Zanski knows that his children will be used as labor power, exploited by the steel mill company in the future, but ideological state apparatuses prohibit him from seeing this as problematic.

Meanwhile, Zanski’s conception of happiness being intrinsically tied to the reproduction of the family unit implicates the work of the family ideological state apparatus. He is compelled to continue working in the dangerous environment of the steel mill to maintain his idea of happiness, that is, to support his family by paying for the things they need to survive and to be a functioning family, which he describes as “Feller from Ukraine workin’. His woman wash the curtains, and the kids growin’ in the yard” (83), corresponding to Althusser’s assertion that wages are investments on the part of the state (the steel company and steel company interests in Blood on the Forge’s industrial setting) to generate structures of production and consumption within the working class family unit. Zanski’s family exemplifies such a structure, and his idealization of the family unit assures that he will continue to do his part to sustain it, mainly through the earning of wages for as long as he is physically capable.

However, because of a serious injury sustained in an accident at the mill, Zanski is soon incapable of working any longer. In addition to being friends to the Mosses, the Zanskis also represent the only family, beside the Mosses, that is developed in any real way in the course of the novel. His granddaughter, Rosie, introduced to the Mosses as the waitress who works behind the counter at the lunch car, is also affected by the contradiction between the family as ideological state apparatus and the reality of labor/class struggle. Regardless of Zanski’s idealization of the institutions of family and work, he and his family suffer a fate comparable to the Mosses’ experience, and
furthermore, comparable to countless other families surrounding the mill whose fate is only glimpsed in the narrative. Robert Flegar, whose article “William Attaway’s Unaccommodated Protagonists” traces the devastation and misery running throughout the novel and relates them to a “metaphysical plight,” also recognizes the shared predicaments of steelworkers across national and racial divisions. He states, referring to the Mosses:

Their downfall is paralleled by the fall of the East European steelworkers, who, although many have families and children, nevertheless see their daughters being raped by their own brothers and also becoming whores for their father’s own fellow workers. Attaway believes no one has any cosmic status because of mankind’s utter negligibility and the universe’s absolute nonsensicality. Suffering does not bring understanding or grandeur […] Blood on the Forge suggests there are no relationships: man is completely unaccommodated by the facts of existence. (3)

Importantly, Felgar recognizes the general experience of misfortune throughout the novel that affects all of the steelworkers, their families, and the rest of the mill community, regardless of race and nationality, struggling to make a living under dire conditions and not only for workers in the mills, but the children brought up in the violent conditions, and the women working in the local box factory by day and prostituting at night. This broad depiction of hardship dialectically mediates racial struggles within the context of international class struggle, and the Zanskis’ experience in relation to the Mosses’ well represents the interconnectedness and mediation of race and class struggle.
Moreover, Felgar attributes the novel’s bleakness to a cruelly indifferent state of existential chaos. Ironically, this perspective closely aligns with what appears to be the general understanding of existence within the mill community. Several characters represent this perspective, such as longtime steel man, Smothers, the character who believes that steel itself is maliciously intent on maiming and killing steelworkers; the Mosses, who certainly consider their suffering in a naturalistic and reified manner; and Zanski, who views the surrounding turmoil as natural in the absence of the family unit, as he says, “Feller from long way off die like plant put on rock. Plant grow if it get ground like place it come from” (83). Felgar’s observation touches on the issue of reification and consciousness within the capitalistic social formation of the steel mill town, which connects to the manipulation of consciousness by the ideological state apparatuses that obscure the fact that the turmoil, devastation, and despair are the result of manmade conditions ultimately put in place for production and profit.

Despite Zanski’s idealistic understanding of family and happiness, he and his family suffer an outcome all too common in the mill town. It begins when Zanski is severely injured on the job, putting a permanent end to his steel-working career. When Melody hears of his accident, he is greatly relieved to learn that Zanski has survived, and he thinks, “Now the old hunky could sit in his courtyard and watch his kids and his kids’ kids go to work in the mills” (125). Later, Melody does in fact find Zanski sitting and watching Rosie work at the lunch car, as Attaway describes, “The old man beamed on his granddaughter” (138), signifying that his idealism had remained unshaken by the accident revealing the deep seated reification of his conditioned ideological makeup.
However, the extent of the devastation to his family resulting from the accident is still to be disclosed. Many weeks later, after labor issues with the steel company have escalated drastically and another mill accident has claimed the lives of fourteen steelworkers, Melody happens to meet Rosie at a brothel. She explains to him that she needs to supplement her pay from waitressing at the lunch car by prostituting in the evenings, and of course “Melody thought of Zanski and his talk about his ‘kids.’ He wondered about the old man. Had his pride in his granddaughter soured, changing his entire outlook?” (207). When Melody asks Rosie about her grandfather, she informs him that Zanski is bedridden and not expected to survive much longer. Melody is grief stricken. Attaway writes, “For a time he sat, not wanting to speak, a little afraid to move, for fear of disturbing her concentration on the wall. He knew that his mention of Zanski had upset her. He could have kicked himself, for he had known all along how Zanski would feel about his granddaughter” (207). Melody knows that Zanski would be devastated by Rosie’s prostitution since Melody had listened to Zanski condemn prostitution in favor of his family/work ethic, and here, his granddaughter is working as a prostitute in order to feed her family. In tragic irony, Zanski lies dying from the work related accident. The tragic irony of the Zanski family’s misfortune demonstrates how ideological institutions function to exploit family ties for the sake of production and managing relations of production with disregard for the family itself, and in this way, it emphasizes the dialectical contradiction that the ideological state apparatuses are intended to obscure.
The Moss Brothers’ Rise and Fall in the North: Mediating Tragedy in *Blood on the Forge*

As established in the first section of this chapter, the Mosses experience far less racial violence once they have escaped from the South. Despite the dismal industrial landscape, there is a sense of freedom in the Northern mill community, giving the Mosses the opportunity to develop and express themselves in ways that were repressed by Jim Crow culture back in the South.

However, Chinatown’s blindness, as the result of the tragic mill accident, triggers the Moss brothers’ tragic fall. He, of the three brothers, was the quickest to adjust to the social structure of the North. That is to say, he seems to carry with him from the South the least amount of emotional trauma compared to Big Mat, who carries with him throughout the novel unresolved emotional issues. At the same time, in comparison to Melody, who had lost his ability to “slick away” hardship once he had arrived to the North, Chinatown is the least affected by the new environment. He, in contrast to his brothers, falls in line with the program with relative ease, reporting for work each day as well as participating in heavy drinking, excessive gambling, and frequenting the brothels. In many ways, he had become the man in the fantasy he and Melody described in the wishing game back in the South, that is, until the blast furnace Chinatown worked exploded, destroying his eyes.

Chinatown, the man who had rejoiced in his own reflected image, was now permanently blind. His preoccupation with his appearance is well established in the previous chapter in reference to his gold tooth for which he had a good tooth pulled to make room. He would gaze at length into the mirror admiring his golden reflection. He
had been intensely fearful of losing the tooth on the train ride to the North, and here he is with his tooth intact, but simultaneously and ironically, symbolically lost. Attaway writes, “Chinatown’s eyes were gone. It was as if Chinatown were gone,” he explains:

Weeks had to pass before Chinatown knew his blindness. That long time he was a man thrown into a vacuum. He did not know where he was; he did not know where the light had gone. There was no time. In movement his body felt motionless; the floor was a thing that moved to touch his feet. This was not delirium. He had been a man who lived through outward symbols. Now those symbols were gone, and he was lost. (161)

When Chinatown’s imaginary relationship to his conditions and his ideological rituals and coping mechanisms are uprooted, he is stripped of his identity, that is, his sense of self. In an attempt to ease the suffering in the Moss household, he and Melody return to the wishing game. However, this time here in the North, the game of fantasy conjures nostalgia for the past. The wishing game itself is now a symbol of what has been lost, “a part of their past, forgotten up to now” (164), and for Chinatown perception of the world has been reduced to a futile clinging onto the past.

In a similar manner, collisions between past and present and between the imaginary and the real confront the brothers respectively, each in their own way. They are all stripped of their illusions concerning the present and their hopes for the future, especially Mat, who is killed after inciting a riot at a local union hall. Upon arrival to the mill town, Mat had hopes of starting a new life in the North and a family with his then expectant wife, Hattie. Mat even resisted the hedonistic lifestyle that his brothers were pursuing, that is, until he receives word that Hattie had in fact miscarried again. In
response to the tragic news, Mat goes out drinking with his brothers. In the course of the
evening, he becomes inebriated, takes part in a street brawl outside the dogfights, and
befriends a young prostitute named Anna. The two are soon living together, and before
long Mat is at odds with Anna over issues of distrust and jealousy. After Chinatown is
injured, the three brothers and Anna move in together, and while Anna nurses Chinatown,
Big Mat’s jealousy and rage escalates beyond his capacity for self-restraint.

A key moment in the narrative occurs when Mat is out walking, blowing off
steam from the rage that is building in him. From a riverbed, he lifts a large stone above
his head, and some passing police officers and company men notice the display of
strength. In a scenario that is uncannily similar to Althusser’s allegory of the hailed
subject, the sheriff hails Mat, calling out, “Hey, you!” to which Mat replies, “Yessuh?”
(191). Althusser describes this “very precise operation […] called interpellation or
hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday
police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there,’” and he explains that “the hailed individual
will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he
becomes a subject” (174). In Blood on the Forge, Mat’s conversion in response to the
sheriff’s hailing goes beyond the state of subjugation. Mat’s interpellation represents his
initiation into the Northern industrial repressive state apparatuses. Mat has been so
extremely manipulated ideologically that, in a misguided attempt to reclaim a sense of
manhood and control over his circumstances, he will become an agent of oppression.
Deputized as a union buster for the steel company, and thus with a reinvigorated sense of
power, Mat goes on a violent rampage beating Anna mercilessly and killing an elderly
union leader, bringing to fruition the climax of Attaway’s novel.
Mat Moss’s transformation over the course of the novel, especially notable at the moment of his deputation, suggests the extent of the power within ideological institutions. Mat, who had lashed out at the riding boss, an oppressive force against him, becomes a force of oppression, and furthermore, through the distortions of his imaginary relationship to the actual circumstances, he is convinced that he is getting revenge, that the people he is hurting are riding bosses like the one back on Mr. Johnston’s farm who had hurt him physically and psychologically. Mat’s psychologically damaged state is a culmination of his despair, and his despair is ideologically manipulated so that the steel company and company interests benefit from his delusional state, while he misinterprets his own misappropriated acts of violence as acts of reclamation. After being deputized, Attaway describes how Mat feels and how he perceives the situation, writing:

For a long time Big Mat had been empty, like a torn paper sack inside. But all of that was over. He had to heal his ruptured ego with a new medicine. That medicine was a sense of brutal power. A few careless words from a police deputy had started that strange healing. This Monday would complete the cure. That the cure might be deadly was too deep a thought for him. The only thing he felt was a sense of becoming whole again.

(212)

However, when Monday comes, the reality of the situation is anything but healing in any real sense of the word. Big Mat is radiating with violent force harnessed by the repressive apparatuses, as he is “going from place to place, spreading terror among the passive people, giving them the ultimatum: ‘To work or to jail’” (215). The discrepancy between Mat’s ideological conception of what is taking place compared to the reality of his
actions corresponds, first, with Althusser’s ideological formula where “ideology = an imaginary relation to real relations” (167), and second, with his theory of state apparatuses using ideology and repression as a means of protecting state power and securing the relations of production.

Unbeknownst to Mat, while he believes that his part in the labor riot is a liberating experience of self-actualization, he is acting as a company pawn, and this emphasizes the dialectical contradictions of Mat’s ideological perspective and the labor struggle. He is blind to the truth that his life circumstances, that is, his material condition is part of the labor struggle as a struggling worker. While grasping for something to substantiate and validate his existence, he submits himself to the institutions that have repressed and exploited him, his family, and the rest of the working class struggling in the Northern mills and Southern fields. Mat is blind to the implications of his deputation and actions as a representative of the repressive state apparatuses, that is, until a young union member trying to defend his fallen comrade, who Mat has killed, hits Mat over the head with a pickax handle. Mat had been charging through the riot with the thought that “here there was no riding boss. He had to keep saying it to himself: there was no riding boss . . . there was no riding boss” (227), and then it hit him. “He, Mat,” Attaway writes, “was the riding boss,” and as he is dying, he “sensed something true. Maybe somewhere in the mills a new Mr Johnston was creating riding bosses, making a difference where none existed” (emphasis added, 233). The passage describing this moment is quoted in its entirety in the first chapter of this study because its poignancy is integral to my endeavor.

Mat’s epiphany at the end of his life represents a piercing of the ideological veil between
him and the horrid reality of the situation, and it mediates the dialectical contradictions within the narrative.

Ideological and repressive state apparatuses work to manage the dialectical contradictions represented in the narrative, and this point is made sharper when the sheriff, Mat’s recruiter, makes a comment that suggests the significant influence that ideology has in regards to race, class-consciousness, and the cumulative effect of repressive and ideological state apparatuses as a means of managing and reproducing the conditions of production by manipulating the forces and relationships of production. As Big Mat lies lifeless, the sheriff concludes:

“Sure it’s a shame that big nigger had to go and git himself killed. But I don’t reckon we can pin it on nobody. Just accidental in the line o’ duty, that’s all. He was game, all right, but crazier ‘n hell. That’s the thing ‘bout nigger deputies—they’re fightin’ the race war ‘stead of a labor strike. Always be like that, I guess, as long as they come from the South. There’ll be somebody to take his place, an’ that there’s one reason why the union ain’t gonna win. They didn’t figure on the South when they started this here. . . .” (233-34)

Within these words, so much is revealed about how the relations of production are handled through ideological manipulation and pure brute strength with indifference to the plight and dispossession of the working class. The sheriff implies that there is nobody to blame for Mat’s death, expressing a naturalistic view towards the volatility of race relations; however, this point of view is contradictory to the meaning of Mat’s epiphany concerning the creation of riding bosses, making a difference where none existed. Mat’s
final vision exposes racialized ideologies, not only as social construction, but, moreover, as weapons of class warfare against those caught in the labor struggle, of which Mat is a casualty. Dialectical mediation of the narrative proves the sheriff wrong by revealing that exploitative and repressive institutions, “forces cold and ruthless” (Attaway 234) that capitalize on Mat’s self-destructiveness as the result of racist ideology and policy are behind the causes that lead to his ultimate destruction.

The symbolic order that has created and taken advantage of Mat’s disposition is also quick to disregard and replace him when he is no longer exploitable or of use. This point applies to Chinatown and Melody as well. The Mosses are replaced at the mill, implicating a critical mechanism in the reproduction of conditions of production, which can be described as an ongoing cycle of interpellation, exploitation, and disposal of the individuals that make up the productive forces. The depiction of the Mosses emphasizes the humanity of the victims of this demoralizing and dehumanizing process of exploitation. The surviving brothers witness their replacements’ arrival by freight trains from the South. Melody and Chinatown depart for an uncertain future deeper into the industrialized North, farther away from the Southern rural setting that they still refer to as home.

Melody, who has had a growing sense of spiritual depletion ever since his arrival in the Northern mill town, has lost one brother and must care for what remains of his surviving brother who has been symbolically “lost” to his blindness. Back in the South, Melody had the ability to “slick away on his guitar” (1) any feelings of unfulfilled desire, but once he is in the North, his guitar begins to fail him. Melody becomes increasingly burdened by despair, and it alienates him from his family, especially from Mat on
account of Mat’s relationship with Anna, the focus of Melody’s desire. Alcohol replaces his guitar as drinking becomes his ritual of escapism, nullifying his blues symbolically and descriptively. In other words, now alcohol obliterates his feelings of despair as the blues once did, and he stops playing the blues altogether. Nevertheless, while Melody uses one escapist ritual to replace another, eventually the realities of the circumstances become inescapable when such tragedies occur as Mat’s death and Chinatown’s blindness.

Melody’s experience in the North, and the South as well, had been defined by his imaginary relationships to reality. While in the South he played the blues and the wishing game as coping mechanisms assuaging hunger pains, here in the North, he drinks and pines obsessively for Anna. However, in terms of Althusser’s theory of ideological state apparatuses, Melody ultimately maintains his role as a worker at the steel mill contributing to the force of production, which is the reality of his condition. His relationship to the social formation changes when he is unable to act as part of the productive force and is promptly replaced. He remains immersed in his imaginary relationships through ritualized drunkenness and longing for Anna. While Anna is, of course, real, and she and Melody have had a physical relationship and are now living together as Anna nurses Chinatown after the accident, Melody’s perception of Anna is primarily imaginary. This is evident when he expresses to her his belief that eventually their relationship will be worked out, and he kisses her to emphasize his feelings. Although Anna “let her lips touch his,” Attaway writes, “her eyes were far away and worried (201), and, when Melody finally asks her to elope with him, she replies, “Nothin’ but dreams come out of your head” (220). In the end, Melody’s illusions are exposed, as
he and Anna are finally separated by a violent cataclysm and unlikely to see each other ever again.

Melody’s misperception of his relationship to Anna is part of a broader issue concerning his imaginary relationships to material circumstances, which are expressed throughout the novel; however, once in the North, the coping mechanisms that he has based on these imaginary relationships to reality begin to fail him. In the end, the reality of accumulated loss breaches his ideological framework, resulting in the development of his morose disposition, one similar to that of his older brother, Mat, whose demeanor has always reflected lifelong hardship. Towards the end of the narrative, the ideological veil that had maintained Melody’s ability to slick away harsh realities diminishes before the reader’s eyes, and the following passage exemplifies this. “Someday, Melody thought, he and Chinatown would go home to Kentucky,” Attaway writes, “But he did not think about that very hard. He was beginning to feel the truth: they would never go home” (234). Finally, Melody leaves behind his guitar and picks up his deceased brother’s abandoned Bible. Among other things, this act signifies the end of an ideological naïveté that Melody had managed to sustain in the South but not in the North. Melody’s carefree methods of dealing with hardship are exhausted, and the acquisition of Mat’s Bible, more than anything, reveals the reciprocal power of material and ideological influences, as Melody’s ideology changes in response to changes in his material conditions, which have to do with the geopolitical differences and consistencies between the North and the South.

What makes the North so different from the South in Blood on the Forge is not merely the absence of Southern Jim Crow culture, for racist policy and ideology persist in
the North, but the Northern reorganization of the exploitative factors, such as racism, repressive state apparatuses, and ideological state apparatuses, into a more sophisticated and effectual operation of exploitation to match the complexity and enormity of the steel mill’s productive process and the masses of workers required to run the operation. As productive forces, the Mosses are exhausted in a short time, within a year of their arrival. Their experience serves as a kind of testimony to the oppressive power of institutionalized ideology, that is, the cultural conventions of the industrial setting. The ideological state apparatuses, as they are more clearly distinctive in the industrial North than they were in the South, are exceptionally effective even without the repressive element that overlapped with ideological apparatuses in the novel’s representations of the South.

In the North, the brothers are interpellated into the cultural ideology of the mill town social formation, where they integrate into the international and interracial community of workers, and yet ideological factors prevent the Mosses from comprehending the condition of labor struggle as well as their own relationship to that struggle, that is, until it is too late, and tragedy has destroyed their family. The surviving brothers, Melody and Chinatown, leave the steel mill demoralized and physically injured by their foregone exploitation, and Attaway leaves off with the image of Chinatown and a fellow passenger, a blind war veteran, juxtaposed, aboard the northbound train, comparing imaginary sounds to explosions at the steel mill and cannon fire from the war. They were “listening for sounds that didn’t exist. They were twins,” Attaway concludes (237), and, in likening Chinatown to the soldier, the conclusion emphasizes that the ideological state apparatuses, while they function to pacify the dialectical contradictions
of labor struggle, are, nevertheless, weapons of a class war waged against the working class.
In The German Ideology … *Ideology is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness. All its reality is external to it. Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud.*

—Louis Althusser

*Expose . . . the economic roots of race hatred and race fear.*

—Langston Hughes

In the first epigraph to this chapter, Althusser suggests that *The German Ideology* underestimates the role of ideology in determining social conditions. Althusser’s reasoning is that ideology influences the actions of individuals and is, therefore, a social force. Althusser’s perspective is reflected in *Blood on the Forge*’s representations of materiality shaped by the dreamlike imaginary construction of ideology. Comparative analysis emphasizes the devastating effectiveness of the ideological state apparatuses as weapons of class warfare. The novel shows a dramatic shift from brute force to cultural influence as the dominant means of controlling the Mosses as members of the working class. Further comparison bears out the relationship of racism and racist policy to the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. The novel depicts racism persisting in Northern culture, although it is clearly different from the racism of the South, and it reveals fluidity in the conceptualization of race. Variations in the way race is conceptualized depends on variations and differences among exploitative relationships in local cultures. As the Mosses come from a violently racist culture, their individual
ideologies reflect such violence and racism, as well as resistance to it. In the North, however, the Mosses are swept away by the currents of social recreation, rituals comparable to those described in Althusser’s theoretical system, to which they submit with a disarmed sense of resistance. All the while, racist ideology continues to factor into policymaking in the North, as it is in the South, dictated by demands for labor. Although Attaway portrays a tenuous hold on authority by both repressive and ideological state apparatuses in contrast to Althusser’s model, *Blood on the Forge* reaffirms as well as informs Althusser’s theory through representations of the powerful yet tenuous influence of the state apparatuses, the dialectical clash of humanistic freewill, ideological determinism, and the deterministic effect of brute force in relation to institutionalized racism and labor exploitation. *Blood on the Forge* accomplishes this by showing the continuity from South to North of exploitative relationships that produce the Mosses’ material and ideological conditions as they are interconnected to institutionalized manners of thinking and corporal enforcement within Southern and Northern cultures. The Mosses, who are incorrigibly volatile and unstable as characters, challenge Althusser’s notion of the absolute control of the state apparatuses without, however, underplaying the extent of their influence over the personal lives and living conditions of individuals as subjects under capitalism.

There is much more to be said concerning Attaway’s engagement with themes of false consciousness and repressive exploitation. Representations of ideological illusion are traceable throughout his fiction, and an expansion of this study will include a broader survey, including analysis of his first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939), and especially the two short stories that bookend his published works, “Tale of the
Blackamoor” (1936) and “Death of a Rag Doll” (1947) in relation to the Althusserian representations of ideological illusion in *Blood on the Forge*. Both stories reflect *Blood on the Forge*’s focus on the contradictory nature of cultural ideology against the struggle of the working class, marking this as an enduring theme from beginning to end of his literary efforts.

In this way, all of Attaway’s literary works are grounded in Marxist, or at least strongly Marxian, thought concerning sociopolitical issues of class and race. Attaway’s approach to literature is both violent and subtle in its relaying of complex social and familial relationships, creating perspectives of extreme and nuanced contradictions. Consider Attaway’s fiction in relation to Marx and Engels’s theory articulated in *The German Ideology*. Attaway can be read as emphasizing the complexity as well as simultaneously and perplexingly inverting the idea that life determines ideology, as expressed in the following passage:

> Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. (Marx 768)

*Blood on the Forge* shows evidence of such life-determining factors of ideology in regard to the exploitative measures of the Mosses’ employers and the violent manifestations of racist ideology. The idea that material conditions manifest from ideological conditions
may appear contradictory to Marx and Engels; however, as my analysis of *Blood on the Forge* suggests, institutionalized ideology and the prevailing symbolic order are interconnected and propagate symbiotically, as further evidenced by the relationship between the symbolic order and the material and social conditions portrayed in Attaway’s work.

Althusser points out how ideology is comparable to Freud’s concept of the Unconscious, and this explanation sheds light on ideology as something “omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history” (Althusser 161). The subconscious-like quality of ideology as an always/already condition constitutes the absoluteness in the concept of ideological influence in that “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser 173). *Blood on the Forge*, in its representations of the North and South, exposes the subjugating force behind the perceived absoluteness of ideological interpellation and the categorization of subjects; however, Attaway’s depiction of the Mosses’ struggles, as a family and as individuals, reveal cracks in what Althusser calls concrete.

As a result of his focus on psychological manipulation, Attaway’s work, especially *Blood on the Forge*, is groundbreaking in its representations of social dynamics bound up in sociopolitical/cultural ideologies. Ideology manifests in dialectical collision and collusion with state power, and the Mosses’ material conditions reflect this. Thus, *Blood on the Forge* is revolutionary in its expositional mediation of racism as it is related to labor exploitation and ideological manipulation.


