A COMPLEX SNARL OF REALITIES: RE-READING RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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Richard Wright's powerful 1940 novel *Native Son* holds a notoriously vexed place in literary history. Wright has been variously disparaged for his depiction of women, pilloried for his "gratuitous" violence, denigrated for his embrace of programmatic naturalism and dismissed as the author of overdetermined naturalist fiction and tediously didactic protest literature. Nonetheless, his work remains widely read, and *Native Son* is still considered an indispensible classic in the tradition of American letters. In his recent book-length investigation of Wright, Mikko Tuhkanen suggests that it is precisely his enduring legacy that limits contemporary critical considerations of Wright. Tuhkanen argues that such overexposure "has made it difficult to approach his texts—especially the most influential ones—without already knowing what one will read, without already being sutured into a fixed perspective as a reader" (xxv). Barbara Johnson makes a similar argument about the effect of canonization on reading practices in *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994), arguing that critical discourse establishes a "screen of received ideas" (Paul de Man's phrase) between canonized texts and their readers. Citing Paul de Man's essay "The Return to Philology" (1982), Johnson explains, "While critics of the university are claiming that campus radicals are subverting the literary canon and that students are no longer reading it, de Man is here claiming that really *reading* the canon is what is subversive, because students in traditional 'humanist' classrooms are usually taught *not* to read it, but to learn ideas about it" (30). Drawing on Johnson's and de Man's arguments, Tuhkanen asserts that because "our canonical readings of them may in fact be but inherited preconceptions," what is needed are careful re-readings of Wright's most canonical works, particularly *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, that self-consciously defamiliarize underlying assumptions about them (xxv).

Tuhkanen's insights provide a useful preface to my own experience reading *Native Son*. I was introduced to Wright's novel during the Spring of my first year of graduate school. In fact, I was assigned to read *Native Son* twice that semester by two different professors. In one of these courses I had just read Wright's harrowing autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), and would eventually read one of his nonfiction works, *Black Power* (1954). That semester I would also go on to read Ralph Ellison's collection of essays *Shadow and Act* and James Baldwin's collection of essays *The Price of the Ticket*, which contain the infamous critiques of Wright that each respectively forwarded in the 1940s and 1950s. So I would go that Spring, in a very short amount of time, from having read absolutely nothing by Wright to having read a good deal of writing both by and about him, and having spent a decent amount of time thinking about Wright and his critics, and discussing them with my colleagues and professors. But the truth is that when I sat down that Spring to read *Native Son*, I was relatively new to literary studies, having majored in political science as an undergraduate, and, therefore, I knew virtually nothing about Wright, nor of his reception and reputation. However, taking a cue from Tuhkanen, I'd like to reframe my embarrassing ignorance of such an important man in American letters by suggesting that I came to *Native Son* with a relatively untrammeled opinion of the novel (or its author) beyond the fact that I had been assigned to read a large portion of his oeuvre in my first year of graduate school. Contrary to Tuhkanen's concern that the novel's canonization had rendered it *already-read,* I approached *Native Son* more or less on its own terms because I knew absolutely nothing about it.[1]

[1] Tuhkanen uses the term "already-read" to describe the effect of canonization on Wright's most widely read works. He draws the term from Paul de Man who suggested that the canon need not be dismantled, but *(re)read*.

As the semester progressed and my knowledge of Wright grew, I found myself increasingly unsatisfied with interpretations of the novel offered by my peers, literary scholars and Wright's contemporaries alike. A pattern emerged in responses to *Native Son*, in which certain words and phrases were repeatedly called upon to raise objections to Wright's novel. Indeed, the parity between responses in both of my graduate seminars was almost uncanny, as students not only voiced similar criticisms in the two separate classes, but actually used the exact same terms in doing so. For example, in discussing the protagonist Bigger Thomas, one of the very first questions raised by both classes was whether or not Bigger is a "human." My colleagues pointed to Bigger's propensity for violence and his apparent lack of consciousness as evidence that he belonged outside the province of humanity. To be honest, when the question was raised in the first class, I was a little taken aback, as I was unsure of exactly what the alternatives were. If Bigger Thomas was not a "human," then what else could he be? Several words were thrown around during these discussions that relegated Bigger to the fringes of personhood: subhuman, monster, beast, brute, mindless, subconscious, bestial; one of my colleagues pointed out that several people had even slipped into referring to Bigger as "it." The conclusion that was ultimately reached in both of my classes was that, in fact, Bigger is not a human, but rather a symbol. In other words, in order for Bigger's brutality and seeming lack of consciousness to make sense, we had to read him as something other than a human being. What fascinated me about my classmates' discussions was not simply that they were thinking about Bigger as a symbol. It is, of course, quite common to think of characters in literature as symbolic of something other than themselves, or representing something beyond the pages of the book. Rather, what struck me was that

Bigger's symbolicity was being suggested in the place of, or at the cost of, his status as an individual human being.

The tendency to discuss Bigger as something other than a human is part of a long critical tradition that dates back to the novel's publication. In the decades after *Native Son* appeared, a series of infamous responses to the novel came from the pens of Wright's very own friends and protégés, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, both of whom were somewhat artistically and professionally indebted to Wright. Despite the fact that Wright had helped them jumpstart their literary careers, Ellison and Baldwin both publicly criticized him, and especially *Native Son*, in a series of essays and speeches in the 1940s and 1950s. Their comments ultimately stimulated a vehement public debate between Ellison and fellow critic Irving Howe in the literary journals of the 1960s, when, a few years after Wright's death, Howe published an essay defending him against Baldwin and Ellison's criticisms.

For example, in his acceptance speech for the 1953 National Book Award, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Ellison had publicly criticized the "hard boiled" realism and "narrow naturalism" of Wright's literary aesthetic.[2] Baldwin similarly criticized Wright in his now notorious 1945 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," arguing that the tradition of American protest literature, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Native Son*, reduces the complexity of black life in the name of political expediency. He asserted that the danger in these representations is that they ultimately traffic in the very racism that they aim to combat. He points to *Native Son* as a perfect example of this hazard, claiming that

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[2] Ellison had also previously criticized Wright in a 1940 review of *Native Son* (that he later denied having ever written), as well as in his review of *Black Boy,* which he opens with the somewhat backhanded reference to *Native Son*: "Imagine Bigger Thomas projecting his own life in lucid prose, guided say, by the insights of Marx and Freud, and you have an idea of this autobiography" (77).

by representing Bigger as "subhuman," Wright's novel merely perpetuates the "monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (33).

Baldwin later elaborated his critique of Wright in a lengthier essay, "Many Thousands Gone," (1951) in which he condemns the field of sociology and protest novels as mutually implicated in reducing black people to a series of dehumanized stereotypes. He argued that sociology positions the black man as "a social and not a personal or human problem…somehow analogous to disease…which must be checked…" (66). He explained that sociology, with its endless "statistics" and "cataloguing," constructs a generic "image" of the black man that strips him of his individual personality (66). Protest novels like *Native Son,* he charged, merely perpetuate these constructions with their one-dimensional caricatures of black character. Although he concedes that Bigger successfully represents "that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash," he faulted Wright for pursuing a "sociological vision" of black life in *Native Son* and for representing Bigger as a social cipher rather than a fully realized person (71). Describing Bigger as a "symbolical monster," he argues that a more complicated representation of his psyche, "would have given him a stature more nearly human and an end more nearly tragic" (75). But he laments that, ultimately, Wright's novel finds itself "so trapped by the American image of Negro life…that it cannot pursue its own implications" (75).

When Howe defended Wright against these criticisms in an essay published in the Autumn 1963 issue of *Dissent* magazine, he set off an emphatic debate with Ellison, who responded to Howe's accusations in kind. Provocatively titling his essay "Black Boys and

Native Sons," (1963) Howe chastised Baldwin and Ellison for turning against their literary progenitor, dismissing their criticisms as "attacks launched by young writers against their famous elders" (39). He praises the novel for the authenticity of its representation and for Wright's unapologetic commitment to tell "the truth about American Negroes" (45). Responding directly to Ellison's and Baldwin's objections to Bigger's characterization, he declares that although Bigger is, "more a brute energy than a particularized figure…[his] cowering perception of the world becomes the most vivid and authentic component of the book" (43). He also defends Wright's embrace of naturalism, arguing that although the novel has its origins in "white fantasy and white contempt" it nonetheless records "an authentic projection of a social reality" (42, 44).

Ellison's impassioned response, "The World and the Jug," appeared in the December 1963 issue of *New Leader*. He begins his fiery essay with a penetrating set of questions about the racist assumptions underlying so many critics' approach to literature written by black Americans and excoriates Howe's reading of *Native Son* as evidence of his limited understanding of the black American experience (112). Ellison maintains that Wright's depiction of Bigger is far too deterministic and lacking in nuance to approach anything like an authentic representation. He condemns Bigger's lack of psychological complexity, arguing that he is "near-subhuman" and conceives of the world "solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious" (114). Ellison and Howe would go on to respond to each other again in a set of essays published in *New Leader* in February of 1964, at which point their arguments more or less turn away from Wright's novel in particular, and focus instead on the role of the black artist and artistic autonomy in general.

While Howe and Ellison's debate (and by extension, Baldwin's essays) reveals two disparate conclusions about the merits of Wright's novel, their arguments nonetheless share common assumptions that are fundamental to their arguments. Though they disagree on Bigger's authenticity, both position him on the peripheries of personhood (he is "subhuman" and "non-conscious" in Ellison's words, "brute" and a "trifle conscious" in Howe's, and for Baldwin, a "monster," lacking a fully developed consciousness). As my classmates had done, they read Bigger as a symbol in order to explain his characterization – in other words, they interpret Bigger's subhumanity metaphorically. For example, rather than person (a "particularized figure"), Howe says that Bigger represents a "terrifying symptom" of the "disease of our culture" (44). Ellison had warned in "The World and the Jug," that advancing such an interpretation was dangerous, accusing Howe that his defense of the novel suggested that "when he [Howe] looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell" (112). But Ellison's and Baldwin's readings of the novel bear no small resemblance to Howe's, as all three interpret Bigger as a subhuman symbol: Ellison deems Bigger a "subhuman indictment of white oppression," (114) and Baldwin describes him as a "symbolical monster…created by the American republic" (72).

While Howe accepts Bigger's subhuman stature on the grounds that he symbolizes a larger "sociological truth," it is precisely Bigger's symbolism that invalidates his authenticity (or truth-value) for Baldwin and Ellison. But what is at stake here is Bigger's position on the spectrum of representation, not his humanity, as all three authors tacitly agree he is subhuman. Baldwin's and Ellison's criticisms likely stem from racism's entrenchment in the politics of black images, which meant that representations

of black character often carried the weight of material consequences. As Baldwin had noted in "Many Thousands Gone," this dynamic essentially denied black people (and black artists in particular), the luxury of being individuals, because they had, "the necessity thrust on [them]…of being the representative of some thirteen million people" (71). As black artists, Baldwin and Ellison were profoundly aware of this burden of representation, and therefore registered understandable anxiety with thinking about Bigger as a symbolic or representative figure. Indeed, one of the central concerns in their respective essays is the violence inherent in compressing the black life into symbolic abstractions. Such limited representations were necessarily dehumanizing, they argued, because they failed to account for each person's complex individuality that subtends such abstractions. This was the crux of the issue for Baldwin as an artist, who variously describes the human condition, and the situation of black Americans in particular, in his essays as "contradiction," "disquiet complexity," "savage paradox" "a web of ambiguity," and an "inward contention of love and hatred, blackness and whiteness" that is "resolutely indefinable, unpredictable" (29, 75-76). According to Ellison and Baldwin, it was Wright's aesthetic commitment to a sociological vision that hindered him from communicating a deeper truth about the complexity of black life in his novel. This was Ellison's critique of "narrow naturalism," and Baldwin's objection to protest novels, and also why both expressed so much disaffection with sociology, as they felt that these paradigms functioned by compressing black people into a set of unavoidably de-individualized, and, therefore, inevitably inauthentic, types. They rejected Bigger's authenticity on the grounds that as a stereotype he represented nothing more than a

pernicious racist fantasy, and worse, they charged that by depicting such an image Wright was merely perpetuating its racist implications.

In “Spectacle and Event in *Native Son*” Jonathan Elmer suggests that in the critical debate surrounding the novel, critics persist in conflating Bigger’s limitations as a character with Wright’s limitations as a writer. In “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright even seems to invite this confusion by paralleling his own consciousness with Bigger’s, disclosing, for example, that while he was writing the novel, “Like Bigger himself, I felt a mental censor…standing over me, draped in white” (448). Not only does Wright explicitly compare himself to Bigger here, his description immediately evokes the “white blur” of Mrs. Dalton, draped in a flowing white gown, who haunts Bigger’s consciousness throughout the novel. As Elmer rightly observes, this deliberate comparison has resulted in a critical slippage wherein Bigger’s limitations are often cited as evidence of the novel’s limitations, or of Wright’s own artistic shortcomings, and vice versa. For example, many early reviewers paternalistically dismissed the novel’s aesthetic flaws by reference to Wright’s race, and indicated that any perpetuation of stereotypes was inadvertent on Wright’s part, the effect of ignorance (read lack of education) or subconsciously absorbed racism (read lack of intellectual sophistication). Clifton Fadiman advances this notion through a classic paralepsis, dismissing the “numerous defects” of the novel on the basis that Wright was “not a finished writer…That he received the most rudimentary schooling, that for most of his life he has been an aimless itinerant worker” (Reilly 50). These early critics somewhat perversely suggest that the source of Wright’s most significant achievement – his authentic representation of the black experience – was also the source of his aesthetic flaws.

Such evaluations of *Native Son* quite condescendingly imply that Wright was unaware of the factitious origins of the stereotypes that he was deploying and the risks inherent in deploying them. But the explanation that Wright gives of why he decided that the plot of the novel should include this stereotype discredits any such accusations. He explains in “How Bigger Was Born” that *innocent* Negro boys are “picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with ‘rape’” so often that the image of the black rapist had become a “symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (455). Wright’s declaration that most of these young men are, in fact, quite innocent, and his offsetting the charge of “rape” in quotations, makes it clear that he knows that this stereotype has virtually no basis in truth. Furthermore, he explicitly acknowledges that this image gleans its power through its ceaseless repetitions in the legal system and in the media. Wright even declares that the burden of representation was foremost on his mind when he sat down to write the novel, revealing that he worried “What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say: ‘See, didn't we tell you all along that niggers are like that?’” (448). His comments indicate the he was more than aware of the political import of re-presenting this nefarious “stereotype” in his own novel.

Given that Wright undoubtedly recognized the fact that he was drawing on a racist and fictitious stereotype, the most pressing critical question is why he chooses to do so. Baldwin and Ellison suggest that the novel reveals bad faith in black humanity on Wright’s part. But this accusation conflates Wright’s representations of racist stereotypes with his acceptance of them. Such allegations likely stem from their belief that Wright was committed to a purely naturalist aesthetic in his writing that restricted him to

representing sociological "truths." Baldwin had implied as much in "Everybody's Protest Novel" when he criticized Wright by declaring that, "literature and sociology are not one and the same…it is impossible to discuss them as if they were" (31). This assumption about Wright's aesthetic objectives dates back to the novel's publication, when reviewers consistently cited Wright's stylistic debt to naturalism – variously comparing him to Zola, Dreiser, and Steinbeck (Gates and Appiah 8-9, 21). This critical bond between *Native Son* and naturalism, for good or ill, is so strong, that twenty years later, Irving Howe lamented that the waning popularity of naturalism had relegated Wright's novel to the dustbin of literary history (Gates and Appiah 65).

Baldwin and Ellison took issue with Wright's methodology because they believed that sociologically derived portraits simply could not capture the full humanity, the disquiet complexity, the savage paradox of the black American experience. Instead, they felt that these portraits pawned off "formulaic fictions" as true representations of black life. In his eagerness to pursue a sociological or naturalist aesthetic in *Native Son*, Baldwin charged, Wright had merely represented "fantasies, connecting nowhere with reality" (31). In their own works, Baldwin and Ellison hoped to counter the violence that sociology and naturalism perpetuated by reducing individuals to socio-cultural symbols. They believed that literature could best serve political ends simply by being true to the complexity of the human experience. In essay after essay, they affirm that aesthetics must enjoy some degree of autonomy from political concerns, because the role of the author is to produce literature that conveys a deeper truth about life, not to turn out sociological or political tracts, as they alleged Wright had done.

But Baldwin and Ellison's affirmations echo, rather than contravene, Wright's own aesthetic goals. In his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," published shortly before he began work on *Native Son*, Wright reveals his own artistic objectives and outlines his thoughts on politics and aesthetics in African American literature. Contrary to Baldwin and Ellison's accusations, Wright devotes an entire section of his essay to the "autonomy of craft," in which he argues that "the Negro writers' new position calls for a sharper definition of the status of craft, and a sharper emphasis upon its functional autonomy" (105). He concludes that the task facing this new generation of black writers cannot be solved by "a simple literary realism" (101). He even cautions writers against viewing literature as a social mirror, explaining that "the relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple," and warning that "A too literal translation of experience into images is a defeat for imaginative expression. And a vulgarized simplicity constitutes the greatest danger" (105). Turning back to Wright's essay, Cheryl Wall points out that Wright "was no simpleton when it came to matters of representation," and while he, "called for simplicity in presentation, he disparaged the simplistic" (290). Rather, in his own words, his goal was to portray, in a simple and straightforward manner, "all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over even the most sordid existence;" an aesthetic he described as "complex simplicity" (103).

In "Blueprint" Wright not only affirms the autonomy of craft, he also provides a succinct description of his own aesthetic idiom: "complex simplicity." This playfully ambiguous phrase evokes the African American aesthetic of double-voicedness that literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would describe fifty years later as "signifyin(g)."

In his foundational text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Gates successfully transfers the historically linguistic practice of signifyin(g) in black vernacular to African American literary discourse and criticism. Pointing to two key figures of double-voicedness in African, Afro-diasporic and African American culture, Esu Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, Gates argues that double-voicedness is a fundamental tenet of the African American literary tradition. He explains that together, Esu Elegbara, who functions through double-voiced utterances, and the Signifying Monkey, who functions through rhetorical tropes, formal revision and intertextuality, represent the literary practice of signifyin(g).

Gates draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "double-voiced" utterance (whose origins are indigenous to African and Afro-diasporic cultures) to develop his theory of signifyin(g). Bakhtin defines a double-voiced word as that which works "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a…word which already has--and retains--its own orientation" (50). Gates also cites Gary Morson's analysis of Bakhtin, who argues that in the double-voiced sign the listener/reader comprehends "both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of the speaker's point of view (or 'semantic position') and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view" (50). In short, signifyin(g), Gates asserts, is a kind of literary "black doublevoicedness" (51).While signifyin(g) can manifest itself in a variety of ways, Gates locates two classes of double-voicedness that are the most germane to Wright's project in *Native Son*: tropological revision and the speakerly text. Gates defines tropological revision as "the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences" (xxv). He points to doubling, figures of the double, and particularly double-consciousness as one of the most

salient tropes at play in the African American canon. The speakerly text refers to African American writers' preoccupation with representing the speaking black subject in writing. In particular, Gates points to Zora Neale Hurston's use of "free indirect discourse" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a poignant example of the manner in which African American authors manipulate narrative strategy to produce a "play of voices" in their works (xxv).

Parody and the related concept of hidden polemic are also fundamental to Gates's theorization of signifyin(g). Beginning with the *Princeton Encylopedia of Poetry and Poetics's* definition of parody as "exaggerated imitation," or "a form of literary criticism which consists in heightening the characteristics of the thing imitated," Gates differentiates parody from imitation proper. Unlike direct imitation, parody forwards a critique of the very thing it resembles; in other words, through exaggeration parody conveys a sense of derision for the subject of representation. Of course some of the most pernicious representations of African Americans take the form of parody, in which racist assumptions about black character are magnified, often for comedic or political effect. But, as Gates points out, "if blacks were the *subject* of this sort of racist Signifyin(g) parody," they were also quite capable of using tropological revision themselves to signify "upon white racism through parody." (94). This type of parody constitutes "hidden or internal polemic," another concept that Gates pulls from Bakhtin. Bakhtin explains that in hidden or internal polemic,

> the other speech act remains outside the bounds of the author's speech, but is implied or alluded to in that speech…In hidden polemic, the author's discourse is oriented towards its referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is construed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the author's

> discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion on the same topic (111).

Parody and hidden polemic are two forms of double-voiced discourse that Gates identifies as "formal signifyin(g)," in which black writers include "a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent content" (103). Formal signifyin(g) can also function conversely, wherein an author "suggests a given structure precisely by failing to coincide with it – that is, suggests it by dissemblance" (104). For example, Gates points out that in *Invisible Man*, Ellison, "signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference" (107). In other words, he simultaneously evokes and critiques Wright's novel through aesthetic dissimulation.[3] Ellison himself described this type of signifyin(g) as "*technical assault against the styles* which have gone before" (107).

According to Gates, literary signifyin(g) constitutes, "successive attempts at creating a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of African American literature, the so-called Black Experience" through signifyin(g) (111). For example, while Ellison and Wright were both preoccupied with the representing the "black experience," by his own admission, Ellison's objective was to supersede Wright by implicitly underscoring the inadequacies of his representations. Signifyin(g), Gates explains, serves to "create a space for the revising text," which is "written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience," so that it can supplant them (124). Through

[3] For example, according to Gates, the title of Ellison's *Invisible Man* obliquely references and rewrites the titles of Wright's books *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, inverting the material presence of the black native with the absence of invisibility, just as Ellison replaces Wright's voiceless protagonist in *Native Son* with a narrator who is nothing but voice (106).

repetition, revision, parody, ambiguity, and doubling, signifyin(g) provides black authors with a powerful strategy that is at once aesthetic and political.

Although *The Signifying Monkey* appeared decades after Wright began writing his novel, one can easily find traces of something similar to Gates's description of signifyin(g) in Wright's works. In "Blueprint," for example, he affirms the centrality of repetition in black culture, which he argues achieved its expression in the form of stories "recounted from mouth to mouth" (99). The trope of doubles and doubling also surfaces throughout the essay: the African American writer's unique position provides her with two perspectives, two literary traditions, two audiences, which must be assimilated and reconciled in her project. It is only by drawing on this "complex consciousness" Wright argues, that black writers can "do justice to their subject matter" (102). It is these observations that lead Wright to conclude that an aesthetic of "complex simplicity" is most appropriate for the manifold task ahead of the black writer, the phrase itself evoking many of the fundamental characteristics of signifyin(g): ambiguity, word play, paradox, indirection, layers of meaning, double-entendre, equivocation, etc.

These considerations were surely on Wright's mind when he began work on *Native Son*, just six months after publishing "Blueprint." Indeed, the very title of Wright's novel is a sort of double-voiced utterance, as the phrase "native son" simultaneously others the protagonist and affirms his nativism. By suturing the racially inflected term "native" to "son," Wright signifies on a set of politically and racially loaded concepts in American culture: the "black boy" and the "founding fathers." This sense of ambiguity surfaces in Wright's explanatory essay, "How Bigger Was Born," as he describes the novel through a series of indeterminacies and equivocations. For

example, he describes Bigger as a "symbolic figure of American life" only to obscure that symbolism by multiplying the "Bigger type" ad infinitum: Bigger Thomas is not only black, he is white too, not just Southern, but also Northern, and not just American, but German and Russian as well. By the end of the essay the Bigger type is ubiquitous, "there are literally millions of him everywhere" (441). Wright also makes it clear in the essay that although Bigger is meant to represent something larger than himself – of course, his very name suggests as much – he is nonetheless, and perhaps, first and foremost, a person. He not only explains that he intended to "make [Bigger] a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things I felt and saw in him," he even provides a nuanced description of each person who inspired his representation of Bigger (448).

Wright's description complicates readings that deem Bigger a symbol by divesting him of his individuality or stripping him of his personhood. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a few definitions of the word "personality" that are cogent to my argument here: "the quality, character, or fact of being a person, as distinct from an animal, thing, or abstraction; a person, esp. one considered as the possessor of individual characteristics or qualities; a being resembling or having the nature of a person, esp. by having self-awareness or consciousness." These definitions reveal something fascinating about Wright's choice of words: the OED's definitions for "personality" sets up a binary opposition between person and abstraction, individual and symbol, defining them as more or less mutually exclusive. By making Bigger a "living personality and at the same time a symbol," Wright is simultaneously affirming that Bigger is a human and stripping him of his humanity, he is emitting a double-voiced utterance. Like his playfully ambiguous "complex simplicity," he describes Bigger paradoxically, as both a thing and its opposite.

If we take Wright's comments in "Blueprint" and his explanatory essay "How Bigger Was Born" to heart, then the reductive readings that Baldwin, Ellison, Howe, and even my classmates have offered are surely missing the point. What is needed, then, is an analysis of *Native Son* that takes Wright's own stated aesthetic objectives as its starting point. Tuhkanen, the Wright scholar with whom I opened this essay, is not the first to observe that a more rigorously nuanced reading of *Native Son* is imperative. In fact, noted literary scholar Houston Baker called for such readings nearly twenty-five years ago in his seminal work *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1987) when he asserted that Wright's project could "only be understood through the deconstruction of the quite familiar (and lamentably narrow) modes of assessing his corpus that have held sway for decades" (140). Gates had described the importance of signifyin(g) precisely because he felt that the African American literary tradition had suffered from a lack of sophisticated scholarly attention, and that the scholarly attention it did receive failed to approach works by black Americans on their own terms. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison similarly argues that literary criticism's position of universalized whiteness has resulted in misreadings of much canonical literature. These misreadings stem from the critical praxis of "American Africanism" that she describes in the book as the "disabling virus within literary discourse," and defines as "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (xx). Baldwin had hinted at the flaccidity of critical approaches to black literature several decades earlier in "Everybody's Protest Novel," arguing that readers are all too quick to dismiss "whatever violence they [black

writers] do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility" because readers "receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (31). Ellison had also sounded these complaints in "The World and the Jug," opening his essay with a triad of provocative questions about the racist assumptions underlying many of the critical approaches to African American literature, asking:

> [Why] is it so often true that when critics confront the American as Negro they suddenly drop their advanced critical armament and revert with an air of confident superiority to quite primitive modes of analysis? Why is it that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project? Finally, why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is? (107).

But it is precisely Baldwin's and Ellison's trenchant insights into the lack of rigor in critical approaches to African American literature that leave me so disoriented by their own reductive readings of Wright's novel. And my classmates's own responses, coupled with a survey of recent scholarship published on the novel, lend at least some credence to Tuhkanen's concerns that I cited at the beginning of this paper about the inherited preconceptions that haunt Wright's novel. It seems that Wright's legacy, his reputation and critical reception, quite unfortunately precede him to the point that "lamentably narrow" modes of assessing his novel do continue to hold sway.

Much of these "lamentably narrow" readings of *Native Son* hinge on the issue of genre and Wright's reputation as a naturalist, a fact which is often taken for granted by critics. In general, Wright does present his method in *Native Son* as descending from the school of naturalism that Zola had championed in his well-known essay "The Experimental Novel" (1879). Zola advocates a method in which the novelist acts not merely as an observer, but as an experimental scientist, placing his characters in

particular situations in order to record their responses. Such a method ultimately gleans its significance when the characters are established as real in some way, and this is precisely the assertion that Wright makes in "How Bigger Was Born": that Bigger is essentially – we might say sociologically – real. Certainly, Wright took pains to establish the veracity of the novel's basic topography, returning to Chicago in November of 1938 to take notes and photographs, and to interview a local lawyer about court procedures. Ernie's Kitchen Shack (where Bigger, Mary and Jan eat dinner) – identified in the novel as being located at Forty-seventh Street and Indiana – refers to an actual restaurant in Chicago called "The Chicken Shack" that was located at 4647 Indiana Ave. and owned by a man named Ernie Henderson (Kinnamon 67). In point of fact, Wright cites the influence of naturalist writers such as Zola, Dreiser and Crane on his thinking, and he further notes that "the most important discoveries came when I veered from fiction proper into the fields of psychology and sociology…I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime, relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment…" (*Black Boy* 278). Accordingly, Wright describes writing the novel in "How Bigger Was Born" as a kind of sociological investigation.

At the same time, however, early reviewers were quick to tally the novel's flaws as a naturalist text. For example "New York Times" book critic, Orville Prescott, lamented that "instead of a realistic sociological document he [Wright] had written a philosophical novel, its ideas dramatized by improbable coincidences and symbolical characters" (Reilly 293). After reading a draft of the novel that Wright submitted to his publisher in February 1939, his agent Paul Reynolds, Jr. responded with a list of

“weaknesses” in the novel based on their implausibility, including “Jan’s pardon of Bigger, some unbelievable aspects of Mary’s character…[and] the extreme naïveté in trusting a new chauffeur to bring their [the Daltons] daughter home in the middle of the night” (Fabre 177). Another example of plot that commonly warrants skepticism is the unlikely coincidence that Bigger sees Mary Dalton for the first time in the movie theater on the morning of the very same day that he is hired by her father as a chauffeur and that ends with him accidentally killing her. But the most infamously ludicrous and therefore oft-cited scene occurs early in Book 3, when virtually every character in the novel crowds into Bigger’s jail cell at the same time – Reverend Hammond, Jan, Max, Buckley, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Bigger’s mother, his brother Buddy and his sister Vera, as well as his friends Jack, G.H., and Gus, all squeeze into what must be one of the largest jail cells run by one of the most lenient and indulgent prisons in American literature.

As I recounted beforehand, early reviewers paternalistically explained that these flaws were due to Wright’s naïveté or lack of education. But contrary to these critics’ assumptions about his artistic crudity, Wright was fully aware of the flaws that these reviewers were so quick to highlight and then eagerly dismiss as the result of ignorance. For example, in response to Reynolds’s criticisms, Wright conceded “nine-tenths of what you say is correct” but he nonetheless chose to leave many of these alleged “weaknesses” in the cherished novel that he had gone to such great pains to systematically research and develop (Fabre 177). Thus, it seems unlikely that such inconsistencies were inadvertent on Wright’s part. In fact, sounding much more like a modernist expressionist than a “narrow naturalist,” he typically justified these narrative improbabilities as intentional departures from a strict realism designed to achieve certain emotional or expressive

effects. For example, in “How Bigger Was Born” Wright acknowledges the implausibility of the overcrowded jail scene, but explains that “I wanted those people in that cell to elicit a certain important emotional response from Bigger. And so the scene stood. I felt that what I wanted that scene to say to the reader was *more important than its surface reality or plausibility*” (italics mine 458). He goes on to state that in writing the novel he was less concerned with the verisimilitude of particular details than with how successfully those details achieved the desired effect, revealing that “If a scene felt improbable to me, I’d not tear it up, but ask myself: ‘Does it reveal enough of what I *feel* to stand in spite of its *unreality*?’” (italics mine 458). The most fictitious elements of *Native Son,* then, are a mechanism that Wright strategically employs, not inadvertent oversights or evidence of his woefully inadequate formal education.

Of course it is easy to mistake the fallacious nature of Wright’s representations with the literal truth of the resulting picture. Since, by his own admission, Wright is paradoxically committed to both a strict realism and an uncompromised expressionism, it’s not surprising that readers might confuse one mode with the other. Actually, this even seems to be Wright’s intention. For example, the description of Bigger that appears in the Chicago *Tribune’s* coverage of his trial in Part 3 represents such an exaggerated example of racism that it seems to exceed hyperbole:

> His shoulders are huge, muscular, and he keeps hunched, as if about to spring upon you at any moment…All in all, he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. In speech and manner he lacks the charm of the average, hapless, genial, grinning Southern darky so beloved by the American people.
> The moment the killer made his appearance at the inquest, there were shouts of “Lynch ‘im! Kill ‘im!”
> But the brutish Negro seemed indifferent to his fate, as though inquests, trials, and even the looming certainty of the electric chair held no terror for

> him. He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in the white man's civilization.
> An Irish police captain remarked with deep conviction: "I'm convinced that death is the only cure for the likes of him" (*Native Son* 323).

Writing in *The University of Kansas City Review,* Hubert Creekmore – like Wright, a native of Mississippi, and of the same age, but white – criticized the newspaper accounts in the novel, declaring that they "exceed belief…Mr. Wright makes them present incidents and ideas which reflect his own mind rather than an editor's mind or the public mind" (qtd. in Kinnamon 69). Of course, it is now widely known that the newspaper articles in *Native Son* are directly culled from the Chicago *Tribune's* coverage of the arrest and trial of Robert Nixon, an eighteen-year-old black man who was accused of killing a white woman, Florence Johnson, with a brick in May of 1938. Nixon confessed to the crime, as well as a number of other attacks, most likely under torture, and although he ultimately pled not guilty for the crimes at his arraignment, he was speedily convicted by an all-white jury and executed by electrocution on June 15, 1939. Although Wright downplays the influence of the case on *Native Son*, after hearing about Nixon he sent a letter to Margaret Walker, one of his colleagues in Chicago, pronouncing "I have just learned of a case in Chicago that has broken there and is exactly like the story I am trying to write. See if you can get the newspaper clippings and send them to me" (qtd. in Gayle 113). A review of the newspaper clippings that Wright had in his possession reveals that the newspaper reports featured in the novel are virtual reproductions of the *Tribune's* coverage of the Nixon case:

> He has none of the charm of speech or manner that is characteristic of so many Southern darkies. That charm is the mark of civilization, and so far as manner and appearance go, civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and catlike tread all suggest the

> animal. He is very black – almost pure Negro. His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species…
> Last week when he was taken…to demonstrate how he had slain Mrs. Florence Johnson…a crowd gathered and there were cries of "Lynch him! Kill him!"
> …Nixon either doesn't realize the gravity of his position or doesn't care. He will worry about the chair when the time comes…
> [The Louisiana sheriff of Nixon's home parish writes,] "It has been demonstrated here that nothing can be done with Robert Nixon. Only death can cure him"
>
> (Chicago *Sunday Tribune*, June 5, 1938, p. 6).

These outlandish, but nonetheless factual, accounts are interlarded with the aforementioned unrealistic scenes that, despite their implausibility, Wright chose to preserve on the basis that they conveyed an expressionistic truth. By deliberately and ambiguously blending realist and expressionist modes, Wright seems intent on provoking reader skepticism. But why would Wright desire such a response from his readers? In "Beyond Naturalism?" (1975), Michel Fabre argues that Wright's propensity to blend fact and fiction stems from his "pleasure in discovering that reality is often more fiction-like than fiction itself and in persuading the reader of this" (66). Creekmore's mistaken belief that the Chicago *Tribune* would surely never print such racist sensationalism points to this effect: one can imagine that an incredulous reader like Creekmore, faced with the original newspaper articles that served as Wright's sources, might be shocked all the more by their basis in reality, this sudden jolt perhaps prompting a shift in consciousness that Wright was aiming for.

Contrary to the critical contention that the stylistic inconsistency of *Native Son* is one of its flaws, these inconsistencies are better understood as strategic departures from the conventions of naturalism on Wright's part. This manipulation of genre recalls Gates's description of formal signifyin(g) in which an author signifies on another text by

repeating its "given narrative or rhetorical structure," but filling it with "incongruent content" (103). By drawing on both realistic and expressionist techniques, Wright's novel itself can be viewed as double-voiced as it communicates through two different, and in some ways competing, modes of representation. The above passage from the novel in which Wright draws on an article from the Chicago *Tribune* also constitutes tropological signifyin(g), because although Wright nearly reproduces the original article, he does make slight changes. For example, he rearranges the order of the sentences, adds and removes some words/phrases, swaps out the Louisiana sheriff for an Irish police captain, and changes the "Lynch him! Kill him!" of the original article to "Lynch 'im! Kill 'im!" in the version that appears in the novel. While these changes may seem insubstantial, on further inspection this subtle editing produces quite a different effect. For example, by replacing the Louisiana sheriff with an Irish police captain, Wright more explicitly racializes the uniformed figure as Anglo-European. Wright also calls the cultural or intellectual sophistication of the onlookers into question by rendering their violent refrain into vernacular speech (dropping the 'h' from the 'him'), essentially inflicting the same kind of representational violence on the lynch mob that the journalists who penned the original article had perpetrated against Bigger.[4] Coupled with the rest of the changes that he makes to the original article, Wright's subtle revisions turn the representation of Nixon as an inhuman savage in the original article on its head. In Wright's version we have a quite passive Bigger Thomas bookended by a bloodthirsty mob and a homicidal Irish police chief. Wright's added suggestion that the rather halcyon Bigger "seemed out of place in the white man's civilization" seems nothing short of ironic. These revisions

[4] This is not to say that vernacular speech suggests a lack of cultural or intellectual sophistication, or that Wright believed it did. On the contrary, by playing with the division between civilized and uncivilized in his revision of the article, Wright seems to be calling those very assumptions into question.

allow Wright to reproduce the newspaper articles, while simultaneously clearing a space for himself to subtly critique the racist views that they contain within that representation; in other words, signifyin(g) allows Wright to represent racism without condoning it.

Signifyin(g) reframes the supposed flaws of Wright's novel as deliberate attempts to intervene in specific methods of representation. Indeed by his own admission, Wright drew on a particular genre's aesthetic conventions in *Native Son* only to the point that they were effective, and simply abandoned its method of representation for another when and where he felt that it was inadequate. In an analysis that resonates with Gates' explication of signifyin(g), Frank D. McConnell asserts that in African American literature "not only the plot, but also the language itself of the economic and social world, generating and generated by the novel, is available to the American black writer only as an acquired form, just as his existence in that social world is an acquisition rather than a birthright. And this means that its conventions can be employed only insofar as they are simultaneously tested" (195-6). Wright's departures from these "acquired forms" then, forward an implicit critique about the limitations of the literary traditions that he had inherited, suggesting that, in the end, even the writers who inspired him did not provide the tools necessary to adequately represent the African American experience. Wright's deviations from conventional naturalism, in other words, the "defects" in the novel's naturalism, are precisely the moments that reveal Wright's critique of conventional naturalism.

To fully comprehend Wright's critique of naturalism, it is helpful to consider critical accounts of the genre's conventions. In general, naturalist writers attempted to show how social and economic conditions, rather than biology, determine a person's

character. Donald Pizer argues that American naturalists were particularly interested in depicting the way that pervasive and deterministic social and material realities circumscribed consciousness. Wright's project in *Native Son* was undoubtedly inspired by similar concerns. In "How Bigger Was Born" he explains that, "I don't mean to say that I think that environment *makes* consciousness…but I do say that I felt that the environment supplies the instrumentalities though which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped…the mode and manner of behavior will be affected (442). In order to convince readers of the need for social reform, naturalist authors often depict characters who lead brutal and miserable lives, because as naturalist scholar June Howard explains, "if the victim's lot is sordid, the need for reform is proved" (38).

As a politically engaged artist, intent on social change, it comes as no surprise Wright saw merits in the naturalist project. But he had expressed at least minimal disaffection with the genre's propensity for objectification when he criticized Stephen Crane's naturalist masterpiece *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, calling it a "coldly materialistic piece of poverty" (qtd. in Fabre 48). Wright's reservations about the unalloyed naturalism of Crane's novella anticipate Howard's conclusion that in their commitment to narrative objectivity, naturalist authors undercut the political and moral efficacy of their own works. She argues that the "objective, analytic attitude proposed by the aesthetic ideology of realism and even more emphatically by naturalism…effectively dehumanizes the character," stripping her of selfhood and allowing the reader to view her as an objectified Other (81). This detachment from the characters undercuts the genre's political objectives, she argues, because it inhibits the moral imperatives of the work from penetrating the readers' consciousness, "enough to cause real discomfort" (Howard

102). In other words, the narrative distance positions the reader as a voyeur and the protagonist's miserable life as nothing more than a spectacle for the reader's gaze.[5]

To counter the voyeuristic effect of a purely naturalist aesthetic, Wright employs a more sophisticated narrative strategy in his novel. Unlike the impersonal tone of a detached third-person narrator, his novel is dominated by the perspective of its own protagonist. He explains, "…as much as I could, I restricted the novel to what Bigger saw and felt, to the limits of his feeling and thoughts even when I was conveying *more* than that to the reader." (459). Wright hoped that this would provide a more penetrating and personal account of Bigger's character, revealing that "I had the notion that such a manner of rendering made for a sharper effect, a more pointed sense of the character, his peculiar type of being and consciousness." (459). Allowing Bigger's point of view to pervade the narrative humanizes him, because it keeps readers grounded in his consciousness. But again, Wright equivocates when he claims that the novel is restricted to Bigger's point of view. Just moments before declaring, "Throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger's,"(459) he gives a decidedly more complicated account of his narrative strategy:

> …sometimes I'd find it necessary to use a stream of consciousness technique, then rise to an interior monologue, descend to a direct rendering of a dream state, then to a matter-of-fact depiction of what Bigger was saying, doing, and feeling. Then I'd find it impossible to say what I wanted to say without stepping in and speaking outright on my own; but when doing this I always made an effort to retain the mood of the story, explaining everything only in terms of Bigger's life and, if possible, in the rhythms of Bigger's thought (even though the words would be mine). Again, at other times, in the guise of the lawyer's speech and the newspaper items, or in terms of what Bigger would overhear or see from afar, I'd give what others were saying and thinking of him (458).

[5] For example, the opening scene of the novel in which Bigger kills a large rat is described from a detached third-person perspective. Wright then describes the Thomas household in the same third-person narrative voice that the rat is described, effectively heightening the dehumanization of Bigger and his family.

In other words, Wright manipulates the narrative throughout the novel so that third-person narration is mediated by Bigger's first-person perspective. Gates describes this narrative strategy, referred to as free indirect discourse, as a form of the speakerly text, "in which third and first person, oral and written voices, oscillate freely within one structure" (22). This "double-voiced narrative," he argues, shifts its level of diction to, "reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness" (xxvi). Gates acknowledges Wright's use of free indirect discourse, only to dismiss it, commenting, "Wright uses free indirect discourse to some extent in *Native Son*, but its diction is not informed by Bigger's speech" (192). For Gates, Wright's use of free indirect discourse is unsuccessful because the narrator's sophisticated voice and Bigger's vernacular speech never effectively merge.

While most critics comment on Wright's use of free indirect discourse only in passing, Laura Tanner provides an article-length investigation of these narrative shifts in her essay "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (1987). Like Gates, Tanner notes the linguistic disparity between Bigger and the narrator, but she argues that Wright deliberately juxtaposes the sophisticated voice of the narrator with Bigger's primitive diction in order to represent "their differing relationships to the master language" (146). Her argument ironically echoes Howard's analysis of *Maggie* – the very novel Wright had criticized for its dispassionate and ineffective narrative strategy. By juxtaposing the voices of, "unreasoning characters and a highly sophisticated narrator," Crane's novel "widens the

chasm between the ignorance and brutality of the slum dwellers and the literary sensibilities of the narrator and reader" (105). She continues that Crane's narrator "makes no direct statements, but within the strict constraints of ironic implication [the narrator] achieves a subtlety of meaning utterly beyond the reach of the characters, whose meager vocabulary [and] distorted syntax…mark them as…unaware, inarticulate characters…quite incapable of self-analysis" (105).

But unlike Crane's novel, which is written from a purely journalistic third-person perspective, Wright uses free indirect discourse in such a way that it is often difficult to parse out Bigger's thoughts from the narrators because there are minimal textual clues as to when the shift in consciousness has occurred. For example, in the crowded jail scene that occurs in the last section of the novel, Bigger's thoughts are commingled with the narrator's in such a way that it is difficult to tell the two apart. Moved by his mother's pitiful state, Bigger implores her not to worry, declaring "I'll be out of this in no time." (297). Bigger's assertion is met with disbelief by his visitors: "They were all staring at him in surprise. Buckley's lips were twisted in a faint smile. Jan and Max looked dismayed. Mrs. Dalton, white as the wall behind her, listened, open-mouthed. The preacher and Mr. Dalton were shaking their heads sadly" (297). Their incredulous responses indicate that Bigger is simply too dumb or too naïve to comprehend the gravity of his situation, a fact which even seems to garner him some sympathy. But his ridiculous declaration is followed by a piece of narration that is part interior monologue, part narrative commentary:

> He was ashamed of what he had done; he should have been honest with them. It had been a wild and foolish impulse that had made him try to appear strong and innocent before them. Maybe they would remember him only by those foolish words after they had killed him. His mother's eyes

> were sad and skeptical; but kind, patient, waiting for his answer. Yes; he had to wipe out that lie, not only so that they might know the truth, but to redeem himself in the eyes of those white faces behind his back along the white wall (297-98).

In this excerpt, it is difficult to tell when, or even if, a shift in consciousness has occurred; should these thoughts, which reveal a rather astute reflection, be accorded to Bigger, or the narrator, or both? Unlike Crane's *Maggie*, whose narrative strategy polarizes the characters and the narrator (and by extension the reader), Wright uses free indirect discourse to collapse this distance.

Gates and Tanner argue that this narrative assimilation doesn't actually occur because the disparity between Bigger's idiolect and the narrator's linguistic eloquence is never resolved. For example, after the somewhat sophisticated analysis in the passage above, Bigger ultimately mumbles "There ain't nothing, Ma. But I'm all right" (298). In other words, Gates and Tanner see Bigger's vernacular speech and general difficulty articulating himself as proof that he is intellectually incapable of such self-reflection. However, while the narrator's voice doesn't appear to be informed by Bigger's speech, that does not mean that it is not informed by Bigger's thoughts. In fact, this is precisely what Wright says, explaining that when he felt that when he felt he needed to say something that was beyond Bigger's verbal capabilities he would try do so "in the rhythms of Bigger's thought (even though the words would be mine)" (458). This type of free indirect discourse highlights the distinction between consciousness/intellect and its verbal articulation, and creates a mental space that is not conclusively or exclusively Bigger's or the narrator's. The resulting interiority effect enables Wright to represent thoughts and feelings in such a way that they appear to be emanating from the deepest, unverbalized reaches of Bigger's mind. Critics such as Dorrit Cohn, J. Hillis Miller,

Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short have recognized that the interiority effect of this narrative strategy is unique in being able to give the impression that it can at once represent and preserve the inner depths of a character's mind. As Cohn observes, in the free indirect narration of inner depth the blended "words" of the narrator and character appear to undergo a qualitative change and become the character's "thoughts" – even as the latter remains "suspended" on the "threshold of verbalization" (103). Leech and Short add that by giving the impression that mental content is suspended between word and thought, this form of free indirect narration is most realistic, because its illusory nature resembles the experience of inner thought, which in real life, is hardly ever fully verbalized (255-280). These free indirect renderings of inner depth suggest what Bakhtin once described as an "unrealized surplus of humanness" (36).

Although many of the critiques leveled at Wright revolve around questions of genre, some of the fundamental objections to his novel remain unresolved by interrogating his aesthetic interventions. For example, it remains to be seen why he chooses to write a novel about a black rapist and murderer, and whether or not in doing so he is merely perpetuating a racist fantasy. But if Wright's formal revisions suggest that he was attempting to intervene in specific methods of representation, then an investigation of stereotype actually seems fundamental to his project. In fact, a more attentive reading of the novel reveals that Wright's treatment of Bigger in the novel is just that, an *investigation* of stereotype, not merely a representation of it. For example, while Wright is certainly playing on the hysterically racist fantasy of the black man as nothing more than a predatory phallus, upon closer examination his portrayal of Bigger appears to be more a caricature than a realistic representation. Bordering on hyperbole,

Wright's exaggerated depiction of Bigger as an over-sexed, gratuitously violent brute, suggests the conventions of parody. This reframing of the novel alone would indicate that he intends his representation to signify a critique of the stereotype, and not an acceptance of its sociological truth. But Wright even goes a step further, as the actual events that take place in the novel undermine his own exaggerated portrayal of Bigger. Although he is obviously meant to evoke the racist fantasy of the black man as a rapist and murderer of innocent white women, Bigger never actually rapes Mary, nor does he actually murder her (because Bigger accidentally kills Mary, his actions are more appropriately deemed manslaughter than murder).[6] Because Wright stops short of having him actually rape and murder a white woman, Bigger is, quite literally, not a transparent representation of the racist stereotype that readers take him for. Of course readers often overlook (or dismiss) these facts because Wright deliberately obscures Bigger's innocence in the novel. For example, although Bigger doesn't actually rape Mary, the moments leading up to her death are saturated with sexual innuendo:

> He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined. He stood her on her feet and she swayed against him. He tightened his arms as his lips pressed tightly against hers and he felt her body moving strongly. The thought and conviction that Jan had had her a lot flashed through his mind. He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind. Her mouth was open and her breath came slow and deep (84).

The sexual tension in this scene suggests that, if not for the sudden appearance of Mrs. Dalton, Bigger might have raped Mary, or that he was planning to. Jonathan Elmer notes that Bigger's suffocation of Mary is also described as if it were a rape:

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[6] Although it varies from state to state, first degree murder is generally a killing that is deliberate and premeditated, second degree is deliberate killing in which premeditation is absent, and manslaughter which lacks premeditation and suggests that at most there was intent to harm rather than to kill. From: Black, Henry Campbell, and Bryan A. Garner. *Black's Law Dictionary*. St. Paul: West Group, 2001. Print.

> He grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's finger- nails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, deter- mined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him. His eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. Again Mary's body heaved (97-98).

By describing Mary's death, and the moments leading up to it in this way, Wright leaves readers with the sense that Bigger has committed rape, even though no rape has actually occurred. If this is not enough to divert readers from the fact that Mary's death is an accident, the horrific post-mortem dismemberment and incineration of her body probably overshadows any lingering doubts about Bigger's guilt.

Of course Bigger's innocence is most effectively obscured by one of the book's most troubling doubles: the actual rape and murder of Bessie that Bigger commits in Book Two. Wright describes the two scenes quite similarly, so that the violence Bigger inflicts on Bessie is a literal reenactment of the crime that he is assumed to have committed against Mary. In other words, Bessie's definite rape and murder stand in for the rape and murder of Mary that never occurred. But this conflation prioritizes Mary's victimization because it reduces Bessie to a piece of evidence, as if all that really matters here is Mary's death. Wright even dramatizes this during the trial when the malicious state's attorney Buckley parades Bessie's body through the courtroom as proof of Bigger's guilt. But even Bigger knows that Bessie's death, her disfigured body, doesn't really matter to observers: "Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely 'evidence.' And under it all he knew that the white people did not really care about Bessie's being killed" (331). Not only does Bigger's reflection point to the hazard

of allowing Bessie's victimization to stand in for Mary's (as readers often do), he also seems to understand more, to be more insightful about social dynamics here, than an unconscious brute should.

In tracing out the ambiguities and indeterminacies of the novel, what becomes clear is that *Native Son* is far more nuanced – stylistically, rhetorically, thematically – than many extant interpretations and criticisms acknowledge. Wright's aesthetic and tropological interventions position his novel more squarely in the African American tradition of signifyin(g), than Dreiser's narrow naturalism or Crane's hard-boiled realism. Nor does Wright's project fit unproblematically in the sociological mode that many critical approaches to the novel take for granted. As Fabre shrewdly remarks, far from proving that Wright's novel is artistically flawed, "his incursions into realms other than social realism proves only that there are elements in his writing which cannot be reduced to their [critics'] favorite image of him as a hard-boiled naturalist" (*World of RW* 56). I would go one step further to suggest that, as a signifyin(g) text, readers' and critics' most common objections to the novel actually point to the moments when Wright's critical commentary is most salient. Of course, as Gates explains, signifyin(g) exacts a hermeneutical demand, because even the most simple of images and language in the signifyin(g) mode, are actually quite rhetorically complex. This hermeneutical effect is why signifyin(g) functions as both a rhetorical system and as a theory of literary interpretation. As such, following Gates, many critics have adopted signifyin(g) as an effective interpretive lens with which to approach many African American texts, whose artistic sophistication had remained largely unrecognized under the critical languor of Eurocentric systems of evaluation.

But if signifyin(g) lends itself as an interpretive frame, its signal figure, Esu-Elegabra, god of indeterminacy, is a "metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text" (21). Esu's canonical tale "The Two Friends," epitomizes this aspect of interpretation. In the tale, two friends who have vowed eternal friendship together are working in adjacent fields when Esu suddenly appears wearing a cloth cap that is black on one side and white on the other side. Esu speaks to the friends who can each only see one half of the cap from their position. Afterwards, the two friends fall to arguing about the color of the hat, calling each other blind and crazy because each could only see one half of the hat and is sure that the other is wrong. Just as the quarrel reaches its peak, Esu appears and shows the friends that the cap was actually two-sided, that neither friend was correct and that neither friend was wrong. Esu's tale not only illustrates the indeterminacy of interpretation, it also reveals that meaning is at least partially determined by vantage point and the mode one employs to see. In this way, Esu resonates with contemporary literary theorists who have turned to the reader's role in determining meaning. For example, in *The Act of Reading* (1978), Wolfgang Iser delineates a theory of aesthetic response in which literary meaning is produced in the interaction between a text and its reader. According to Iser, interpretation is a dynamic process that occurs as a reader arrives at a meaning by simultaneously responding to the text's own promptings and creatively filling in textual gaps and ambiguities. Closed texts, that represent a perspective on reality without ambiguity or tension, he explains, have a didactic function and seek to generate a particular response from the reader. The role of the reader in a closed text is limited to determining what is being communicated and then responding positively or negatively to that message. By contrast, open texts contain gaps

and ambiguities such that meaning is generated through the interaction that occurs when a reader resolves those ambiguities.[7]

While Gates explains that signifyin(g) "clears a space" for the author or artist, Iser points out that that space, what he refers to as textual "blanks," also beg the reader's participation in generating meaning. In other words, as Esu's tale of the Two Friends demonstrated, Iser recognizes that meaning is mediated by both the text and its reader. Although the text itself determines meaning to some extent, resolving the blanks, he explains, is the activity of the reader, because a definitive answer is not supplied by the text. As a result, blanks increase the interpretative possibilities for any given text, whose meaning is dependent on how the reader resolves the textual blanks and ambiguities.[8] However, while there is a plurality of options for resolving ambiguities in a narrative text, the resolutions are neither limitless nor arbitrary. Instead, the reader's interpretation is guided by the text itself, which actually prompts the reader on how to interpret the text. In other words, like signifyin(g), open texts actually educate the reader on how they are supposed to be red. Iser posits the "implied reader" as a textual construction based on how the text itself is asking to be read. Therefore, the "implied reader" is a hypothetical, a model reader who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect -- predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted

[7] Iser references Umberto Eco for his distinction between open and closed texts. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington, IL: Indiana UP, 1979. 3-10.

[8] One of the strengths of Iser's theory is that he does not deny the role of the author in constructing a text, but positions the author, the reader and the text itself as actors in the interpretive process. He delineates the relationship between the reader, the author, and the text in this way: a text is the artistic work of an author while a literary work is the aesthetic effect of the reader's engagement with the text. Reading is an *act* which results in the building up of a text into a literary work.

in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader" (34).

As Esu's tale illustrates, and Iser's theory acknowledges, however, there is no model reader, who comes to the text as a blank state. Instead, actual readers come with convictions and beliefs that influence and, at times, distort their engagement with the textual structures. Iser describes the "actual reader" as one who "receives mental images while reading; but these images are, inevitably perhaps, modified by the experience and knowledge (and thus other images) which the reader brings to the text" (21). In this respect, readers often approach a piece of literature as a participant of the very system that the text is interrogating. Of course, scholars of African American culture and literature have long-recognized that this is the case and have deliberately positioned their own art and scholarship in order to counteract the cultural biases inherent in literary criticism. For example, Gates argues that it is imperative that we not only reassess literary texts themselves, but that we also analyze, "the language of contemporary criticism itself, recognizing that hermeneutic systems are not universal, color-blind, apolitical or neutral…" (*Loose Canons* 27). Again and again, contemporary scholars, all too aware of the political and cultural biases that mediate the evaluation of texts, have called not just for a reassessment of the canon but of the interpretive and aesthetic rubric of literary studies as well.

Considering these scholars' observations, readers' and critics' willingness to strip Bigger of his humanity should give us pause. Historically, race had been used not only to divide people from one another, but also to dehumanize certain races in the process. Of course, this dehumanization was often done through the very language of humanism, a

discourse which has historically functioned by eliding African Americans from consideration. If the idea of common humanity was seen as a justification for universal, egalitarian ethics, the idea of inhumanity was perpetually raised as a justification for hierarchical ethics, in particular for ethical hierarchies based on the notion of racial difference. Indeed, Gayatri Spivak identified the radical contradiction at the heart of the universal, emancipatory project of humanism when she pointed out that, "slave holders and proponents of Christianizing the natives, and so on," and those who have produced the discourse of universal humanity ironically coincide in the same historical subject. And it is precisely on the axis of humanism and subjectivity that the entire project of emancipation is most resilient, because, as she puts it,

> The great doctrines of identity of the ethical universal, in terms of which liberalism thought out its ethical programmes, played history false, because the identity was disengaged in terms of who was and who was not human. That's why all these projects, the justification of slavery, as well as the justification of Christianization, seemed to be allright: because, after all, these people had not graduated into humanhood, as it were (229).

In other words, accounts of universal humanity, and the ethical treatment that such humanity deserves, depended on and/or enabled the exclusion of certain people from the term, and thus from ethical treatment.

Even beyond emancipation, the question of universal humanity was striking in a twentieth-century America that claimed to offer equal rights to all people but insisted on legally dividing its citizens into races and denying particular people legal protection in the process. As Morrison puts it, "Living in a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer" (xiii). Maintaining this contradictory world view required denying the "overwhelmingly

undeniable" – the humanity of black people. Making black people full citizens and granting them equal rights meant nothing less than widening their concept of humanity. Of course, as Richard Yarbrough points out, this is why black artists were preoccupied with convincing white audiences that blacks "were not only human but fully endowed with the traits and abilities necessary for them to meet or surpass the standards used to adjudge acceptability into the white, bourgeois American mainstream" (111). Positioning their writing at the center of America's dynamic humanist discourse, many African American authors viewed literature as a way accessing, representing and fostering universal humanity. Recently, this has become known as "the cultural turn" in African American politics—an attempt to overturn racism not by "direct political action" but by "indirect cultural politics" (Warren 25-41). Explicit in the "cultural turn" was the idea that art and literature were equipped to demonstrate the hypocrisies of racial segregation, and thus to dismantle Jim Crow.

However, Wright accused these writers of "begging the question of Negroes' humanity" (123). Generally speaking, he argues, "Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people" (97). These writers, according to Wright, had limited to fighting their battles on the white audience's terms – by struggling to prove that black people were fully human, African American writers inadvertently accepted the premise that black humanity needed to be earned, that it was contingent at all. In other words, Wright refused to "beg the question of Negroes'

humanity," not because he rejected African American writers' investment in humanity, but because he believed they had failed to do their investment justice. For Wright, the question of black humanity was not the issue, instead, he was interested in documenting and interrogating the systems which lent credence to such arguments in the first place. Hence his interest in communism, naturalism, and the Chicago school of sociology, which he viewed as tools for analyzing the material conditions under which the dehumanization of black people was maintained.

Baldwin and Ellison, among others, faulted Wright for such a project because they believed that in his effort to represent inhuman conditions, Wright had represented his characters as less than human, inadvertently reinforcing prevailing stereotypes about black inhumanity. Wright's methodology amounted to a "pathologizing of blackness," they charged, and limited him to representing black people as dehumanized abstractions. But as Wright's writings make clear, his relationship to naturalism, sociology, and even communism were complicated at best. Wright certainly viewed those philosophies as useful starting points, but it seems unlikely, based on his own comments, that he believed that the fullness of black life, or the complexity of the race problem, could be accounted for by any single discipline or mode of representation. Wright says as much, not only in "Blueprint for Negro Literature," but also in the explanatory essays that he attached to some of his most widely read works. For example, in the preface to *Black Boy* Wright explains "The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead…they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back" (320). For Wright, "putting some of that

meaning back," was to account for the individual human life that underlies each abstraction.

Of course this is precisely how Wright describes his protagonist in *Native Son*: what makes Bigger's character so complex, Wright argues: he "was hovering unwanted between two worlds - between powerful America and his own stunted place in life" (451). In other words, Bigger is both a symbolic figure of American life and a discrete person. It was this "dual aspect" of Bigger's consciousness that Wright labored to present in his novel (451).. He explains that in constructing Bigger's character his task was twofold: "First, there was his personal and private life…that elusive core of being, that individual data of consciousness which in every man and woman is like that in no other… Then I was confronted with that part of him that was dual in aspect, dim, wavering, that part of him which is so much a part of *all* Negroes and *all* whites" (450). Wright sums up Bigger's character, asserting, "Bigger, as I saw and felt him, was a snarl of many realities; he had in him many levels of life" (450). Wright describes his project in the novel as nothing short of a humanist endeavor. Of his decision to construct Bigger he explains, "I felt that a right more immediately deeper than that of politics or race was at stake; that is, a *human* right, the right of a man to think and feel honestly. And especially did this personal and human right bear hard upon me, for temperamentally I am inclined to satisfy the claims of my own ideals rather than the expectations of others" (449). In other words, the very character that so many readers view as subhuman was actually written as an assertion of unqualified and universal humanity.

If Bigger's humanity in the novel seems more threatened than it should, perhaps this is because Wright portrays him as an individual who is continually being stripped of

his personhood and mortified into the crudest of symbols; his story is one of a discrete individual warring to free himself from the symbolic figure others believe him to be. Bigger is never seen by any of the characters in the novel as an individual, rather he is perceived by the Daltons, Jan, Britten, and Buckley as the member of a group that they already know everything about. Even Bigger's attorney Max, understands him as a social symbol, but imperfectly as a human being. Though Max is the sometime hero of the novel, his heroic status is ambiguous — ultimately Bigger rejects Max's determinist reading of the case and Max, unable to recognize Bigger as an individual stumbles blindly from the jail cell. Wright seems to point to the way in which pure environmental determinism fails to address the individual need to feel human. Likewise, Bigger does not see white people as individuals, rather, "to Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead," and his scenes with them are marked by obscuring images of snowfall, the white vapor of his breath, and the ghostlike white blur of Mrs. Dalton (114).

Furthermore, the two pivotal scenes of violence in the novel are precipitated by encounters in which characters are symbolically stripped of their individuality. For example, Bigger accidentally suffocates and then dismembers Mary because he believes that the only possible interpretation of his being in her room is rape. As Gallagher notes, "Over 300 years of conditioning tell Bigger the implications of his being found in the unconscious Mary's bedroom, and he acts in response to a racial prototype rather than to the specifics of the situation" (6). In other words, the violence that Bigger commits against Mary occurs because he knows that he will be *misread* as a stereotype. Wright dramatizes the violence of this symbolic encounter in very literal terms. As Mrs. Dalton

appears in the doorway Bigger's body "stiffens" in fear, causing him to accidentally suffocate Mary – in other words, he quite literally stiffens into a symbol. As Jonathan Elmer observes, "what Wright ruthlessly delivers here is the image of Bigger *becoming* the fantasmatic phallus of the white supremacist fantasy. The various associations clustering in Bigger's name now come into full force. Bigger becomes bigger than himself at this moment, an aggrandizement that is also, excruciatingly, the definitive reduction to stereotype" (780). Mary too, is victimized symbolically: her body is emptied of actual meaning and she registers only as the symbol of white womanhood that subtends the fantasy of the black man as rapist and murderer. Wright shows that in turning Bigger and Mary into symbols – Bigger as the stereotype of the black rapist and Mary as the symbol of white feminine purity – both are dehumanized.

If the white characters in the novel fail to recognize Bigger's humanity, he perpetuates this symbolic dehumanization against his girlfriend Bessie. Bigger never recognizes that his sexual interaction with her might be rape because he never really recognizes Bessie as a human being. Instead, while they are having sex, Bigger perceives her, "as a fallow field beneath him stretching out under a cloudy sky waiting for rain," as a "warm night see," a "fountain whose warm waters washed and cleaned his senses" (135). In their sexual interactions Bigger alone maintains his subjectivity while Bessie is stripped of personhood and reduced to a series of metaphors that grant him unlimited access to her body. Just moments before Bigger victimizes Bessie, he describes the act of rape in highly symbolic terms, reasoning, "rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out" (228). This metaphorical substitution is literalizes in the brutal rape and murder of Bessie.

In these scenes Wright depicts the kind of tension his representation of Bigger creates between his readers and his book. Readers who overlook the artistic and aesthetic sophistication of Wright's novel are inadvertently forced into the position of mirroring the characters – the readers, like the characters within the novel, cease to regard Bigger as an individual. Reading Bigger as a symbol by divesting him of his individuality is a replication of the violence that is perpetuated throughout the novel. Furthermore, the judgment that Bigger is subhuman also duplicates the inability of characters within the novel to recognize Bigger's humanity. Wright manipulates a racist stereotype in his novel to confront readers with the inadequacy of their own culturally conditioned gaze.

Unfortunately, a review of scholarship and criticism written about Wright's novel over the fifty years since its publication suggests that, despite his most vigorous efforts, readers persist in "begging the question of Negroes' humanity." A brief survey of the most recent articles written about the novel reveals that, as my classmates had done, readers persist, in stripping Bigger of his personhood. In doing so, readers are participating (though perhaps unconsciously) in a cultural system which has naturalized the calculation of black humanity. A sophisticated metaphorical substitution of Bigger's humanity is ultimately just another instrumentalization of black humanity. One might counter that Bigger, as a character in a novel, is merely a linguistic construction and not really a person anyway, or what EM Forster referred to as "a construction within a construction." For example, Georges Poulet and J. Hillis Miller have recently argued that because a novels are a textual medium, nobody can be said to exist outside of the words written down by the verbal mind of the novel's narrator. While this is certainly true, one of the crucial mimetic conventions of reading narrative is that literature can and does

refer to a "reality" beyond the confines of the book. This is especially the case with realist or naturalist inflected texts which share the assumption that narrative can accomplish work in the "real world." In a study on mimesis and representation, Kendall Walton argues that readers display an almost existential need to treat the contents of a fictional narrative as constitutive of a reality that, at least for the duration of reading the narrative, is almost as real as any non-fictional world. In other words, a reader's credulity can make any story of any human figure seem real, at least for the duration of the reading experience.

Purely symbolic readings Wright's novel perpetuate the fungibility of black humanity. Symbolically removing Bigger from human consideration is to relegate him to a moral and psychological no-man's land. For example, in the May 1940 issue of "New International," CLR James published a review of *Native Son* in which he forwards a purely allegorical reading of the novel. Declaring that, "Bigger Thomas is a symbol and prototype of the Negro masses in the proletarian revolution," James describes Bigger's accidental murder of Mary as a "striking blow…against his hated enemies," and Bigger's grisly murder of the innocent Bessie is deemed "subordinate to his great purpose, to fight against these tyrants and torturers" (92-93) In James's allegorical reading of the novel, Bigger's horrific violence is subsumed to the symbolic import of his struggle, rendering the gruesome deaths of two innocent women mere collateral damage. Such a reading allows for unconscionable substitutions and metaphorizations, scrambles agents and victims, and generally destroys the most basic ethical landmarks.

To engage with a work's humanistic meanings may actually require some empathy with the moral, ethical, or political themes to be admitted as evident in the work

under critical examination. Of course, perceiving a character as a real human being is at least partly determined by readers' conventions for determining what counts as a human being in the first place, whether the features of the character are perceived as resembling those of a human being. Responding to a racially insensitive review of the novel, Wright declared: "If there had been one person in the Dalton household who viewed Bigger Thomas as a human being, the crime would have been solved in half an hour. Did not Bigger himself know that it was the denial of his personality that enabled him to escape detection so long? The one piece of incriminating evidence which would have solved the 'murder mystery' was Bigger's humanity, and the Daltons, Britten, and the newspaper men could not see or admit the living clue of Bigger's humanity under their very eyes!" (*Bite* 828). To disregard Bigger's humanity is to overlook the central message of Wright's project: the imperative of recognizing others' humanity and individuality in a system that universalizes and dehumanizes.

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