

**“He Was Something He Hated:” Psychologically Internalized
Racism in Richard Wright’s *Native Son***

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Native Son

Upon the 1940 publication of his most successful novel, *Native Son*, Richard Wright rose to fame and literary prominence. His early literature dealt predominantly with the issue of race in America and explored the experiences and suffering of African Americans in a Jim Crow society, with which Wright was all too familiar. Wright was one of the most influential African American authors of the twentieth century, though the extent of his literary significance is not without debate among scholars. Indeed, in the nearly three quarters of a century since *Native Son* appeared, a number of notable voices in the literary community have denounced the novel for a number of reasons. Famously, Wright’s once close friend and protégé, James Baldwin, rejected Bigger Thomas as a symbol of oppressed, urban African Americans. In his 1955 *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin posits that Bigger’s lack of connections with the black community cause the artistic merit of the work to break down. To Baldwin, Wright’s failure to explore the relationships between individuals that create meaningful ways of life renders *Native Son* ineffective. Baldwin’s criticism echoed the sentiment of important Harlem Renaissance author, Zora Neale Hurston, who conceded that Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* has all “the shocking-power of a forty-four,” (3) but faults the collection of short stories for ignoring the nuances of the African American experience, instead dwelling only in the spectacular.

Similarly, Wright’s work became the target of black feminists in the 1970’s, who agreed with Hurston and Baldwin’s assessments, but through the lens of feminist literary criticism, also

faulted Wright for his portrayal of women. This view was championed perhaps most demonstrably by poet and novelist Sherley Anne Williams, who in her essay “Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright” notes: “The women in *Native Son*... are all cardboard figures: Mary Dalton... was never meant to transcend the symbolism of American fruit forbidden the black man... Bigger’s girlfriend, Bessie... represents nothingness, a meaningless void... Bigger’s mother and his sister represent taming and accommodation” (397). However, other scholars have responded to this criticism, describing the phenomenon not as a weakness in Wright’s craft, but rather as a necessary device to support one of his most important themes, his black male protagonist’s search for agency in a repressive society. Valerie Smith argues that Wright’s protagonists portray contempt for the larger black community because they identify this group with what Wright saw as a tendency toward accommodation. Smith goes so far as to posit that a separation between these protagonists and the women in their lives is often pivotal to the plots of Wright’s works: “Wright is especially judgmental with regard to black women, since his plots tend to recapitulate the cultural association of women with domesticity and socialization... his protagonists routinely reject their connections to black women as a stage in their search for liberation” (435). In his essay on the composition of *Native Son*, Wright notes that his early literature is far more concerned with representing those individuals who rejected the restrictions of Jim Crow law, than those who like Bigger’s mother and sister, had learned to live with them: “Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price” (Wright “How” 437).

Wright himself was critical of his first major published work, *Uncle Tom's Children*, noting that shortly after its publication, he realized, "I had made an awfully naïve mistake... I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about" (Wright "How" 454). Though impactful in their language, the weakness of Wright's short stories is that they do little to move the reader beyond the realm of emotion. While the brutal treatment of the stories' black protagonists implores readers for sympathy, the works lack the complexity associated with more sophisticated rhetorical approaches. After reading early reviews, Wright promised himself, "if [he] ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it... it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (454).

In many ways *Native Son* is indicative of Wright's desire to move away from the pathetic appeal employed in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Instead, his most successful novel appeals to logos, addressing Wright's largely white 1940's audience in a way that insists readers realistically confront their own assumptions about race in America, especially if they believe themselves to be racially progressive. The work dramatizes the experiences of the young African American, Bigger Thomas, whose lack of opportunity in a racist 1930's Chicago sets him upon a destructive and naturalistic path. The result is the murder of two women and Bigger's death in the electric chair. One of the novel's most important motifs is the characters' deep psychological internalization of their racist environment and the ways in which this internalization perpetuates a deleterious cycle of racism and negative behavior. Bigger's clumsy attempt to navigate "a world he feared" (Wright *Native* 42) result in a fractured psyche, his personality ruled by terror, shame, and hatred. Meanwhile, the failure of white characters to understand the reality of race relations in America contribute to the circumstances that result in Mary's and Bessie's murders

and Bigger's wasted life. Wright renders these psychic fractures and limitations of understanding often through symbolic imagery and extended metaphor that is at times overtly rendered as demonstrated in Mrs. Dalton's blindness, but sometimes more subtly manifested, as in Mary's well-meaning but ultimately hypocritical acts of kindness. Mathew Elder notes that this idea builds upon a theme first elucidated by Frederick Douglas, namely the destructive psychological effects of an "unholy master / slave relationship" (31) in which the owner turns "bestial or cruel... while the slave obviously suffers a depleted sense of worth and identity; dehumanization is the consequence common to both" (31). While Wright explores the negative psychological effects of racism and segregation on characters that fall into this dichotomy—oppressed and oppressor—he also examines the internalization of a racist environment on a notable third group of characters in the novel, well-intentioned white liberals, most clearly represented in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Mary, and Jan. As such, Wright demonstrates that the effects of racism are not only destructive to African Americans, but also to white Americans, indeed a threat to society at large. In the introduction included in *Native Son's* 1993 republication, Arnold Rampersad notes: "Wright insisted the nation was facing a grave danger, one that would destroy the United States if its dimensions and devious complexity were not recognized" (ix). Through Bigger's violent, fearful, and hateful characterization, *Native Son* strives to wake America from its "self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation" (ix). By doing so, Wright confronts the effects of centuries of racially-based oppression, forever shattering the naïve illusion that a 1940's reader might have been able to previously maintain: that the wrongs of the past and the inequities of the present might be easily mended, forgotten, and forgiven.

Explorations of Bigger's fractured identity abound in the critical conversation that has surrounded *Native Son* in the seventy-plus years since its publication, while discussions of the

damaged psyches of the novel's other characters have been few and far between. While there is much debate concerning what the disparate aspects of Bigger's personality might represent—ranging from folk culture to Communism—there does seem to be the general consensus among scholars that Bigger suffers from some type of schizophrenia or existential identity crisis.

Sheldon Brivic posits that Bigger's personality is divided between the emotional and rational, which are associated with the ideologies of Black Nationalism and Communism respectively, (232) while Mathew Elder argues that “the different formulations of [Bigger's] identity... are thrown into disarray by a segregated, inequitable, and frequently hostile society. The instability of Bigger's identity is shown to be a product of the psychological disorientation engendered by the environment of racial terror with which he must cope” (32). While Elder is justified in his assessment, it is worth noting that racial terror is not the only aspect of society that Bigger

Thomas is shown. Rather, he is also presented with intermittent—if hypocritical—kindness by the Dalton family and Jan, as well as fellowship in his group of friends, Gus, Jack, and G.H.

These homo-social interactions have been explored at length by Aime J. Ellis, who noted that it is “Bigger's sometimes compassionate and sometimes bullying relationships with young black men through which his humanity can be reconsidered” (27). Still, Bigger's self-destructive path is never in doubt, largely because all of these actions occur in a racist environment, which manifests itself in sometimes overtly hostile ways as Elder notes, but also in more subtle incarnations that affect the interactions between Bigger and other characters who might wish him well, but also fall victim to the effects of a racist environment. The deeply internalized psychological effects of this environment in the consciousness of the novel's characters prevent positive human connections and lead only to a culture of confusion, fear, shame, and hatred, which sets the stage for Bigger's destructive and naturalistic path.

If there is one emotion that dominates Bigger's fractured psychological state, it is fear, aptly captured in the title of *Native Son's* first book. There, Wright explores in depth Bigger's internalization of his racist environment as well as the inability of other characters to understand his plight. The book's opening scene sets the stage for this theme, which is paramount throughout the novel. Geographic segregation requires the Thomas family to rent a dilapidated one-room apartment at an exorbitant price on Chicago's decrepit south side. With no privacy to be had, Bigger and his brother Buddy must keep "their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed" (4). Soon after, Wright introduces his first symbol of the novel in the form of a rat that has been terrorizing the family for days: "A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger's trouser-leg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on" (5). Many critics suggest that the rat is representative of Bigger himself, noting that the rat's relationship to the Thomas family parallels the relationship between Bigger and society at large. However, from a psycho-analytical perspective the rat seems more likely to be the manifestation of Bigger's own fear and shame, aspects of his personality that he battles to keep hidden throughout the novel. After he is able to vanquish the rat, he brandishes it about the room to frighten his sister, establishing a pattern of aggressive behavior that he frequently uses as a coping mechanism to hide his own feelings of inferiority: "Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear" (7). After Bigger kills the rat, the narrator muses on the desperate poverty and powerlessness of the Thomas family. Again attempting to mask the most dominant aspect of his personality, fear, Bigger manifests his feelings toward his family as hatred: "He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he

would be swept out of himself with fear” (10). His attempt to extinguish the pain of these feelings further manifests itself in aberrant behavior such as masturbating in a movie theater and planning petty larcenies with his three friends Gus, Jack, and G.H. However, when faced again with an insurmountable obstacle—this time the prospect of robbing a white store clerk—Bigger resorts to hiding his fear by performing a hyper-masculine and aggressive role, insisting that it is Gus who is truly afraid to go through with the robbery then assaulting him with a knife:

“Sometimes I’d like to cut his yellow heart out... He’s just scared... Scared to rob a white man” (36). Still, on some level Bigger is aware of his coping mechanism: “His confused emotions made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus ... than to confront a white man with a gun... he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness” (42).

Though Bigger more often than not misdirects this fear in an attempt to hide his weaknesses and powerlessness, their source is a racist white society, which is manifested all around him. Often, Wright surmises Bigger’s understanding of whiteness in metaphorical terms, but in each case it is an overpowering force that circumscribes his options to find freedom and agency, “that looming mountain of white hate” (289). The force is also omnipresent, demonstrated in one of Bigger’s most lucid and emotionally honest scenes, in which he discusses the phenomenon with Gus. Speaking of white individuals, he notes that they do not live over the line that separates wealthy white neighborhoods from the Black Belt, but instead they are always with him: “Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus. ‘Right down here in my stomach... every time I think of ‘em, I *feel* ‘em... its like fire’” (21-22). The constant presence of white oppression is also symbolized in the Dalton family’s unnamed white cat, which constantly watches Bigger when he is in the Dalton home: “The white cat still contemplated him

with large, moist eyes” (49). The feline witnesses Bigger as he burns Mary’s body, foreshadowing his eventual failure and ultimate inability to challenge the oppressive white world: “Two green burning pools—pools of accusation and guilt—stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk... It was the white cat and its round green eyes gazed past him at the white face hanging limply from the fiery furnace door” (91). The cat’s fascination with Bigger can be seen as representative of the watchfulness of the white world, an ever-present voyeuristic gaze that grants that world power over the African American community, while keeping Bigger’s consciousness mired in fear and shame.

While the cat’s representation of the white world is fairly overt, more subtle are the ways in which it is indicative of Bigger’s fractured psyche. The cat is after all, only that, a cat, and its first appearance is rather benign: “the white cat bounded past him and leaped upon the desk; it sat looking at [Bigger] with large placid eyes and mewed plaintively” (46). It is only through Bigger’s understanding of the cat’s importance that it is imbued with additional connotations and meanings. Put another way, its symbolic significance is filtered through Bigger’s agitated state and thus its characterization provides insight into the experiences of his character. Only after Mary’s murder when the stresses on his psyche continually stretch him nigh to the breaking point, does the cat come to represent the suspicion of the Dalton family and the hostile aggression of the authorities: “the big white cat bounded down the steps and leaped with one movement upon Bigger’s shoulder and sat perched there. Bigger was still, feeling that the cat had given him away, had pointed him out as the murderer of Mary” (202). This progression of the cat’s behaviors and Bigger’s understanding of the cat’s significance are both indicative of his continual psychological degradation. He has witnessed the cat at first only mewling, then watching—according to him with suspicion—to finally making physical contact, which he

believes has marked him as Mary's murderer. As such, it demonstrates the mounting stresses on his psyche, his belief that the white world is closing in around him. More than that, his fear of the cat parallels a larger and more tangible terror that is soon to be realized: his capture and death at the hands of a racist, white-controlled society.

Yet another example of Wright's embedded symbolism filtered through Bigger's consciousness lies in Wright's characterization of Chicago's weather. Bigger's understanding of the white world is often described as an aspect of nature, but it is most clearly represented in a falling snow, which at first begins as a light flurry in the second book, but later becomes a full-fledged blizzard that aids the hostile mob in Bigger's capture. After Mary's bones are discovered in the furnace, Bigger flees the house by leaping out a window, only to be snared in the snow's blinding whiteness: "It seemed at first that he hit softly, but the shock of it went through him, up his back to his head and he lay buried... Snow was in his mouth, eyes, ears; snow was seeping down his back" (220). The metaphor is an apt one, as not only does it connote the overwhelming nature of the white world, but it also implies Bigger's inability to discern differences between white individuals, who like the snow, surround and confound him: "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't" (20). Thus, Wright renders through these symbols and metaphor how deeply internalized the effects of Bigger's racist environment have burned themselves into his consciousness. Thoroughly conditioned to white oppression, he will be incapable of processing the well-intentioned, but hypocritical attempts at racial reconciliation offered by the elder Daltons, Mary, and Jan. The fracturing of his personality, as well as these white characters' inability to

understand the dangerous ways a racist environment has forged his consciousness both contribute to the circumstances that will lead to Mary's murder and Bigger's execution.

While the effects of racism on Bigger's psychological state are at times none too subtle—Wright often expressly describes these effects in addition to employing symbolic allusions—a more careful read is required to discern the negative effects of a racist environment on oppressive white characters, even when they believe themselves to be well-intentioned. Though illusive, these are some of the novel's most rhetorically important aspects, as they establish the logical appeal between Wright and his mostly-white audience, whom he implores for change. Undoubtedly, Wright's characterization of Bigger is a risky one, as readers with racial prejudices would have perhaps been inclined to view Bigger's ignorance and penchant for violence as proof of their racist notions. This view has at times, even been publicized. Shortly after *Native Son's* publication, Rascoe Burton stated in his review that environmental factors were irrelevant to the actions of Bigger Thomas, implying instead that inherent biological differences are to blame for his violence and hatred: "I can't see that Bigger Thomas had anything more to contend with, in childhood and youth, than I had or than dozens of my friends had" (58). Though white readers with preconditioned racist tendencies such as these seem like a lost cause for Wright's rhetoric, Wright alludes to the ways in which these beliefs might be subtly used against racist readers, thus framing racism and white superiority not as a position of strength, but of weakness. Shortly after Mary's murder, Bigger attempts to fool the racist Britten, Mr. Dalton's private investigator, by using Britten's own assumptions about African Americans against him: "They won't think *we* did. They don't think we got enough guts to do it. They think niggers is too scared" (147). Indeed, for some time Bigger is able to manipulate Britten, who due to his inherent prejudices assumes Jan to be by far the more capable and likely suspect: "He's... got some of his Red

friends to lie for him... the ones he planned all of this with. Sure; why wouldn't they alibi for 'im" (211)? While the negative effect of Britten's ignorance does not seem to be nearly as damaging as Bigger's own internalization of racism, it does demonstrate that Britten and the racist community he represents fail to see the truth of reality before their eyes. Perhaps even more important rhetorically is that Britten's racist limitations, unlike Bigger's constraints, are entirely self-imposed. Until Mary's bones are literally dug from the furnace's ashes and placed before Britten's eyes—finally implementing Bigger in her murder—Britten enthusiastically and blindly asserts that Jan must be responsible for Mary's disappearance, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. He believes this only because of his racial prejudice and his belief in Bigger's intellectual inferiority. Were he to voluntarily exonerate Jan, he must then admit to Bigger's having outsmarted him, if only for a short while, which would entirely subvert his worldview, which maintains whiteness as superior. By depicting Britten's stubborn adherence to a flawed racial hierarchy, Wright highlights the mental gymnastics required to maintain a racist—and wholly inaccurate—worldview based on racial prejudice and the fantasy of white supremacy.

While an exploration of the dynamics between Bigger and Britten is productive in characterizing the effects of racism on the dichotomy of oppressed and oppressor, *Native Son* is rhetorically even more effective by including an important third group of characters in the mix, well-meaning white liberals. Wright explores their relationship with African Americans in depth and in many ways is harshly critical of their naïve views, though he imbeds this criticism in subtle ways for the reader to discover. One of the best examples of this lies in his depiction of the elder Daltons. They are ironically named after a form of colorblindness known as Daltonism, which subverts their supposedly progressive position and support of the African American community. As Robert J. Butler points out, "Although they see themselves as good liberal people

who are 'color-blind' in the positive sense of being without racial prejudice, the novel establishes them as 'color-blind' in the negative sense, for it reveals that they are tragically blind to the way a white system oppresses blacks and how they as slumlords are part of the problem" (128). Mr. Dalton believes himself to be a champion of the oppressed: "You see, Bigger, I'm a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (Wright *Native* 53). Yet, by making his fortune in the South Side Real Estate Company, he is in many ways responsible for the impoverished living situation and lack of opportunities available to Bigger and his family. Bigger's lawyer Max points out the hypocrisy and ultimate ineffectiveness of such a position in the novel's trial scene: "And in some of us, as in Mr. Dalton, the feeling of guilt, stemming from our moral past, is so strong that we try to undo this thing in a manner as naïve as dropping a penny in a blind man's cup" (393).

This metaphor of the elder Dalton's blindness is even more firmly established in the character of Mrs. Dalton who is literally blind. While there is every indication that Mr. Dalton offers "over five million dollars to colored schools" (56) to assuage the guilt he feels over racist economic exploitation—as Max points out—Mrs. Dalton seems to more genuinely care for the hardships of Bigger's plight. Still, despite her earnest she is yet even more ignorant of the realities of the world around her. She is insistent that Bigger use his free nights to further his schooling: "The last man that worked here went to night school and got an education" (61). However, she fails to recognize that were it not for her husband's exploitation of the inhabitants of the Black Belt, Bigger may not have been forced to leave school so early in the first place, seeking by necessity, menial jobs to support himself and petty crime and violence to bury his feelings of shame. Mrs. Dalton's blindness not only prevents her from understanding Bigger's circumstances, but also impedes her ability to see the violent impulses inherent in his character.

Though well-intentioned, both she and Mr. Dalton make the mistake of ignoring Bigger's individuality, assuming a paternal attitude towards African American men as a whole, which is characterized by the belief that Bigger will respond to their hypocritical gestures with nothing but gratitude: "he's sort of a problem boy. He's not really bad.... After all, these black boys never get a chance" (163). Finally, Mrs. Dalton's limitations are made most manifest when she both does and does not witness the murder of her daughter. One of the novel's most pivotal scenes, its dreamlike characterization is a departure from plausibility, as it is difficult to imagine that though blind, Mrs. Dalton would be unable to otherwise detect the presence of Bigger and the struggle resulting in Mary's death. Still, the scene is effective in cementing the ongoing metaphor of the Dalton family's blindness. Indicative of her inability to confront the inherent ugliness in her relationship to African Americans, she naively rattles off a list of possibilities before her, each missing the mark of the murder that is in progress only steps away: "Mary! Is that you... Mary! Are you ill... Mary! Are you asleep? I heard you moving about" (86). After the murder, Mrs. Dalton is depicted several times moving about the house feebly feeling at the walls for direction: "[Bigger] stood listening to the soft whisper of her shoes die away down the hall, then on the stairs. He pictured her groping her way, her hands touching the walls. She must know this house like a book, he thought" (128). This scene invites the reader to draw a further metaphorical connection between the Dalton family home and American society at large. Mrs. Dalton may know the physical structure of the house, yet clearly not what happens within it. Likewise, Wright alludes to the reluctance of society—even the supposedly progressive members of that society—to fully confront the complexities of race in America, suggesting that even if individuals have positive intentions, without understanding, like Mrs. Dalton, they stumble through life blind: "[Bigger] saw coming slowly toward him a tall, thin, white woman, walking

silently, her hands lifted delicately in the air and touching the walls to either side of her... she seemed to him like a ghost... she was old and her grey eyes looked stony... She's blind! Bigger thought in amazement" (46). If Mrs. Dalton is indeed representative white progressives, then the critique offered in these scenes is scathing. Mrs. Dalton has no understanding of the effects of racially based oppression on the African American community, or how she and her husband contribute to that community's impoverished existence. Likewise, she is unable to see the psychological effects of this racist environment on Bigger's psyche, the fear and hatred which make him a danger to those around him. Lastly, though only steps away from her dying daughter, she is unable to stop or even see the violence that is taking place before her. Through this symbolic representation, Wright urgently implores his 1940's audience to heed his "wake up call" as Rampersad put it, to set aside naivety and ignorance, to honestly confront the nuances and complexities of race in America.

Though Wright is harshly critical of the elder Daltons, interestingly the young Mary, through death and dismemberment, is handed the harshest fate of all *Native Son's* white characters. Some critics such as Burton, describe Mary's murder as the most heinous and inexcusable act, and consequently argue that Wright's dramatization of such violence is gratuitous and ineffective. Others have responded in ways that echo Max in the novel's trial scene, examining the ways in which Bigger's path was naturalistic, set on its tragic course by the very society that scorned him: "Bigger Thomas' own feeling of hate feeds the feeling of guilt in others. Hemmed in, limited, circumscribed, he sees and feels no way of acting except to hate and kill that which he thinks is crushing him" (390). Robert James Butler is one such critic, who posits that Bigger's rage is the result of the boiling over of romantic desires, his desperate need

to lead a full life and actualize a more realized self, both of which are prevented by the environmental determinants of a repressive society (11).

However, it is also possible to explain Bigger's violence not through explorations of his personality alone, or the way it is shaped by a racist society, but by the ways in which his fractured psyche interacts with the attentions of Mary and Jan, who though well intentioned, make mistakes in their dealings with Bigger that contribute to the circumstances of Mary's murder. This is not to say that Mary deserves what she got, far from it. As Jan notes speaking of the past violence of whites toward African Americans, one cannot take on the blame "for what one hundred million people have done" (288). Still, a thorough examination of the relationship between Mary, Jan, and Bigger demonstrates the danger that Wright saw in naïve assumptions about race relations in America. For all their good intentions, Mary and Jan drastically oversimplify the relationship, fail to understand Bigger's nature, and set the stage for confusion and distrust, which results in disastrous consequences for all parties involved. As such, in the scenes that lead to Mary's murder, Wright earnestly implores white liberal readers to confront their understanding of race with eyes wide open, discard any preconceived assumptions they might have, and avoid the naïve racial piety that characterize Mary and Jan.

Arguably, Mary and Jan's most grievous fault lies in their inability to see Bigger as an individual. Instead, they imagine him as a sociological project and believe that they might reach an understanding of African Americans as a whole by spending one evening with a black stranger. Riding along in the car through Chicago's impoverished south side—the notorious Black Belt—Mary explains, "I've long wanted to go into these houses... and just see how your people live" (69). Here, she demonstrates that she views African Americans not as a diverse array of individuals with their own experiences, beliefs, motivations, and desires, but instead as a

uniform people, exotic and alien to her own life, yet homogenous as a group. Jan is also guilty of this assumption when he insists that the three go eat at “a *real* place... We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places” (69). Like Mary, he has denied Bigger’s individual existence, insisting that because Bigger is black he might be able to offer Mary and Jan an understanding of all African American culture, whatever that might be. Though this does not in and of itself imply racism or white supremacy, it does lump all black individuals together and reinforce a dichotomy between white and black. Despite Jan and Mary’s best intentions, they embody a perspective that fails to acknowledge Bigger’s individuality, but even more importantly, his humanity. They reduce him to a statistic, an object that they might use to extrapolate an understanding of the larger black population as a whole. Though Bigger is incapable of surmising exactly why Jan and Mary’s attentions dehumanize him, he reacts on an emotional level, categorizes them along with other whites who have mistreated him, and reacts with hatred: “He flushed warm with anger. Goddamn her soul to hell... What was it they wanted? Why didn’t they leave him alone” (67)? In addition, Mary and Jan’s desire to see how African Americans live echoes the voyeuristic gaze represented in the Dalton family’s cat. Though their gaze is not malevolent, it is a gaze all the same, which reinforces racial differences and maintains a racial hierarchy with whiteness supreme.

Mary and Jan continue in their misunderstanding of the deep psychological scarring that a racist society has left upon Bigger’s consciousness. They assume that the most simple acts of kindness might reconcile them as friends—as Max put it, the naïve act of placing a penny in a blind man’s cup—and they are bewildered to find that Bigger does not immediately trust them: “We seem strange to you, don’t we, Bigger?” (68). Similarly, Mary concludes that though having just met, she and Bigger should share a form of understanding because “After all, I’m on your

side” (64). In this line, Mary has again denied Bigger’s individuality while simultaneously assuming that he will be able to distinguish her from the oppressive white community at large. Unable to understand these categories as Mary has defined them, Bigger ponders, “Now what did *that* mean? She was on *his* side. What side was he on?” (64). As James Baldwin famously pointed out, throughout the novel Bigger demonstrates little if any connection with the larger black community, so Mary’s assumption that he would have a “side” to which he belongs seems especially naïve. Rather than aligning with a particular collection of individuals, Bigger is more focused on his own personal freedom, which might lead to a more realized self. Thus Mary’s and Jan’s expectations attempt to force him to represent an entire people and their desperate situation, when in fact he is more focused on just surviving. Though they seek to understand and perhaps to help him, they ask Bigger to confront the misery of his own situation, the shame that he has sought to bury from the novel’s very first scene. Consequently, he reacts as he always does in such a situation, with hatred and aggression.

Perhaps most dangerously, Mary ignores the long established taboos regarding interactions between the two races, especially concerning black men and white women, by attempting to shake Bigger’s hand and sitting in the front seat of the car while he drives, her body pressed closely against his. Mary’s ignorance is acutely demonstrated in this scene, as she is has no understanding that her forwardness toward Bigger has the very real potential to endanger his life under the rule of Jim Crow. Her behavior stirs fear and confusion in Bigger that is on the one hand very practical, as he is fearful of violence from racist whites or condemnation from his friends and family: “What would people passing along the street think?” (67). On the other hand, and perhaps more insidious, are the ways in which Mary and Jan’s unwelcome

attention causes Bigger to become hyper-aware of that which makes him different in a racist society:

[Bigger's] entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention... He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand... He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so he would be conscious of that black skin... He felt he had no physical existence... He felt naked, transported; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (67)

Jan has forced Bigger to examine himself and his own situation, something Bigger always seeks desperately to avoid for his own psychological preservation. As a result, Bigger's feelings manifest themselves in an anger and hatred that far supersede Jan and Mary's awkward attempts at kindness. Their failure to recognize him as an individual mirrors his inability to recognize theirs: "They white folks. They done killed plenty of us" (178). Likewise, Mary and Jan fail to acknowledge the complexities of their relationship with Bigger and the way this relationship is influenced by a racist society, including the possibility that their attentions might endanger his safety. Lastly, they underestimate the importance of America's racist history, believing that through a handshake, the effects of centuries of violence and oppression might be swept aside. Ultimately, these misunderstandings lead to the events that result in Mary's death. As such, Wright alludes to the dangers of a society that ignores the nuances of race in America, reinforces a dichotomy between white and black that maintains whiteness as superior, and denies the impacts and lasting effects of a long history of racially-based oppression.

In comparison to the novel's first two books in which Wright weaves his rhetoric through symbolism and metaphor, his own voice is less artistically veiled in the novel's third and final book, *Fate*. Critics frequently cite this as one of *Native Son*'s most glaring faults. Sondra Guttman argues that while the third book is an attempt on Wright's part to explicitly surmise his work's moral philosophy, the section is also "clumsily written and unevenly assimilated into the dramatic structure of the story" (169). The culmination of this authorial intrusion—as some have characterized it—is demonstrated in a speech that Bigger's lawyer, Max, offers in the courtroom. Max is certainly one of *Native Son*'s most enlightened characters. His plea to the jury on Bigger's behalf is a convincing logical argument in which he frames Bigger's crimes as the inevitable product of a racist and oppressive society: "[Bigger's] entire existence was one long craving for satisfaction, with the objects of satisfaction denied; and we regulated every part of the world he touched. Through the instrument of fear, we determined the mode and the quality of his consciousness" (Wright *Native* 402). However, though Max pleads for Bigger's life and on some level sympathizes with his plight, he cannot fully understand why Bigger was driven to kill: "But what had [Mary] done to you? You say you had just met her.... You don't hate people for that. She was being kind to you" (350). Confounding Max, Bigger responds: "Kind, hell! She wasn't kind to me... I hated her! So help me God I hated her... and I aint sorry she's dead" (350). While Max possesses a logical understanding of Bigger's life, after Mary's murder Jan offers a different, more emotionally-based awareness founded in compassion and shared humanity: "It isn't easy, Bigger... I loved that girl you killed... I [think] of all the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them... if they could stand it, then I ought to" (288). In this pivotal scene Jan abandons the voyeuristic position he held while riding with Bigger and Mary in Mr. Dalton's car. Instead he

finally allows himself to feel as Bigger must feel and accept Bigger as an individual and fellow human being. Through the juxtaposition of Max's and Jan's positions—who both seek to help Bigger in the novel's closing pages—Wright offers a more complex and nuanced model of racial awareness than is demonstrated by any character in *Native Son's* first two books. While he logically implores his mostly-white audience to confront their own relationship with African Americans for their own good, insisting that racism “reaches beyond the narrow confines of Negro life to affect the whole of society,” he also suggests that Max's purely logical position is not enough (Ellison 43). Wright seemed to believe that knowledge is profoundly inadequate when it lacks an emotional component to lend feeling to what one knows. Though Max acknowledges Bigger's life, he falls short of Jan's flash of insight, an insight that allows Jan to begin to understand the fear, shame, and hatred that are intrinsic to Bigger's existence. When Jan is able to empathize with Bigger, “[Bigger] saw... as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face” (Wright *Native* 289). In this scene, understanding between races seems a possibility while making clear that in a hierarchy where power is imbalanced, the empowered must take the first step in trying to understand what it might feel like to function from a state of disenfranchisement. Unfortunately, Jan still maintains all the power in this dynamic because as the scene is described, his actions are required to grant Bigger the ability to see. Jan is still in charge. Still, this seems an especially effective rhetorical ploy if Wright's target audience is a group of white individuals who believe themselves liberal and progressive. Wright calls them to further action, which though problematic because it grants them power, might also actually effect change.

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