The Loss of the Referent: Identity and Fragmentation in Richard Wright's

Fiction

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, hero and lifetime friend, Ghalia. To you I say: this newborn would not be alive and kicking had not it been for you.

I also dedicate this thesis to my children: Awab, Hanif and Ela. To you I say: it all became possible because of your love which has no place in words, being the blood that keeps my heart beating.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores forms of fragmentation that characterize black male subjectivity in Richard Wright's fiction and considers their relationship to the demise of the social anchors and referents which are supposed to allow black men to develop as coherent and whole. It argues that the physical and psychic disfigurement and political and social marginality to which these men are consigned are a direct result of a humanist worldview imposed on them by the two main entities that define them as marginal, namely, white society and black community.

To address this relationship, the thesis deploys a poststructuralist approach to question the two societies' humanist grounding of subjectivity in terms of its conformity to the social whole and its attendant stress on homogeneity and sameness. Wary of this humanist and Enlightenment positioning of the subject as a conscious and thinking individual who is at home with the social totality, the thesis illustrates that the experience of splitting and disjuncture undergone by black men is a corollary of societal modes of subjection that disavow difference and heterogeneity. Probing black male identity from this perspective reveals as much about its decentered nature as it does about the two societies' humanist view of identity as a closure determined by the ostensibly stable categories of race and community.

The formation of black male identity as fractured thus helps map out the instability and anxiety at the heart of collective identities, showing that both white and black societies deny black manhood in the name of preserving their own racial fixity and cultural purity. It exposes the mythical and ideological character of the two societies' humanist pretentions of safeguarding the values of freedom, equality and the right to agency and shows how such high moral values are politically mobilized in order to

maintain racially-sanctioned forms of identity and banish black men as different and inferior.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary object of inquiry of this thesis is the fragmentary nature of black subjectivity in Richard Wright's fiction. Focusing solely on black male identity, it argues that the fragmentation of black identity is determined by the loss of the traditional referents that are supposed to provide black men with the necessary social anchors to develop as whole and unitary individuals. These referents, which consist of white culture and black males' own popular culture, relegate black masculinity to the margins of social and political experience and lock it away from agency and manhood. Stripped of the social and cultural frame of reference that enables them to entertain a healthy relationship with their environment and pushed to the fringes of both public and private life, black men in Wright's fiction thus experience an identity crisis that goes beyond mere alienation to self-negation and effacement.

Deploying post-Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on the relationship between the eclipse of the autonomous subject and the demise of totalizing systems of reference, the thesis explores how white and black cultures constitute two hegemonic sites that foreclose recognition of difference, fixing and arresting black masculinity by their humanist modes of identification that privilege the nationalistic desire for purity and harmony over difference and hybridity. It argues that this arrest of the black male subject as different and unassimilable affects its ability to develop as whole and obstructs its desire to be at one with its social environment or negotiate its place therein. The hegemonic formation of black men also deepens their psychic disorientation, denying them speech and the possibility of ordering their personal or social experience in a meaningful way. By tracing the dispersal of black masculinity to the loss of social and cultural referents, this thesis does not aim to restore or unearth some deeply buried essence or principle that would offer black men the prospect of making up for this loss,

namely the possibility of becoming unitary subjects fully at home with the social realities of their environment. Rather, it seeks to explore the mechanisms, rules and procedures that both cultures deploy to produce black male subjects as inferior outcasts or disenfranchised misfits.

In this light, Wright's fiction represents an attempt to expose both white and black cultures as discursively constructed narratives of racial purity and specificity that thrive on the denigration and rejection of black male subjects. In the case of white culture, Wright explores and scrutinizes the validity of its truth claims against its conception of its black Others, underscoring the gap between its humanistic discourses of rationality, order, civilization, freedom and justice and the grim realities of oppression and deprivation in which it locks the black population. The aim of this debunking goes beyond the task of unveiling the discrepancy between the discourses of white culture and its practices when it comes to black people or even bringing to light its unavowed ambivalences towards them as racial others. It goes further than that to attacking the very theoretical and epistemological premises of whiteness as a form of identification that rests on a positivist and essentialist view of the self and the Other. Wright envisages black masculinity as an identity in crisis primarily because it does not fit the humanistic parameters of knowledge and power which sustain white modes of identification in terms of racial solidarity and cultural typicality. His fiction portrays how black male decenteredness is the site where the certainties of white culture and its underlying Enlightenment premises are contested and challenged. Its mining of fissured black masculinity is intended to show that whiteness cannot stand the test of difference which reveals how its truths and epistemological assumptions are not given or natural but discursive and constructed. This mutual process of identification, where the rupture and disfigurement of the black subject becomes the site where white culture's difference-

making values and epistemes are explored, is clearly delineated by Abdul JanMohamed, who argues that Wright's main intellectual preoccupation is to understand his own formation as a black subject by both white and black cultures. Seeing Wright as occupying a borderline position, he says:

> All groups define their identities through some form of binary opposition to other groups [and] the very process of *suturing* the (relative) 'homogeneity' that is crucial to the definition of that group's 'identity' … also simultaneously constitutes the process of rupturing various subjects on its borders: the border subject becomes the site on and through which a group defines its identity. That is, the body and consciousness of the subject caught between two groups are cleaved by those groups, and hence the ruptured body of that subject becomes the text on which the structure of the identity of the groups is written in inverted form. ('Richard' 231-32)

Wright's main methodology rests on a double act of deconstruction: first, he challenges white culture's representation of the black male as inferior, showing that its universal moral values are untenable and are complicit in the construction of the black Other. Secondly, he shows that this discursive character of subjectivity works both ways and that white identity is as much an invention as its black counterpart. For white culture's process of framing the black male as a surrogate Other also involves another elaborate process of discursive invention where the self is purged of all its uncertainties and anxieties and presented as conscious, stable and central. Wright puts this two-fold process of subject invention at the center not only of race relations in America but also at the very genesis of the history of the nation. As he observes:

> The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small. It is the history of

men who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were leveled against them. The Negro is America's metaphor. (qtd. in Weiss 116)

What is remarkable about this typical Wrightian contention is that it removes understanding of the subject from ontology and inscribes it into history and narrative, foregrounding its mythical formation and the need to view it as a discursive construct. The aim of this turning away from Being to representation is to extricate the subject from the certainty of cultural humanism and to open it to interpretation and reading and to the play of the signifier so that identity, black and white, is seen to be the effect of discourse. For Wright does not only situate the conception of racial identity in American history and social practices and customs alone but also projects it as a metaphor, a signifier that dislodges both white and black identities from essentialist definitions of reality and places them in the history of racial struggle over meaning and power. In another context, he challenges white identity on the grounds that, like the Negro, it is an "image" and a product of cultural inventions. He articulates how African-Asian leaders in the postcolonial era see whiteness:

> The 'white man' is a distinct image in Asian-African minds. This image has nothing to do with biology, for, from a biological point of view, what a 'white man' is is not interesting. Scientifically speaking the leaders of Asia and Africa know that there is no such a thing as race. It is, therefore, only from a historical or sociological point of view that the image of 'white man' means anything. (*Black* 667)

Removed from the transparent certainty of mimetic humanism to the play of representation, racial identity ceases referring to an unchangeable and stable essence that can be traced to a cultural and historical origin. It becomes instead inscribed in the play

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of difference across various subject-positions that can no longer be subsumed into a whole. This is clear in using the Negro as a metaphor in order to tear apart national identity by pointing to the different histories and subject-positions that form it. Instead of a single white narrative that defines national American identity, the introduction of the metaphor as constitutive of identity opens the way for the articulation of difference in the form of blacks' history as a subordinated people. It displaces national identity from its claims to an essence defined in relation to cultural and racial origin and center and reveals it to be the site of competing and conflicting histories, each of which is defined in terms of power struggles instead of truth claims. This disruption of the coherence of the subject is also made clear in insisting on seeing the "white man" as an "image," a conception entertained by those who were victims of the Western colonial enterprise. As a construction, the white image accrues meaning and significance not so much from any biological difference but from the social and historical stories that relate it to the histories of the ex-colonized people.

By focusing on the indeterminacy of such categories as nationalism and race, Wright disrupts them as overarching narratives of belonging that secure the stability of the subject and tie it to a collective origin. He breaks the closure of these totalities by opening them to the play of discourse, showing that as constructs they present fragmentation more than homogeneity and are split between different interpretations. Stuart Hall captures this sense of history as a narrative which does not guarantee consciousness for central subjects but is constantly revisited and reinterpreted as discourse when he writes: "The past is not waiting for us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact" (58). Such a conception of history troubles any notion of white identity that is

safely anchored in a meaningful genealogy referring back to a stable cultural and common origin. In showcasing the gaps in white historiography, Wright's idea of identity as "metaphor" or "image" upsets the monolithic representation of history and its exclusion of difference.

Wright's fiction also dramatizes the tensions and ruptures that form black male subjects' relation to black culture and community. It pictures a black masculinity as much at odds with black people as it is with white society, where black characters are doubly displaced from the prospect of being at home within either of the two spheres. Even though expressions of the psychological malaise that drive black subjects apart from both communities are different and conflictual, Wright negotiates the fragmentation of black masculinity on the same grounds with regard to both communities, focusing on their Enlightenment-based conception of identity as a centered selfhood contiguous with social and cultural totality. Whether victims of white society's brutal violence and racism or of the black community's subservience and powerlessness, black subjects are positioned on the borderline of both cultures, disillusioned and estranged by their closed modes of identification. Wright articulates this in-between subject-position in terms of his and his characters' inability to fit into either white or black cultures. Describing the fissures and tensions that grip the main character of his debut novel, Bigger Thomas, in relation to the two poles of his identity as an African American, Wright says:

> Bigger was attracted and repelled by the American scene. He was an American, because he was a native son; but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp. (*Native Son* xxiv)

Cast in the homely geographical and emotional terms of "reside" and "camp," this in-betweenness reflects the black subject's rootlessness and displacement from both

white and black cultures as sites of social belonging. Wright's characters occupy a liminal space between white and black cultures which attests on the one hand to their ambivalence toward fixed and definitive identity predicated on the sameness of community and race and, on the other, to their inability to "reside" and find home in either community. These characters are cast aside by the dominant white culture's oppressive political apparatus and its supremacist values in the same way that they are sidelined by the black community's pseudo-nationalist privileging of collective experience over individual idiosyncrasy and independence.

The impossibility to "reside" indicates an abiding and fundamental lack or loss that Wright's fiction keeps returning to in its mining of the various layers that constitute black masculinity. This is the loss of home as a cultural and racial origin that black male subjects can return to in order to assuage the debilitating and crippling effects of white oppression and in order to be at one with their black community. Instead of a romantic return to black culture as the site of belonging, identity and home, these characters' psychic estrangement from their families and community underlines the fragmentary nature of black racial experience and the unavailability of a recoverable home based on cultural purity and racial solidarity. Home in this context is shown to be an imagined origin that does not stand the test of the flow of historical and political forces that contaminate it and that reveal the extent to which black people are formed by the experience of racism and political exclusion. In Wright's fiction, home is situated within the various social and historical discourses that constitute it, showing that blackness as spiritual home for black males is a product and not an essence that resists romanticization outside politics and the perils of black history. Angelika Bammer captures this idea of home as fragmented experience which is opposed to home as a stable site defined by the

boundaries of family, race or even nation. She stresses the unstable nature of home as a shifting construct that cannot be pinned down to any traditional structure or totality:

> This instability is manifesting itself on a staggering, some believe, unprecedented scale both globally and locally. On all levels and in all places, it seems, 'home' in the traditional sense (whether taken to mean 'family,' or 'community,' or 'homeland'/'nation') is either disintegrating or being radically defined. (viii).

To counter the stability of traditional notions of home, whether the term refers to family, race or nation, Wright develops the concept of "No Man's Land," which depicts identification with home not so much in the ontological terms of origin and referent but places it in discourse. This concept with its focus on displacement and uprootedness introduces tensions in the black males' identification with black culture and race as home, foregrounding their conflictual relationship to an idea of home defined by the boundaries of family, community and race. Homeless, black masculinity displays an ambiguity of belonging that renders any easy and straightforward identification with racial origin untenable. Calling it nativism, Kwame Anthony Appiah discards the politics of cultural and racial specificity as an offshoot of Western hegemonic discourse and calls for "transcend[ing] the banalities of nativism–its images of purgation, its declarations … its facile topologies" (71-72). Wright articulates his black male subjects' disaffection with their black community in terms of lack of place and denial of home. Describing how Bigger inhabits a No Man's Land of utter uprootedness, he qualifies the predicament of his renegade black character as one of placelessness in relation to both white and black communities: "he [Bigger] was hovering unwanted between two worlds–between powerful America and his own stunted place in life–and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man's Land" (*Native Son* xxiv).

In Wright's figuration of black masculinity, the metaphor of the "No Man's Land" describes the tension and repudiation that mark black males' relation to community and that render a transparent sense of belonging and affiliation impossible. "Unwanted," these black characters' placelessness vis-à-vis their community makes it impossible for them to embrace or recover a meaningful relationship with their black culture as home or origin. By foregrounding fragmentation and disjuncture, the No Man's Land reveals how much black community is an imagined homeland that is formed by discourse and representation and that offers no essentialist, certain and stable identity which black males can cultivate in order to be integrated in the racial collectivity.

The No Man's Land also signifies a third space of in-betweenness and hybridity. Positioned on the border between two social systems, black characters develop hybrid strategies to intervene in the closed racial structures of both black and white communities and achieve agency. Instead of appealing to the values of community, purity and identity to claim their place in these societies, they mobilize strategies which ensue from their fragmentary and hybrid position to challenge and contest the two systems politically and epistemologically. The "No Man's Land" trope also functions as a hybrid and contaminated perspective that disrupts binary racial thinking, with its reliance on the values of sameness and racial typicality and specificity. Hybridity, as Arif Dirlik puts it, "is in a fundamental sense a rebellion of those who are culturally dispossessed, or feel culturally dispossessed, who not only assert hybridity as an autonomous source of identity but go further to challenge the cultural claims of the centers of power" (104). Cultivating their hybrid and border position, black male subjects interrogate the totalizing perspectives of racial identities, white and black, and complicate worldviews of belonging that are predicated on the binary terms of self and Other and us versus them. They turn away from alternatives of either integrating or opposing the racial totality and

deploy hybrid tactics to show how culture is fictionalized and home romanticized to maintain and exclude difference. JanMohamed points to Wright's development of this critical perspective starting from his position as an intellectual situated on the borderline:

> I would argue that homelessness almost always subtends Wright's fiction … [His] own life also is characterized by a series of flights from potential 'homes.' The homelessness that characterizes the man and his entire literary production is central to my attempt to define him as a border intellectual, as an intellectual who is always capable of turning his own border condition into an analytic opportunity. ('Richard' 233)

The subject-position of the border empowers Wright's black male characters to overcome their conditions of powerlessness and dispossession and also to redefine and unseat the Enlightenment worldview about culture and identity. As a hybrid location, the border is the place where black male subjects resist and challenge Enlightenment perceptions and their privileging of an essentialist form of subjectivity at home with the closure of racial particularity and ethnic absolutism. It enables them to showcase what Paul Gilroy claims to be one of Wright's

> favourite themes, namely that differences between the groups we know as races are associated with the repression of differences within those races. Literary and other cultural forms thus provide him with a chance to comprehend how a race may differ from itself. Notions of typicality and racial representativeness in aesthetic and political judgment are rejected because they arrest the play of these differences. (153)

Wright's fiction is governed by a dual structure. First, it investigates how the political exclusion and cultural misrepresentation of black masculinity is effected and sustained by a humanist conception of identity and culture as loci of homogeneity and

sameness. Secondly, it celebrates the fragmentary status of black male identity and uses it as a site to probe and reveal how such a humanist worldview is untenable, displaying the ways in which both identity and culture are characterized by fragmentation, heterogeneity and difference.

To discuss and analyze forms of subjective fragmentation among black male characters in Wright's fiction, this thesis draws on current theories which place the question of decentered subjectivity at the heart of their intellectual preoccupations, especially poststructuralism and postmodernism. Both theories provide a framework for exploring the two main arguments of this thesis, which are the disruption or the loss of the referentiality of culture and race and their concomitant splitting and fissuring of the subject. In order to problematize the humanist view of culture and race as referents which guarantee meaning and experience for subjects to develop and gain consciousness, this thesis brings Wright's fiction into dialogue with most of the leading figures and proponents of poststructuralism, notably the members of the French *Tel Quel* group. The significance of the work of this group is that it aims to dismantle the assumptions of the Enlightenment and their emphasis on experience as a locus of meaning and the human subject as the generator of consciousness and knowledge. Each in his or her own way (thinkers including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes), seeks to counter Enlightenment faith in the possibility of knowledge and consciousness by shifting the field of philosophical inquiry from Being to language, putting into question the very existence of meaning or truth outside discourse and the system of language. This important break from a metaphysics of presence, which starts from the assumption that truth and knowledge are there in the world waiting for thinking human subjects to grasp them, is effected through the introduction of language not as a transparent and neutral conduit of knowledge and experience but as the site where truth

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and cognition are questioned and interrogated. In his discussion of narrative, Barthes makes the case for language not only as the sole force that should be reckoned with in the reading of texts but also as a discourse which makes the humanist view of correspondence between the word and the world problematic. He states that "What goes on in a narrative is, from the referential (real) point of view, strictly *nothing*. What does 'happen' is language per se, the adventures of language, whose advent never ceases to be celebrated" (271). This statement, which doubts the mimetic relation of the text to reality, informs the works of these poststructuralist thinkers and shapes their bid to dislodge the human subject from its status as an originator of meaning. By creating a chasm between the word and the world, these thinkers unseat the long-held central belief that knowledge and consciousness correspond to and imitate being and experience. The transformative effect of this break is that culture and history cease to be referents that endow individuals with meaning, identity and orientation, with language being instead the new referent that does not beckon to anything beyond it.

Return to language in this light deals a number of blows to the Enlightenment view of cognition and subjectivity. First, it eclipses the theory of mimesis which holds that there is an available and graspable reality outside in the world that precedes language and our will to communicate it in words. Secondly, it removes the referent and reorients the quest for meaning away from the world and towards language, which corresponds primarily to itself. Thirdly, with this breakup of the chain of signification, subjects lose touch with objective reality as a stable and meaningful referent which ensures their ability to understand and orient themselves in the world. Speaking about the loss of the "historical past" as referent, Phillip Brian Harper asserts that postmodernism is marked by the fact that "the referential qualities of language are eclipsed by its status as a collection of 'pure material Signifiers' that indicate no deeper 'reality.' The failure of

history and language to function any longer as referential phenomena signals the inability of the human subject to orient itself in relation to the objective world" (8). The linguistic loss of referentiality heralds not only a postmodern loss of historical certainties that enable human individuals to relate to culture and achieve identity but also triggers an implosion of the transcendental human subject itself. When words no longer refer to things and language ceases to point to experience, the nature of human subjectivity becomes problematic and dispersed. In her discussion of the way postmodern texts challenge the humanist view of fiction's relation to reality, Linda Hutcheon affirms that these texts "do disturb humanist certainties about the nature of the self and of the role of consciousness and Cartesian reason (or positivistic science), but they do so by inscribing that subjectivity and only then contesting it" (19).

Michel Foucault also undertakes to banish the idea of the subject by attacking the humanist tradition which constitutes and maintains it. He outlines an understanding of humanism centered around the subject when he says:

> By humanism I mean the totality of discourse through which Western man is told: 'even though you don't exercise power, you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty … The theory of the subject … is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us. ('Revolutionary' 221-22)

This statement details the triad that determines the horizon of Foucault's work as a series of methodological attempts to unseat the subject from its status in the humanist tradition as meaning-bestowing sovereign. The three poles of this project are knowledge (archaeology), power (genealogy) and subjectivity which he adamantly refines and develops to interrogate humanism and its emphasis on consciousness and experience.

Foucault, in this passage, as everywhere in his work, introduces discourse which rests on the power-knowledge couplet in order to do away with the subject and its ability to originate meaning. And again, an important merit of discourse is that it shifts attention away from Being and the real as sites where meaning has to be sought and explored and focuses it on language, to trace and analyze the ubiquitous presence of the will to truth and power. In this light, it is no surprise that Foucault collocates the first emergence of the constituting subject with Plato's epistemology of truth. Charting the different histories of the subject, Foucault defines several developments which saw different forms of subjectivity but none of them was similar to Plato's metaphysics of the subject. The specificity of Plato is that he ties the subject to epistemology and the will to truth and self-understanding, setting in motion the power-knowledge nexus where Man has to embrace the desire to understand and know the truth in order to achieve self-mastery (Flynn 535). Whether called self-mastery and desire to truth, or power and knowledge or government and problematization, these labels form the two poles of discourse that Foucault deploys to show how the humanist subject is constituted.

The two other members of the French poststructuralist group, Kristeva and Derrida, put the subject at the center of their attempts to deconstruct the Enlightenment project and its penchant for absolute truth and universal values. Informed by psychoanalysis, Kristeva's work differs from that of the other thinkers in that she does not seek to banish the subject altogether but tries to show that it is marked by dispersal and splitting. To undo the humanist view of the coherent and singular subject, Kristeva plots her conception of subjectivity along the lines of the child's development, calling the transcendental ego thetic or symbolic and the other side of subjectivity that is beyond rationality and located more in the unconscious the semiotic or the *chora*. Allon White says that "Kristeva's first object of attack is the thetic tradition of a single, unified subject,

embodied in philosophy, linguistics and also in those types of literature centered on mimetic and narrative representation" (67). To challenge the thetic, which also stands for the period in which the child acquires culture and language, Kristeva returns to and allows the eruption into the rationality of linguistic syntax the prelinguistic sensory movements of the body which do not abide by the boundaries and limits set by reason so that language can order reality. Derrida, on the other hand, complicates the idea of the subject by attacking what he calls Western logocentrism and declaring the end of philosophy. He mounts a radical critique of the metaphysics of presence, which is one of a series of terms that he puts together to complicate the truth-driven and positivist nature of Western philosophy. This challenge is carried out, like that made by other poststructuralist thinkers, on the level of language. It consists of accusing traditional metaphysics of foregrounding speech and sidelining writing, crediting the first with presence and meaning and downplaying the second as an unnecessary metarepresentation which distorts the transparency and certainty of the spoken word. Coining a new lexicon, the main thrust of Derrida's deconstruction is to restore writing to its rightful place as the difference and supplement, as he calls it, that revises and reverses the presence of meaning as an ontology on the ground of which culture and history legitimize themselves as referents.

This thesis relies on the work of these thinkers to elaborate a theoretical approach to the overlapping and interdependent relations between the fracture of black male identity and the cognitive, truth-dependent and institutional strategies that both white and black communities put in place to preserve their unity and homogeneity. While it draws extensively on some of them and assumes the theoretical import of the work of others, the thesis shares their main goal of destabilizing the positivist and essentialist assumptions that allow culture and race to claim sameness, purity and origin as the

defining character of identity; and in so doing it shows that both engage in discursive strategies to suppress and disavow difference. Another aim of this deconstructive measure is to show that in spite of their truth claims, both of these collective structures of identification invent the self and the Other in order to camouflage and cover up the fissures, ambivalences and anxieties that are at the roots of human identity.

In addition to these post-humanist theories, the thesis taps into two other important bodies of criticism. These are the two traditions of postcolonial and African American critical theory, which are important for this study because of their emphasis on the political and ideological structures that govern the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed and self and the Other. Even though these two theoretical undertakings build on and invest in Western methods and theories like postmodernism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis among others, they never lose sight of the dynamics of power and questions of resistance at play in the plethora of discursive practices that govern relations between these two poles of what JanMohamed calls the racial "Manichean Allegory" ('The Economy' 63). This thesis in this regard engages in an exchange with the leading proponents of these two fields, making use of the strongly analogous nature of racial relations between blacks and whites in the American context and those binding the colonizer and the colonized. It draws on Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism and the challenge he mounts to Western thought in terms of its supremacist constructions of the Orient as an inferior Other, used, crucially, to justify the march of empire on the periphery and morally and politically to legitimize the colonial enterprise. It also benefits from Toni Morrison's work on what she calls the "Africanist presence" which argues in theoretical terms similar to Said's that America develops as a nation by virtue of inventing blackness and creating blacks as a surrogate self. Another leading theorist is Homi K. Bhabha, whose work on identity, inspired as it

is by deconstruction and psychoanalysis, shapes most of my arguments on the construction of black and white identities as anxious, unstable and ambivalent.

Together with these seminal figures, this study is to a large extent informed by the wealth of critical work produced on Wright within the context of what is commonly called Black Studies. I benefit a lot from the works of writers like JanMohamed and Mikko Tuhkanen, among others, to frame my main theoretical arguments in relation to the textual analysis and reading of Wright's fiction. In the same way, I draw on other writers whose works deal with the general issue of the black question in America– Orlando Patterson, Trudier Harris, bell hooks and Sharon Patricia Holland, along with many others. The work of these different thinkers defines the critical horizon of this study. As it focuses mainly on Wright's fiction before exile, the study benefits immensely from this body of critical work in its treatment of the overarching questions that shape Wright's fiction and which include those of violence, lynching, placelessness, the moral and political denigration of black people by the dominant white hegemony and the fractured and hybrid nature of identity at large.

Ultimately, the significance of this thesis is that it fills an important void in the critical reception of Richard Wright in general and in the outburst of critical thought triggered by the fictional work he produced before he left America to live as an expatriate in France in 1946. Most of the critical attention to Wright's work, both inside the United States and outside, dwells largely on traditional ideological and political concerns to do with racial consciousness, racial and class-oppression and the injustices that have marked race relations in America. Adopting a mainly humanist approach to Wright's work, these critics (including Yoshinobu Hakutani, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Ralph Waldo Ellison and James Baldwin) saw in him the voice of a long oppressed people and a nationalist figure

who can speak for his group and create a collective racial consciousness about the problems that plague them.

The few critics who deviate from this line of thought are those who deploy post-humanist thought to complicate Wright's relation both to his black community and wider American culture. This second category of critics, though, deals with the question of identity in his work only tangentially as part of their interest in broader themes like Wright's late attraction to existentialism or his adamant emphasis on secularism over tradition or the like (Paul Gilroy and Michel Fabre). This study fills this critical gap in two ways: first, by using post-humanist thought to address the question of identity, exploring the fragmentary nature of subjectivity in Wright's fiction and his resistance to totalizing views of culture and society which are sustained by the coherent, stable and conscious subject. Secondly, it applies this post-humanist thought to the fiction that he produced in the United States and which is generally viewed as directly political and less self-consciously epistemological.

The thesis is divided up into four chapters which map out in detail the ways in which both white and black cultures, as totalizing systems, produce fragmented black male subjectivity. The purpose of Chapter One is to treat white identity as a discourse in order to contest its humanist and mimetic pretensions to being homogeneous and pure and to put into question its Enlightenment claims to high moral standing, rationality and universal values. Focusing on ideas of white and black embodiment, this chapter reveals the extent to which whiteness as a hegemonic discourse thrives on discursive practices which invent both the Self and the Other. The chapter shows that whiteness is a discourse that invents white identity by foregrounding its disembodiment, underscoring its spiritual and intellectual formation while denying that it is raced or has any physical visibility. It

also deploys the same discursive strategies to racialize and invent the black Other, reducing it this time around to overembodiment and hypervisibilty.

Chapter Two investigates relations between power and knowledge and discourse and institutions in the construction and production of black male subjectivity as a marginal and subordinate identity. It presents an account of the regimes of truth deployed by whiteness simultaneously to denigrate, control and keep the black male subject in its place of inferiority. Another aspect of this process of Othering also has to do with the privileges of whiteness, both in political terms and in those of representation. The study of whiteness's invention of blackness as morally inferior and subsequently unfit for citizenship and the rights and privileges that come along with it is also a study of whiteness's bid discursively to legitimize its supremacy and secure the prerogatives that ensue from such a status. This chapter conducts a dual and reciprocal examination of both the racialization of black masculinity by white culture and the way this very culture invents itself and its values to maintain and sustain the Manichean order of inferior blacks and superior whites. For in inventing blackness as absolute difference, whiteness proves that its truth claims about the Self and the Other are based on stereotypical knowledge and the desire for power.

Chapter Three presents perspectives that further elaborate this critical contestation of the humanist world of identity which rests on the constituting and conscious subject's straightforward and unambiguous relation to a unified and pure racial self. It does this by shifting the focus from white hegemony to the complex relation between black masculinity and black community, arguing that black folk culture is just another hegemonic site where black male identity is denied and displaced. Contending that the black community has long been subjected to white hegemony to the point of being completely dominated by it, this chapter explores the different ways in which

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Wright's fiction mines the black community's subordination to white culture to interrogate and complicate traditional views of the identity of individuals as being at home with their community and culture.

Chapter Four, drawing on scholarly work on hybridity and mimicry as well as on African American forms of fragmentation like Blackface, trickster and Signifying Monkey, provides an account of strategies of resistance and agency articulated by black male subjects in Wright's fiction. The main contention developed by this chapter is that black male subjects intervene in the dominant white and black closed orders and achieve mobility not so much through adversarial politics, where they opt for an alternative vision and an outside position to gain voice and perspective, since such a course of action will only lead to a repetition of the same totalizing structures of subjection which persecute them. What these characters instead do is develop strategies based on the tropes of hybridity, blackface and mimicry to negotiate their place from within the social totality. Because any outside position will only reproduce the same parameters of knowledge and structures of power of the humanist worldview of both white and black cultures, these characters inhabit a borderland which empowers them to enter into play with the social and cultural totality in place and to contest it from within.

With its focus on fragmentation as the defining character of Wright's male subjectivity, this thesis takes issue with the humanist worldview that sees the psychological and social malaise of black men as a symptom of their alienation from society. It argues that rather than being an expression of their inability to adapt to their social environment, these black men are subjected to hegemonic practices by both white and black societies which produce them as split and fractured subjects. This process of production also shows that the societies' claim to provide cultural and moral referents for subjects to develop as conscious and unitary individuals is untenable, because their

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moral networks are complicitous with the strategies of subjection which they imposes on these subjects. By the end of this thesis, it is hoped that the reader will have come to a fuller understanding of the ways in which Wright deploys black male fragmentation as a site that complicates collective forms of identity, revealing how black and white societies maintain their collective identities as homogeneous groups by suppressing difference and heterogeneity.

CHAPTER ONE

WHITENESS AS A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

The Matter of Bodies: Whiteness as an Anxious Identity

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.

(Fanon, *Black* 113)

The above scene depicts a typical colonial situation which features the use of the white gaze to freeze and arrest the black body in order to produce it as an object of fear and fantasy. This process of Othering, that Frantz Fanon calls epidermalization, is marked by a complete fissuring of the body of the black subject which, subjected to white looks and stereotypical perspectives, is framed and fixed as mere body without depth or humanity. What is at play, in this passage, is no less than a colonial mode of representation which uses discursive strategies of identification based on a Manichean view of the Other who, through recourse to a readymade repertoire of stereotypes, is immobilized by the gaze and rendered a mere black object of fear. Yet, the white gaze experiences ambivalence in its specular disavowal of the Other as it is also fascinated by the difference of the black

subject, a difference that feeds its fantasy and desire and keeps it on the lookout for the Other.

This chapter begins with a theoretical account that tries to sketch out the contradictions and ambivalences subtending whiteness. Drawing on a number of leading proponents of the anti-essentialist and anti-humanist view of identity, it will show that the power of the white gaze derives from a certain understanding of bodies which emphasizes the corporeality and hyperembodiment of blacks while foregrounding white people as disembodied and unraced. This chapter will reveal that this view of racial difference, elaborated in the exclusive lenses of physical appearance, is underpinned and beset by uncertainties and anxieties that determine whiteness's conception of the self and the Other. It will then go on to study the role of these contradictions in unsettling whiteness's claims about the existence of an essentialist white identity that is all-soul and human and a black identity reduced to mere body and banished from the realm of humanity.

Whiteness, in light of the above, is a discursive practice of subjection which rests on the production of stereotypical knowledge with the aim of exercising control and power over the Other. As a form of knowledge which allows whites to affirm their supremacy and enforce their hegemonic worldview over black subjects, whiteness is better understood through the lens of Foucauldian concepts of archaeology and genealogy. Michel Foucault's archaeology permits an engagement with what Houston A. Baker, Jr. views as a paradigm shift from an official white narrative of American history towards a more inclusive perspective which focuses attention on what he calls "commercial deportation," that is the shift from a reading of American history as an evolutionary and teleological story of a Man who has a spiritual errand in a promised land to a story the contours of which are articulated around the forced migration of blacks

from Africa and their eventual enslavement in America (*Blues* 24). If archaeology presents a counter-narrative of history that questions the dominant white version and keeps it in suspense, then genealogy explores the interplay between regimes of truth and institutions of power at the heart of whiteness.

One of the merits of archaeology is that it sets whiteness in the realm of discourse and therefore unseats its claims to scientific truths about the self and the Other, showing that they are not given or natural but discursively constructed. As a method of historical analysis that seeks to show how bodies of knowledge are constituted at specific historical periods, archaeology helps identify the founding discursive formations that lend whiteness both coherence and legitimacy. Foucault asserts that discourse is not concerned about the objective reality of objects but rather about their representation. He says that discourses are: "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak … Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (*Archaeology* 49).

In addition to denying it positivist grounding, whiteness, when seen through the prism of the archaeology of knowledge, emerges as a discourse which rests on a set of founding "statements," which sustain themselves and preserve their truth value through repetition. Foucault defines these statements as the most basic units of discourse and credits them with determining its themes and concepts, thanks to what he calls "discursive formations." For it is these "discursive formations" that determine the configurations of statements within discourse (*Archaeology* 38). The governing statements of whiteness cut across different spheres of subjectivity that include the physical, the cultural, and the political. They range from discursive units that emphasize the disembodiment of white people, units like "spirit," "absence of color" and being "unraced", to cultural statements which champion white civilization's cherished values

of "humanity," "rationality," "liberty" and "progress" and set them as a universal norm. Other central clusters of concepts which follow from as well as produce the previous set of statements are those which organize political life, and they involve: "supremacy," "privilege" and "centrality." Each family of concepts could be expanded to include as many statements as possible in order to preserve the construction of whiteness as a subjectivity which is racially unmarked, civilized and enjoys hegemony over its Others.

Richard Dyer traces the hegemony of whiteness back to its representational power as a disembodied, racially unmarked category which is immune from stereotypes and therefore representative of humanity (*White* 3). He argues that the unraced character of white culture allows it to pass as an invisible category which, being guarded against processes of Otherisation, enjoys superiority as a norm and a reference: "white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (*Matter* 44). According to this view, whiteness emerges as a universal category which conceals its values, power and governing concepts under a façade of a nonracialized and colorless human nature. Dyer attributes the invisibility and universal character of whiteness to a struggle between body and soul which he explores through Christianity, imperialism and racial discourse, emphasizing the construction of whiteness as a spirit "that is in but not of the body" (*White* 14).

These three areas of representation, Dyer goes on to say, offer a discursive legitimizing of whiteness's disavowal of the body while imagining the invisible spirit with its values of virtue, refinement and transcendence as its defining character. Thus when white people undertook to "civilize" the world in the colonial era, they went about their errand as "subjects without properties," expanding their hegemony and making their colonial enterprise seem natural and acceptable. They were, in the words of Dyer, "without properties, unmarked, universal, just human" (*White* 38). Foucault insists that

statements in discourse, according to an archaeological approach, have to be understood in "the exact specificity of their occurrence" (*Archaeology* 28) and calls for establishing connections between them and similar statements as well as setting boundaries and limits separating them from other different statements. In line with this Foucauldian configuration of statements in discourse, Dyer pits the disembodiment of whiteness against its highly racialized Others: "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (*White* 1).

Following a similar line of argument which equates the disembodied nature of whiteness with invisibility, reinforcing its status as a human and disinterested norm, Toni Morrison charts the map of canonical American literature as a site where the white category creates "language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'Othering'" (x-xi). Concerned with charting what she calls "American Africanism," Morrison contends that the construction of blackness in an American literary discourse enables writers of this canon to explore and test white culture's values of autonomy, freedom, individualism, masculinity and innocence. Faced with whiteness's unacknowledged presence as a standard and a norm, the Africanist presence plays a surrogate role for probing white identity: "the fabrication of an Africanist persona," Morrison states, "is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness" (17). Morrison's portrayal of whiteness builds upon insights laid down by postcolonial theorists like Edward W. Said and Homi K. Bhabha, who challenge the invisible universality of colonial discourse in general by demystifying its (mis)representation of the Other. She shares with them the view that white culture passes

off as natural and non-raced because it is able to imprison others in their bodies and confine them to skin color.

Arnold Farr, limiting his analysis to manifestations of whiteness in Enlightenment thought, reaches similar conclusions when he asserts that "White identity and all of its parochial concerns were able to hide behind a façade of neutrality or normalcy" (144). This statement is echoed by Henry Giroux who points to the interrelatedness between whiteness, domination and invisibility. He contends that white dominant culture preserves its hidden authority thanks to its ability to operate outside the limits of race and to be color-blind. It thus "secures its power by refusing to identify" itself (15). The discursive coordinates of the formations of whiteness come to light thanks to the interest which archaeology brings to bear on whiteness not as a given objective reality but as a discourse with governing rules and organizing families of concepts. These concepts make it possible for whiteness to remain invisible and facilitate its presence as an unquestioned universal norm with a set of truth claims which determine the relation between the Western self and its Others.

To unsettle whiteness's purported neutrality and unmask its pretensions of universality, it is also very useful to see it in light of Foucault's theory of genealogy which helps expose the complicity between the network of values which constitute whiteness and the institutions of power it serves. Genealogy's focus on the power-knowledge nexus takes the inquiry into whiteness a step further than the initial archaeological mapping of the discursive constitution of whiteness as a body of knowledge. It does so by bringing whiteness face to face with its suppressed Other, the black body, putting its alleged scientific, universal and totalizing claims to the test and showing them to be a form of historically constructed knowledge about the black self.

The production of this knowledge is aimed at policing and exercising power over black bodies. Stressing this demystifying drive of genealogy, Larry Shiner, says:

> Like all Foucault's analytical tools 'genealogy' is chosen as much for its polemical advantage as its descriptive specificity. It is Nietzsche's term and Foucault uses it in Nietzsche's ironic, agonistic way. It allows Foucault to distance himself from traditional humanistic historiography … as well as from a certain kind of Marxist totalizing theory. In addition, it incorporates the earlier concept of 'archaeology' while correcting its misleading nuances and its failure adequately to treat the reality of power. (386)

By shifting interest away from whiteness as a discipline which secures its ubiquitous presence and legitimacy through invisibility to considering it in light of the network of relationships between systems of truth and modalities of power underpinning it, genealogy disrobes whiteness's relation to the Other, showing it to be about the production of regimes of stereotypical representations that are intimately linked to the exercise of power over the black body / self. A genealogical casting of whiteness in terms of the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power unveils the strategies of Othering underpinning it as a discursive practice. These strategies consist in a Manichean and hierarchical rendering of difference in which whiteness enjoys a privileged position as a reference and a norm of Good while it relegates the black Other / self to the mere status of its epidermal body, denying it all the human values that are conducive to its fulfillment as a subject. Whiteness carries out this process of denigrating Othering through the dual assets of power and knowledge, producing forms of knowledge that freeze the black self into the image of its body, constituting, therefore, a new black subjectivity that is docile, subservient and arrested in development. By producing this stereotypical knowledge about blacks, whiteness engages in a hegemonic endeavor that

assures its having the upper moral and political hand in its relation to the Other, a position of privilege and superiority which is made possible by the Other's internalization of his negative image as touted by whiteness (Yancy 109).

As much as it is silent about its discursive conditions of possibility, whiteness remains highly audible about the visibility of black skin as a master signifier of difference (Bhabha 80). Whiteness, as a set of values, norms and truth claims about the black Other draws the contours of difference exclusively around skin color which it marks as its opposite negative image. Its various discursive disciplines, that vary from sociology to psychology and from literature and philosophy to biology, feature a habit of thinking about the black self that foregrounds stereotypes and denigrating misrepresentations of black subjectivity due to its unwillingness to see beyond the color line and engage with racial difference in any meaningful way other than the visibility of skin color. According to the Manichean character of whiteness's discursive formation, reducing the black Other to skin color serves a number of purposes, chief among which is sustaining the hierarchical structure of inequality in the relation between the self and the Other that accounts for whiteness's knowledge and power, namely white superiority and black inferiority (JanMohamed, "Economy" 61). For whiteness proceeds from a position of centrality and superiority which determines its conceptualization of its encounter with the Other and the knowledge it produces about it. Said points to this power-knowledge nexus at the heart of colonial discourse when he contends that, contrary to its alleged neutral and scientific truth-claims, whiteness involves an encounter that is: "far from being a type of idyllic conversation between equals [and] more usually of a kind typified by the relation between colonizer and colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed" (*World* 181-82).

Whether it is a structure of inequality, according to JanMohamed, or a form of knowledge based on white supremacy (Said, *Orientalism* 3), whiteness rests on a world view of binary relations in which white supremacy is secured thanks to the reduction of the black Other to inferiority and to a subhuman status. This "unchallenged" superiority, Said argues, is the driving force behind Orientalism as a mode of thought predicated on the supremacy of the white man and the subordination of non-whites (*Orientalism* 7). Superiority in this sense is hegemonic in two ways: it creates and maintains a collective white identity on the one hand and produces stereotypical knowledge which shapes understanding of the black subject and justifies its subjugation, surveillance and control on the other hand. Speaking about the American context, Morrison comes to a similar conclusion when she argues that the formation of a national hegemony in the newly created America intensified the need and demand for the invention of a black Other against whom the values and the spirit of the new national body could be measured. For Morrison, a better understanding of blackness is possible only in relation to whiteness, in this case white America. She claims that white America needed to create and imagine an antithetical black presence of a sort in order to come to grips with the uncertainties and anxieties of its new self and achieve a cultural identity necessary for its emergence as a nation. She says: "For excellent reasons of state … the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony" (8).

Indeed, achieving harmony and order out of anarchy and chaos was crucial to the formation of the nascent national identity, and was attained only by constructing the black body as locus of negative values and demeaning attributes. The process of achieving "cultural hegemony" was in fact an undertaking that could hardly have been imagined without a twin process of Othering, of fabricating an African presence, so much

so that the freedom of white America was unimaginable without slavery, white purity and chastity without black criminal sexuality and immorality. It thus becomes clear that the imagining of America as a white society involved more than the pretensions of traditional humanism which pictured a story of suffering on the way to a promised land and that it required the invention and production of the black body as surrogate self, a medium of exorcising the white self of its fears and anxieties. Along the same lines, Sharon Patricia Holland argues that the creation of American national consensus is underpinned not just by the marginalization of black subjectivity but by its death as an "unspeakable" presence (6).

It follows from the preceding discussion that far from being a neutral, transcendental and objective form of knowledge about the self and the Other, whiteness is predicated on a belief in white superiority which determines and shapes its regimes of representations on both sides of the color-divide. This superiority makes true knowledge of the Other impossible because whiteness is capable only of hegemonic knowledge which, instead of recognizing difference, appropriates and produces it in its own image as similar. Like the Imaginary of Jacques Lacan which conceives of the Other in a specular relation with self, Whiteness's figuration of the Other is motivated by desire and fantasy, ruling out the prospect of true knowledge of difference. Lacan asserts that the Imaginary phase, or the mirror stage, of child development introduces an alienation in the process of identification because the child looks at the mirror and mistakes the image he sees for his self, coming to an imaginary consciousness predicated on a false unity between his body and his own reflection. He argues that this identity is specular because it can see only what is similar and represents an extension of the self, while it stays blind to difference, alienating itself from true knowledge of the Other. (75-76). Unable to let go of its own system of values in its approach to Otherness, the hegemonic identity of

whiteness ends up disavowing difference and reinforcing its own self-image. Emphasis on sameness and disavowal of difference also account for the tendency of white superiority to produce stereotypical knowledge about the black body / subject that facilitates its surveillance, disciplining and keeping it under white hegemony. This is the Manichean order which blinds whiteness and denies it the possibility of acceding to a valid representation of the Other since it succeeds only in seeing itself while being blind to the Other; in the same way that it establishes its own cultural hegemony by subjugating the Other to its hegemonic and policing gaze.

JanMohamed insightfully makes the point about the failure of whiteness to understand the Other by stressing its inherent cognitive paradoxes. He argues that the only way for whiteness to have access to the Other is for it to step out of itself and to turn against its beliefs and systems of values ("Economy" 98). And because this is impossible, whiteness is left with two options: to see the Other through its own systems of beliefs and values and end up seeing its own image or use the Other as a medium for consciously contemplating its fears and fantasies. Either way, whiteness falls short of true knowledge about its black Other.

Richard Wright's work centers around an abiding and evolving interest in exposing whiteness's complicity with power and unseating its value claims about its Others, particularly its stereotypical representations of the black male subject. This undertaking is underpinned by two major goals: first, to showcase how whiteness's imagining of black subjectivity is first and foremost intended to hide and camouflage an identity crisis gripping white subjects in their denial of difference and veneration of sameness. As an anxious form of identity, whiteness, in this light, has to denigrate black subjectivity and lock blacks away from privileges, power and citizenship in order to justify its truth claims about them and preserve white supremacy in the body politics as

well as in social and interracial relationships. To demystify this aspect of whiteness, Wright devotes his novel *Savage Holiday* (1954) to exploring and mapping out the uncertainties and ambivalences at the heart of whiteness as an unsecure mode of identification which insists on seeing the black male subject solely in terms that pay lip service to its own supremacist view of the self. Secondly, and this is the aspect of whiteness that he keeps developing and mining in the rest of his corpus, Wright tries to understand and dethrone whiteness by focusing on its object of denigration, namely the black body and subject. His work represents an intellectual will to unveil whiteness's false allegations by focusing on the impact of its representations and the political reality they create for the black subject.

In *Savage*, whiteness and its pitfalls are vehemently criticized through the misadventures of the novel's main protagonist who is shown to be able to overcome his crushing sense of shame and marginality, after retiring from his job, only by treating the other characters who come in his way as Others, demonizing and controlling them. Like most of Wright's characters whose fates enact deterministic tragedies that betray the imaginary character of whiteness as an identity, revealing how it rests on a certain positioning of bodies, Erskine Fowler, the protagonist, seeks to dominate and control his environment thanks to a starkly unequal configuration of bodies that grants him the upper hand over his victims. A white middle-class subject, Fowler finds himself suddenly in a difficult bind when his company sends him into early retirement, stripping him of the privileges of whiteness and forcing him into the realm of the Other. This shift in status, which is enacted in the opening scene of the novel, and how Fowler copes with it unfold in terms of a peculiar and at times tragic set of body relations which reflect his understanding of himself and his world. Following the opening banquet scene which depicts him as the epitome of the American Dream, a hardworking and successful

businessmen, Fowler's loss of the privileges that whiteness confers on him takes the form of a protracted and dramatic initiation into savagery, where his understanding of his own body and the bodies of those around him takes shape in light of his new position as Other. Lale Demirturk describes Fowler's predicament in light of this transformation:

> Fowler loses all the social labels producing the solid sense of whiteness–that is, wealth, privilege, comfort and social acceptance. He is no longer positioned within the 'white-skin privilege politics' … which produced him as the white middle-class man who likes where he stands. Fowler is driven outside the system of white supremacy in being forced into the position of the Other … [which] subverts the success myth. ('Mapping' 133)

Fowler's failure to realize this shift makes him act according to his former position of centrality sanctioned by whiteness, unaware of his new marginal and peripheral status let alone able to accept it. This contrast between his image of himself as a superior white man and his reality as a marginal Other exposes his deep-seated insecurity which translates into his attempt to live up to his image as a decent, moral and secure white middle-class citizen while being devastated by the anxieties and uncertainties related his status as Other. In the novel's next scene, following the declaration of his retirement, Fowler finds himself locked out of his apartment naked as he tries to pick up his Sunday newspaper from the doorstep. An unexpected draft shuts the door behind him, leaving him trapped with his nude body and the crippling shame triggered by fear of being seen by his neighbors. The wealthy New York insurance executive, whose expulsion from the Company strips him of the prerogatives of whiteness, undertakes his first step into Otherness as a disgraceful body experience: "Erskine screamed, his body shaking with rage, shame, despair, and a sickness which he could not name" (*Savage* 50). With no clothes on and using the Sunday edition of the

New York Times to cover himself, Fowler's nakedness highlights his animal and savage nature. The association between nakedness and visibility on the one hand and Fowler's loss of the markers of whiteness on the other is also made clear a little earlier. Before being locked out of the apartment he takes a shower to start his day when he has this glimpse of his body: "He stripped off his pajamas and loomed naked, his chest covered with a matting of black hair … his legs rendered spiderlike by their hirsute coating. Tufts of black hair protruded even from under his arms. Nude, Erskine looked anything but pious or Christian" (*Savage* 40-41).

Fowler's loss of moral and religious standing which comes hot on the heels of losing his job is clearly linked to this grotesque animal-like depiction of his new status. His denigration of the body, expressed in his attempt to escape from visibility and nakedness, shows the extent to which he prizes spirit and soul over physical appearance which constitutes him as Other. Trapped in overembodiment, Fowler displays an unwillingness to accept his nudity and deal with his visibility, holding on tenaciously to the white center of privilege which used to define him as invisible. This disavowal of his body, of the difference embedded in him, is indicative of the splitting, ambivalence and anxiety that determine both his self-image and his social relations and condemn him to a life of appearance over reality. In the above scene, the image of the spider captures the divide separating the different polarities of body and soul, appearance and reality and self and Other governing his Manichean world. Like a spider, he desperately attempts to cast his moral net on those around him, to act white, while denying his true savage and animal nature. Fowler, who becomes in the words of Michel Fabre, "an animal trapped by human convention" (*The Unfinished* 377), stands as a symbol for the myth of whiteness which is able to champion the values of decency and civilization only by demonizing the Other as a bestial body devoid of reason and humanity. This white self

which is deeply troubled by fear of marginality and its concomitant uncertainties and which tries to make up for its feeling of unease by projecting an image of morality and security, is highlighted through Fowler's feeling of shame about his body and his striving to hide it by asserting his position as a moral and decent white man. But if Fowler denies his status as an Other, this does not mean that it goes way. Rather he is haunted by the savage body of the Other he tries to suppress. Caught in a devastating grip of fear in case someone discovers him nude, Fowler rushes into a terrified ride in the elevator, using the emergency stop button to prevent the other tenants from getting in. The image of Fowler in his up-and-down ride in the elevator presents him like a scared beast locked in a cage. Laura Dubek describes the hide-and-seek elevator scene as a "white protagonist's predicament (similar) to that of a black man facing a lynch mob" (8). Dubek's bringing of the lynched black subject into the picture is very revealing for, as much as he tries to hide it, Fowler's story is one of a literal and metaphorical lynching of his Others. And those Others, whom he associates with his body and tries to banish as sources of shame and disgrace, are none other than his next-door neighbor, Mabel Blake and her son, Tony. He is locked with the two in a deadly body contest that is destructive and tragic, leading to accidental death in the case of Tony and deliberate murder in the case of his mother.

Fowler entertains a paternalistic relationship of domination with Tony and his mother. Towards each he holds an ambivalent attitude of fascination and repulsion, an attitude typical of whiteness's stereotypical construction of the Other. He nurtures a sympathy towards them that spurs him to act as if he is responsible for them and at the same time feels threatened by both to the point of causing the death of Tony and putting an end to the life of Mabel. On the one hand, he identifies with Tony's feeling of neglect by his mother, being himself a victim of an uncaring mother, and associates Tony with his past which he had tried to suppress on the other. Acting like a surrogate father, he

attempts to fill in the void in Tony's life by taking him outdoors and buying him ice-cream and gifts. Because Mabel works at night and spends most of the day sleeping, Fowler takes upon himself the mantle of saving Tony from her neglect and giving him the fatherly protection of love he is denied: "he'd resumed his role of the big father scattering gifts" (*Savage* 35). This role of the caring father, underpinned by his insecurity vis-à-vis his past and his attempt to contain it, has a religious and a moral side to it as it springs also from Fowler's ethical code of moral righteousness and preservation of the values of the family. An epitome of the middle-class white man, Fowler is not only a hard-working businessman who fights his way out of poverty and becomes a model of success but also a religious puritan who is respected by his neighbors and whose white credentials are touted by them. He is hailed as a "jolly good fellow," "kind" and "a solid citizen" who is keen to drive family values home to his middle-class community: "And with what a common-place attitude do we regard this sublime spectacle of the family that comprises God's mighty parable, a parable in which He has couched our lives from childhood onward!" (87-8). Speaking and acting from this position of centrality, Fowler goes on a moral mission to rescue the shattered family of his next-door neighbor, by first attending to the needs of Tony and then saving Mabel from what he sees to be the world of sin in which she is mired. But as he goes about his mission, it turns out that his religious fantasy casts Tony and Mabel as Others only to control and dominate them. He thus questions Mabel's right to keep Tony on the grounds that she is not able to give him decent and moral guidance and rules her out as fit mother:

> What a mother! No wonder so many people in this world got into trouble; they didn't get the proper kind of guidance in their childhood. Women who couldn't give the right kind of attention to children oughtn't to be allowed to have them … a child of five oughtn't be left alone all night. (35)

An embodiment of this moral fantasy, Fowler has to demonize Mabel, to exclude her as an evil Other so that he can control Tony and fully assume his position of supremacy as a surrogate father over him. This is even more the case, given that behind this grand narrative of moral control and domination lies a more down-to-earth personal side to his attempt to protect Tony by delegitimizing his mother. In one of their outings, Tony explains to Fowler that his mother "fights" with the men she brings home with her. To his great distress, Fowler discovers that Tony is referring to sexual intercourse and that he is listening to a reenactment of his own bitter story with all its long-suppressed demons. For Fowler's father dies when he was three, leaving him to a careless mother who "has deprived him of maternal affection, twisting his drive to love at an early age" (Demirturk, 'Mapping' 130). A prostitute and a convict, his mother has always meant a past of shame that he tried suppress and overcome by hard work and material success, by adopting the values of a mythical whiteness and the security of success that comes along with it. But if Fowler tries to escape his past, it haunts him as a savage Other that he has to keep under control unless it destabilizes the security that whiteness bestows on him. Fowler is not, therefore, seeking to control Tony as a patriarch only but also as a secure white subject for whom Tony is reminiscent of his own past when he was a child and had to suffer his mother's neglect. This two-fold process of invention, of Othering, underpinning Fowler's moral urge to save Tony, is clearly expressed in the scene of Tony's accidental death as a savage physical encounter. Fowler's unease about his body is due to the fact that he equates it with the Other and all the negative labels of sin, savagery and degeneration attached to it. He hates his body and despises it because, as in the elevator scene, it stands for his being shut off from the security of home and whiteness and being thrown naked in the realm of the Other. But like his past which he

tries to stifle, his body stays with him as an Other exposing his will to power and domination.

This self-Other nexus, which underlies the splitting in Fowler's identity between his avowed white self and the disavowed Others who sustain it, controls Fowler's relation to Tony even before the climactic moment of the latter's death. Prior to this, Tony was rehearsing a scene of shooting Indians below Fowler's bathroom window, while beating his drum and shouting "war whoops." The noise awakens Fowler from sleep, setting off his story of a savage holiday. Historically speaking, linking Fowler's story to drums and the shooting of Indians evokes the history of the white man's colonial story in the New World and its relation to the domination and destruction of Indian Others. The image of the drum beating indicates both war and fear or dance and fascination. It is indicative of the complex pattern of ambivalence which determines the construction of the Other by whiteness as a colonial and supremacist discourse. The drum-beating lures Fowler out of the comfort and warmth of bed, out of the security of home as a space of identity and what is familiar, and into the space of the Other and uncertainty. His venture into savage nakedness finally leads him to the balcony where Tony has stayed playing his Indian game. Breathless and sweating, Fowler breaks into the balcony to face Tony less as a father and more as a beast: "His right leg encountered some strange object and he went tumbling forward on his face, his long, hairy arms flaying the air rapaciously, like the paws of a huge beast clutching for something to devour, to rend to pieces" (52).

In this scene, the drums invite the savage beast instead of the caring father Fowler was at pains trying to be to Tony. Startled by the sight of Fowler's naked body, Tony retreats back to the rails about to fall to his death from the tenth floor. It is only when "the beast" extends his hand to help and is met by Tony's "eyes of horror" (53) that he comes to understand that "Tony feared him" (53). As he sneaks back through his

bathroom window into his apartment, seeking "shelter for his nakedness" (55), we know that the "devour[ing]" beast has left behind it "Tony's little smashed and bloody body lying on the concrete pavement below" (55). Later Fowler surmises that Tony was afraid because he thought he had broken into the balcony to fight him like other naked men had fought his mother. Fowler's conclusion only gives credence to how much Tony associates him with the dominating patriarch he desperately tries to hide through the prerogatives of whiteness.

From the time he is locked out from his apartment to his climbing back into the security of home through the bathroom window, Fowler's body becomes an emblem of his savagery, reflecting the domineering and supremacist self that is hidden under a façade of the white myth of success and civilization. It embodies his new position as an Other, a stereotypical image which is defined in terms of a white center from which Fowler is banished. For on a symbolic level of reading, Fowler literally finds himself "on the outside of it all" (*Savage* 20) following his expulsion from the company and his experience of displacement and homelessness is metaphorically enacted when he is forced out of his apartment (home) and into public visibility. Stripped naked of the privileges of whiteness and its attendant position of superiority, he starts hating his body and the new status of Otherness it represents. It is this unwillingness to avow the Other in the constitution of his subjectivity and his drive to suppress, demonize and control it that haunts him in the image of his body and that he paradoxically tries to impose on his Others. As with little Tony, Fowler's will to power rests on inventing and imagining the bodies of Others in order to appropriate and dominate them. In his relationship with Mabel, his dead mother, and the black maid Minnie, Fowler's view of his female Others is restricted by the patriarchal order of whiteness, which, through a negative form of stereotypical representation, defines the Other as a body devoid of intellectual and human

value. This negative reduction of the Other to physical qualities serves whites in two ways: first, it secures white subjectivity's grounding in civilization and humanity through what JanMohamed calls the Manichean Allegory ("Economy" 61) and, second, it legitimizes the control and domination of the Other whose savagery calls for the white man to come and redeem him. These features of the discourse of whiteness set the pattern for Fowler's guilt-ridden relationship to the female figures who populate his troubled past and murderous present as he desperately maneuvers to maintain his superiority and centrality by confining his female Others to a stereotypical fixity that reflects his white fantasy more than a true representation of their reality as subjects. Fowler's will to power is evident in the way he uses his freedom to control and subordinate Mabel. He sees his retirement as a freedom from the "prison-cage of toil" (*Savage* 33) to which he had devoted his life in order to forget the "threatening feelings, [and] desires" (*Savage* 33) of his childhood. But if his newly gained freedom sets him free from the prison of the American Dream represented by the Longevity Life Insurance Company, it puts him face to face with his past which, ironically, renders him, "trapped in freedom" (*Savage* 33).

A typical figure of white supremacy, Fowler uses his freedom to conceal his role in the murder of Tony and to force Mabel into believing that she is responsible for the death of her son because she did not take care of him. Instead of coming to terms with his guilt about causing the death of Tony by avowing it to his mother, he chooses to keep his mask of respectability, presenting himself as a savior instead of victimizer and Mabel as a symbol of criminality and sin instead of a single working mother and poor war-widow. To assuage his guilt and make this reversal of positions possible, Fowler uses religion as a convenient means of painting himself in the best colors as God's chosen instrument to redeem Mabel from her sins and to make himself, in the words of Fabre, "the tool of this providential chastisement" (*The Unfinished* 377). This God-like position

is rationalized along the lines of gender deference where Fowler, the patriarch, falls back on religion to hide his crime and enforce his moral superiority over Mabel whose individuality is eclipsed by the generality of the stereotype of women as sinful beings:

> Again his emotions became religious … He must somehow redeem what happened to Tony! … In redeeming Tony, he'd be redeeming himself. How neatly the double motives fitted! He'd help to purge the world of such darkness … How right he'd been in refusing to accept blame for Tony's death; it hadn't been his fault at all. Only an ignorantly lustful woman could spin such spider webs of evil to snare men and innocent children! As he walked he told himself with the staunchest conviction of his life: 'That Mrs. Blake's the guilty one'. (*Savage* 105)

Fowler's position of superiority as a male patriarch and a domineering figure hinges, therefore, on a moral rationalization that convinces him of his good intentions in spite of his guilt-ridden conscience and on controlling Mabel as well. This position of power is secured through defining Mabel, fixing and framing and eventually negating her as a subject through a stereotypical misrepresentation of her body and sexuality. The God-like supreme power that whiteness as an ideology casts on Fowler materializes not through a true knowledge of Mabel but through inventing her body as Other. It is only by criminalizing Mabel's body as sinful that Fowler is able to claim the moral superiority which defines him as white man firmly rooted in civilization. This mode of identification, based on a binary construct of us versus them, is revealed to be imaginary and mythological. For Fowler can suppress his internal turmoil of anxiety and guilt and be the religious and decent white man he has to be only by confining Mabel to marginality and to a realm of criminality and sin. His coming to terms with his guilt is not due to his belief in his innocence but rather to his blaming Mabel's body, which he invents and

renders a symbol of female promiscuity. The binary dynamic of self and Other, center and marginality, savagery and civilization exposes the ideology of whiteness of which Fowler is a symbol to be an imaginary type of subjectivity which has to sacrifice true knowledge of the Other in order to preserve the white subject's pure and secure sense of identity. Since the stereotype makes impossible the understanding of the Other, whiteness relies on its position of power to legitimize its fictional binary worldview of the colonial experience as true knowledge of its Others. It is this relation of power at the heart of whiteness as a hegemonic discourse that propels Fowler to seek control of Mabel by demonizing her body and dehumanizing her character.

Power configurations in the novel tip the scales of representation in favor of Fowler, for, according to whiteness, power yields knowledge and those who have power can wield it to represent and speak for others. In terms of values and privileges, Fowler comes about as the opposite of Mabel. He occupies the center of a white system that denies her the economic and social prerogatives that he enjoys and forces her to live on the margins of social life, working at night and sleeping during the day. From the outset of the narrative up to his confession to the police about his murder of Mabel, Fowler acts and speaks from a position of privilege and centrality which stands in a stark contrast to the social status of Mabel as a dispossessed marginal figure. He is described as a professional white man with a successful career in the corporate world, a respected member of Mount Ararat Baptist Church and masculine supremacist referred to as a "solid citizen" (221). Mabel, on the other hand, belongs to a world the coordinates of which are not defined by the markers of white privilege. She is a working-class-war-widow, a single mother, who has to work at a nightclub to survive. Seen through the prism of whiteness, her marginality is further indicated in the fact that she entertains men in her apartment, drinks and smokes. In one instance, Mabel claims her voice and tells

her own story, explaining why she leaves Tony alone and why she works at a nightclub. Fowler's reaction to her account, which traces the inventory of her troubles back to poverty, is shown by the narrator to emphasize his domineering character. His reaction is a mix of happiness that his marriage proposal to her is morally justifiable because her sins are caused by her poverty, and not any inherent evil, and a feeling of contentment derived from his having the upper hand on her life: Mabel is "More sinned against than sinning, he told himself with satisfaction, relishing the advantage that his money and social status gave him over her" (*Savage* 123).

Reading whiteness from the standpoint of its Others shows that Fowler's social status and power determine his image of Mabel and his ability to impose it as a legitimate representation of her subjectivity. Yet, his power is sustained thanks to the false stereotypical knowledge about the female Other which the ideology of whiteness puts at his disposal. This power-knowledge nexus underlines and maps out Fowler's quest to order the moral chaos and threat that Mabel represents to him, control her sexuality and subjugate her to his will. His plan to marry her speaks for this fear of the Other as an alien force of chaos that threatens the familiar world of the self. On the face of it, Fowler's marriage proposal is intended to save Mabel from a life of adultery by offering her the ordered and stable family life so dear to him. But deep down, Fowler's plan is a coping strategy to deal with his own guilt and internal conflict related to Tony's death and also to come to terms with his past memories of his mother. Either way, Fowler's bid to save the world is in fact an attempt to save his shattered self from the fear of the two most important women in his life, his would-be wife and his dead mother.

The underlying motif behind Fowler's marriage-proposal, according to Fabre, is not only to deflect Mabel's attention from Tony's death but also "to possess her tyrannically" (377). Not based on love, Fowler's marriage looks like an entrepreneurial

endeavor which is animated by his utilitarian and business-like will to dominate and make use of Mabel. The third-person omniscient narrator defines the goal behind Fowler's decision to marry Mabel: "She'd obey him! She was simple; and, above all, he'd be the boss; he'd dominate her completely" (*Savage* 134). The association between business figures of power like the "boss" and white masculinity sets in motion the unequal and hierarchical relations governing the gendered positions of Fowler and Mabel under the patriarchal order in which they interact and operate. Yet the marriage plan has more in store for himself and her than the mere fact of meeting the oppressive ambitions of the New York insurance executive. It involves a moral coping strategy that would place him beyond the memories of his neglecting mother and Mabel's slain son:

> *One* act on his part could tie into a knot of meaning all the contradictory impulses evoked in him by this dramatically sensual women; *one* decision of his could allay his foolish guilt about Tony's strange death; *one* gesture of his could quell the riot of those returning memories from the dark bog of his childhood past; *one* deed of his could place him so near her that she'd never think of that damned spot of blood … *one* vow could enable him to answer God's call, save this woman, and serve Him as he should. *He'd ask her to marry him*. (*Savage* 134; emphasis in original)

From a patriarch to a businessman and then to a missionary, Fowler associates the success of his grand narrative of marriage with the three pillars of his own and white society's story. These three pillars serve to guarantee Mabel's subservience to Fowler who is set on a deadly marriage plan leading to a brutal murder instead of wedlock. He assumes the role of the missionary to redeem Mabel from her licentious life. A savior, he envisages his mission an easy one as he pictures Mabel "begging for guidance" (*Savage* 137). It is because he looks down at her as a "fallen woman," a "bitch," and a

"cheap, cold monster" (*Savage* 152) that he sees his marriage proposal as a civilizing mission with the aim of saving her savage self. This stereotypical commoditization of Mabel as a sinful body is also transferred onto his mother whose ghosts he tries to suppress without avail. Like Mabel, Fowler's mother, seen through a series of flashbacks and recollections, is pictured as a monstrous presence he refuses to recognize and tries hard to confine to his unconscious. She stands for the shameful past he wants to keep hidden from his consciousness, even though it keeps resurging, adamantly jeopardizing the security of the subject he has become and threatening to tear asunder the world he diligently strove to make. Although his attempt to repress the shame associated with his mother is another act of violence, a symbolic matricide that shows his domineering masculinity, the figure of the mother haunts Fowler's day-dreams and dreams while he's asleep, shaking his grasp on reality and bracketing the viability of a world of whiteness he has created out of hard work at the company and religious faith. JanMohamed's significant comment that "Mabel Blake is, predictably, also a mirror image of Fowler's mother" (*Death* 216) draws attention to parallels between Fowler's split self, between his past and present, his conscious and unconscious identities and his real avowed world and dream-like hidden world. It shows that these dualities which make up his world are held together by the subjection of women as Others to the violence and domination of white patriarchy. For Fowler's symbolic matricide and his fear of his past are expressions of his shame about his mother's sexuality. Fatherless at three, the little Fowler blames his feeling of being neglected on his mother's promiscuity, for which she was imprisoned. She died shortly after coming out of prison but her memory and the memory of her promiscuous life leave indelible scars on Fowler. He remembers her as impure and a prostitute, and just as he tries to control Mabel's sexuality through a civilizing mission which casts her in the savage terms of the stereotype, he attempts in the same

derogatory and dehumanizing manner to control the memory of his mother's sexuality by shutting her off from his consciousness.

Fowler performs yet another symbolic murder of his mother when he takes revenge on her by breaking a doll's head against a brick. At the end of the novel, he finds out that the recollection of this act of revenge was not a reality but one more dream from his past:

> *He'd never 'killed' the doll, really! That memory was but the recalling of a shameful daydream of revenge which he had pushed out of his mind! It was what he had angrily daydreamed one day when he'd been playing games with Gladys and her dolls; they'd been coloring paper with colored pencils and he'd drawn the image of a dead, broken doll and he had imagined Gladys telling on him and his mother branding him as bad … He'd pictured vividly to himself what he'd wanted to do to his mother for having gone off and left that night when he'd been ill.* (*Savage* 220; italics in original)

Fowler's imprisonment in the narrative of whiteness and its effacement of the Other blinds him from seeing the true nature of his victims as poor widows who are marginalized and crushed by the requirements of survival in a white patriarchal order. His strict moral code and its attendant supremacist masculinity restrict his ability to see women as other than objects he can manipulate and control. Fowler's purported high moral standing condemns him to murder the Other, literally and metaphorically. His fantasies of women's sensuality and beauty, in the case of Mabel and his mother, arrest the image of the Other, casting it into the fixity of the stereotype, annihilating the true image of the Other and rendering accurate knowledge of it impossible. Fowler's reduction of the identity of his female Others to their bodies, which he indicts and associates with sin and adultery, is to preserve his own identity as a white and a savior

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set on a divine mission to restore morality by redeeming and civilizing its enemies. This form of death, enacted as a stereotyping of women as promiscuous and immoral, is bound to lead to actual death and the complete demolition of existence. Just as he has sacrificed his mother symbolically and Tony accidentally, he premeditatedly and cold-bloodedly stabs Mabel dead in an act which Demirturk reads as an expression of savagery: "For the first time in his life he has acted out his savage impulses that had long been repressed by the social signifiers of civilization" ('Mapping' 135). It is not, therefore, a coincidence that he ends up a beast devouring Mabel as his Other the same way he is pictured in the balcony scene at the beginning of the novel, where he figures as "a huge beast clutching for something to devour" (*Savage* 52), her son Tony. Through Fowler's pressing psychological contradictions, his fantasies and desires and his haunting past, Wright unveils whiteness's dreams of power as well as its attempt to negate the Other. These contradictions which grip white identity are articulated in the contrast between Fowler's bestial murders, literal and metaphorical, and his outward show of morality and civility. They are also shown in his will to emerge as all-soul and spirit, trying to hide his nakedness and his embodiment at the beginning of the novel by acting like a religious savior throughout. This paradoxical self-image starts to have tragic consequences when Fowler sets out to create surrogate Others upon whom he can inscribe his fears about his body and sexuality. Not able to recognize his embodiment, he goes on to treat the female characters in his life as bodies, intent on pleasure and sin, who have, therefore, to be redeemed to the realm of soul and spirit. This view of whiteness which sees Fowler sent behind bars after committing three murders, two actual and one symbolic, takes another no less tragic twist when Wright shifts his attention to analyzing whiteness from the perspective and position of the black subject. As the following section of this chapter will demonstrate, Wright's scholarly interest in understanding whiteness focuses on its

relation to the black body, underlining the ways in which black male subjects are reduced to mere bodies and denied the human qualities of soul, intellect and morality that qualify them to be equal to whites.

<center>**Black Embodiment and Non-Identity**</center>

Savage Holiday is Wright's only novel dedicated to the study of the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in white subjectivity. By peopling his narrative with white characters only, Wright is able to unsettle and destabilize whiteness's claim to a pure and secure identity, showcasing the fissures and anxieties which it tries to hide and suppress. He also succeeds in illustrating the connectedness and interdependence between white subjectivity and its Others and how white identity is dependent on a knowledge and power relation that defines, produces and confines the Other in order to exercise control and domination over it. In the rest of Wright's canon, probing the thorny question of identity shifts from the center to the periphery, from the oppressor to the oppressed and from the perspective of the self to that of the Other. The introduction of the racialized black Other sways Wright's scholarly attention to black bodies instead of white bodies in what appears to be a lifetime process of excavation in order to dig out the root-causes of the displacement and fragmentation of black subjectivity and expose the totalitarian white system and culture which constructs it as such. A major site of such archaeological excavation is the black body.

Carol E. Henderson's concept of "imag(in)ing" the black body underlines the connections between the body as an image, a physical appearance, and the ideological representation which constructs it as mere picture which refers to nothing beyond it. Investigating this pictorial stereotype of the body as image, Henderson states that racial ideology in America is "adversely affected" by what she calls "superficial and metaphoric differences between various groups of human beings" (*Scarring* 19). She further notes that the history of race theory shows that there was a need to invent racial difference, to promulgate and legitimize it and that this need animates "America's

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developing legal and political systems [which] were based on the imaginative tropes of racial difference, particularly for people of African descent" (*Scarring* 19-20).

Along the same lines, Maurice O. Wallace contends that modern "racial reasoning" is first and foremost about a visualization of the black body that relies on the stereotype to arrest and impede the possibility of representation. Defining the spectral nature of white knowledge of the black subject in terms of "Ocularcentrism," he calls for the recognition of "the emphatically modern character of twentieth-century racial reasoning and its deep reliance in modernity on stereotype and fetishism, themselves nothing so much as fantasies of absolute difference induced by a kind of 'reckless eyeballing' on the skin" (171). But imprisoning the black subject in a fixed corporeality is not a particularity of the twentieth century. Already in the seventeenth century, race theory displayed a keen interest in the visible traits and color of the black body, although not in the dehumanizing manner in which they were seen later. It was not until the eighteenth century that, in the words of Winthrop D. Jordan, "Blackness was eminently functional in a slave society where white men were masters. It served as an easily grasped symbol of the Negro's baseness and wickedness" (257-58). Jordan stresses that the scramble for an excessive black corporeality and complexion meant not only the dehumanization of blacks through stereotype but also branded them as different Others:

> By far the most common assumption was that the original color of man was white, an assumption which gave special sharpness to the question why the Negro was black. It was not so much a matter of why the Negro was black as why the Negro had become the very negation of white. Many commentators treated the Negro's blackness as a degeneration from original color. (248)

Jordan's statement shows the principle governing the construction of black bodies by whiteness. It has to do with framing black subjectivity within visibility, a process of

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construction by virtue of which black subjectivity is denied in the name of a fixed appearance that serves to emphasize the value of the white body as a center, a point of reference which restricts the black presence to the margins, "*never* achieve[ing]," in the words of Sharon Patricia Holland, "in the eyes of others, the status of the 'living'" (15; emphasis in original). Concerned with the imagined place of black subjects after slavery, Holland underscores white masters' unwillingness to accept the political rights of newly freed slaves by viewing them in the same ways as before. This white culture rests "on the nonhuman status of its black subjects … [and] on the status of the black as nonentity" (15). Following a similar line of inquiry, bell hooks relates the denial of black identity to white culture's insistence on an arrested form of representation that sees blacks as mere bodies: "racist colonization has deemed black folks more body than mind. Such thinking lies at the core of all the stereotypes of blackness … which suggest we are 'naturally, inherently' more in touch with our bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society'" (129).

This embodiment and its indelible psychological and social scars on black subjectivity are nowhere more thoroughly and dramatically articulated in Wright's work than in his debut novel, *Native Son* (1940). Centered around the clash of its main black character, Bigger Thomas, with various aspects of the white system which controls his life in the ghetto, the novel draws an inventory of the negation of black male subjectivity through its hero's full embodiment. Emphasis on Bigger's body, which is a visible signifier for his deprivation of voice and consciousness, denotes white society's will to arrest and fix him in his physical appearance and color and, subsequently, deny him subjectivity. The manifestation of this state of imprisonment in visibility and embodiment comes about through his repeated violent physical reactions to whites and the black community, underscoring his inability to articulate a healthy and meaningful

relation to his world or to understand it. Bigger's excessive embodiment is the expression of his victimization by white hegemony which compels him to accept and internalize its prohibitions and restrictions which in turn limit his possibilities in life and keep him in his defined place of visibility. Because the hegemonic white order does not allow him to think about who he is or act according to his choices, he ends up acting in terms of its taboos and laws which cause his physical strain and violent outbursts. Condemned, thus, to uncontrollable bodily reactions and forced not to think about the hegemonic forces that put him in this difficult bind, he plunges into a world of physical violence and fantasy as a means to escape trying to understand or deal with the hegemonic taboos that form him. Sarah Relyea neatly captures this pattern of splitting and rupture which determines Bigger's self: "*Native Son* probes the consciousness of Bigger Thomas to reveal a besieged realm where fantasy clashes with harsh internal taboos" (13). Bigger, in this regard, presents a self and a consciousness torn between fear of white prohibitive structures which constitute him and to which he has to conform and his desires and fantasies, unleashing his wrath and compelling him to react violently. These conflicting forces, which stand in the way of Bigger's meaningful bonding with others, according to Relyea, "manifest the internal struggles marking his status as an incomplete American subject, one who is not granted the full rights of citizenship" (13).

Early in the novel Bigger expresses how hegemonic constraints imposed upon him by the rules of a segregated Jim Crow society shapes his subject formation, denying him autonomy of self and the meaningful ordering of his experience as a conscious individual. Following one of those moments of rage and anger which grips him whenever he feels helpless in the face of white power, Bigger relishes a fantasy of freedom as he contemplates a pigeon flying "on wings stretched so taut and sheer that Bigger could see the gold of the sun through their translucent tips. He tilted his head and watched the slate-

colored bird flap and wheel out of sight over the edge of a high roof" (*Native* 23-4). This fantasy of flight, freedom and invisibility is quickly undermined by the terror of white hegemony which is felt physically, as, for example, in the following exchange, in which Bigger answers a question he puts to his friend Gus about where the white people live:

> Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus.
>
> 'Right down here in my stomach,' he said …
>
> 'Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em,' Bigger said. (24)

Seeing the world through this fractured prism of an inner clash between deep-seated exterior restrictions demanding compliance to white order and his own urges and desires, Bigger's corporeality and his physical tensions become the expression of how he is undone by white ideology. JanMohamed's comment on how dominant culture enforces its hegemony on minorities is similar to Bigger's experience of whiteness. He says:

> The hegemonic formation of minorities is itself based on an attempt to negate them, to prevent them from realizing their full potential as human beings and to exclude them from full and equal participation in civil and political society … it is through the construction of the minority subject that the dominant culture can elicit the individual's own help in his / her oppression. One of the most powerful weapons in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. ("Negating" 108)

The barriers of the white hegemonic system structure Bigger's self by holding him hostage to fear of infringing upon its laws or violating its prohibitions. He knows that trying to understand the reasons of his fear will cause him to commit murder and to get killed in return, so he keeps his fear buried inside his psyche and lives by the code of the dominant hegemony. This fear which he feels as a physical force inside him blocks

his mind and leaves him only with rage, frustration, and anger to cope with his outside environment, compelling him at the same to experience outbursts of desire that only his fantasy can gratify. This manner in which his deep-seated fear forms his subjectivity and dictates his actions is amply clear in the way he vacillates between his many fantasy flights and spells of despair. It is, for example, indicated in his fantasy to be free like a pigeon right after his feeling of helplessness in the face of the white forces which control his life and form his interior. It is also made clear when he and his friend Gus fantasize a few moments earlier in the novel about flying airplanes while Bigger vents his anger at the fact that whites will never allow blacks to learn to fly or experience the joy and freedom from physical and geographical confinement that comes from it. Bigger's response shaped by the horror of the white taboos he has absorbed shows how much he is imprisoned in his skin, relating to the outside world only through his physical tensions and explosive reactions. He says, "Cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell" (20).

This is not the only time Bigger pictures himself killing other people out of fear of whites whom he sees as an inscrutable and undefeatable natural force. In fact, his hysterical fear and unrestrained bodily reactions which follow from it make all his encounters with people end up in murders imagined or real. He imagines killing whites and blacks alike, wishing to kill Mr. Dalton, Mary, Jan, their maid Peggy and Britten, and almost every other white he encounters. Bigger also fantasizes killing his black friend Gus and wishes several times to blot out members of his black community. But Bigger also masterminds and carries out the murder of Mary and his black girlfriend Bessie. In those moments when Bigger is gripped by his outbursts of anger and terror he even considers killing himself. These acts of aggression, both real and fantasized, are physical expressions of his fear, which he mobilizes to escape and transcend the barriers of racism

and their impact on his life. As acts of anger, they also reveal how Bigger projects his repressed feelings, which are the only means available to him to order and make sense of his experience, not as a whole human being but as a mere human body. Louis Tremaine blames Bigger's over-embodiment on the tension created in him by the conditions of his living, saying that "it is a recognition that the conditions of his life exclude the very thing that his being requires: the freedom to express his individual human needs without fear" (49). Whether it has to do with his fantasies of self-destruction or the killing of others, these acts of embodiment show Bigger's entrapment in fear and confusion in a way that renders impossible his making sense of his predicament. Treated like a pariah and second-class citizen by the forces of whiteness which define him, Bigger shields himself from the reality of his subjection by acting upon his body instead of his mind. Such a paradoxical state of being which accounts for his many fits of frenzy and hysterical terror is all the more acute and threatening when he plans to violate white taboos, and is thus set in a specular relationship with his inner fears and latent white demons. The first of these moments which prompts him to physical aggression is unleashed against his friend Gus. During the pool scene, Bigger tries hard to suppress the tension which takes hold of him as he discretely hatches a last-minute plan to prevent his friends from robbing a store owned by a white man called Blum. As Bigger tries to dissuade his cohorts from transgressing the white taboo of stealing a white man's property, his fear that Gus might show up, making the act of robbery inevitable, becomes somatic:

> The fear that Gus would really go made the muscles of Bigger's stomach tighten; he was hot all over. He felt as if he wanted to sneeze and could not; only it was more nervous than wanting to sneeze. He grew hotter, tighter; his nerves were taut and teeth were on edge. He felt that something would soon snap within him. (27)

This over-embodiment, which shows Bigger about to explode physically, mirrors the fear and unrestrained hysteria that grip him as he is poised to risk robbing white property and violate the hegemonic prohibitions that form his subjectivity. He vents his anger on Gus whose willingness to join in the robbery plan puts Bigger face to face with his internalized dread of white taboos and restrictions, a dread he can control only by violent physical aggression against him. The stakes involved in transgressing the racial boundary and the price it exacts upon him are crystal-clear to Bigger as he contemplates the robbery scheme in the movie theatre:

> He was a fool for wanting to rob Blum's just when he was about to get a good job. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Why take a fool's chance when other things, big things, could happen? If something slipped up this afternoon he would be out of a job and in jail, maybe. And he wasn't so hot about robbing Blum's, anyway. (36)

Bigger is not consciously aware of these restrictions which govern the color-line separating blacks from whites and which determine his reactions to the outside world. They are, on the contrary, unconscious, latent and suppressed motives which spur him to direct his tensions to whites and blacks whenever he finds himself in a situation where he has to violate the code of the white order. Therefore, in order to maintain the guise firmly in its place and appear to be willing to go ahead with the robbery while working to thwart it, he lets his terror and fear of whiteness fall on his friend Gus:

> Bigger's hand moved so swiftly that nobody saw it; a gleaming blade flashed. He made a long step, as graceful as an animal leaping, threw out his left foot and tripped Gus to the floor. Gus turned over to rise, but Bigger was on top of him, with the knife open and ready. (40)

The image of the "animal leaping" accurately captures the formation of Bigger as a racialized subject under white culture and its institutions which reduce blacks to subhuman status under the segregation laws of Jim Crow. Reduced to his body, Bigger feels Gus in a manner which shows him to be the victim instead of his friend. He feels him "over all his body, through him, in and out of him" (28). Notwithstanding Bigger's show of force, he is penetrated by the fear of violating white taboos personified by Gus. This fear maps his entire body like the way segregation laws map the city in which he lives, confining him to a life in the ghetto. He thus assaults others like an animal out of racial conditioning by white laws and prohibitions. The narrator shines a light on this process of racialization of the black subject after Bigger had aborted the robbery plan:

> Like a man staring regretfully but hopelessly at the stump of a cut-off arm or leg, he knew that the fear of robbing a white man had had hold of him when he started that night with Gus; but he knew it in a way that kept it from coming to his mind in the form of a hard and sharp idea … he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness. He had fought Gus because Gus was late; that was the reason his emotions accepted and he did not try to justify himself in his own eyes, or in the eyes of the gang. (44)

Bigger's physical tensions and violent reaction in this incident attest to the extent to which he is emasculated by white hegemonic discourse. The racial barrier which cramps him within the confinement of the ghetto and forces him to seek release through fantasies of flight also denies him his manhood out of fear of violating white property. In *Native*, the trials of Bigger's masculinity are conducted in terms of his submission to the three laws of the racial barrier. The first of these is the spatial barrier which imprisons Bigger in the South Side of the city and bans his access to its white part unless invited.

The second barrier has to do with the taboo of violating white property, a law ensuring that white wealth is contingent upon the dispossession and deprivation of blacks. The third and most deadly barrier is the sexual one which uses the threat of castration and death against blacks who are involved sexually with white women. These three discourses ensure the security of the white order at the expense of black masculinity, which is denied regardless of whether blacks obey the laws or rebel against them. If black subjects, like Bigger, conform to the prohibitions of these three racial barriers, the result of their action will be a denial of their manhood and humanity. This is also the result if they decide to transgress the racial barrier, an act which is punished in Wright's canon either by literal castration through lynch laws or by death through court laws. Bigger regains his manhood momentarily when he kills the Daltons' daughter Mary only to go back to his previous conditions of emasculation when captured by the police, tried and imprisoned pending his execution.

If the price for Bigger's compliance to the racial barrier is loss of manhood, other characters in Wright's fiction dramatize how the violation of the prohibition around white property exacts the same price on the black subject through death and castration. In the novella "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1938), initiation into manhood comes about as the fruit of a tragic failure to abide by the law protecting racial property and white female sexuality. Big Boy, the main character, and his three black friends' decision to enter white private property uninvited, in a disregard of the sign "NO TRESSPASSIN," is enough to put them face to face with danger. The four boys who enter without permission into a swimming hole on white-owned land are immediately caught by the white owner's son who shoots two of them dead before the protagonist, Big Boy, wrestles the gun away and kills him. The white owner's son, a soldier, is not only defending his honor by coming to the rescue of his white wife seized by fear at the sight of the black boys but also

protecting the law of property, which maintains the racial barrier and keeps blacks in their place. Later in the story, Big Boy will be forced to see from his dim kiln the spectacle of his third friend, Bobo, being lynched. The same fate takes also the life of Mann in "Down by the Riverside" (1938) when he is forced to breach the property taboo to save his dying wife and his family from being swept away by the flood. Afraid at first to commit the violation, Mann makes up his mind to use the boat belonging to Heartfield, a white man, to get his pregnant wife to the hospital. Following a series of events, in which he kills Heartfield on his way to hospital and the death of his wife and her child, Mann is eventually captured and killed by the police authorities for transgressing the racial boundary of property.

Wright also depicts other forms of transgression, which are both more subtle and more dehumanizing for the black subject. In both the novel, *The Long Dream* (1958) and the short story, "Long Black Song" (1938), Wright explores his central theme of the emasculation of the black male through the drama issuing from the material dispossession of Tyree and Silas. Both characters choose to give up rebellion against and defiance of the code of segregation governing relations between white and black and are consequently rewarded by a pseudo-material independence. Tyree runs a funeral parlor for dead black bodies and other illicit businesses, including a whorehouse, a dance hall and a bar. Silas cherishes a dream to be "as good as any white man" ("Long" 20) by sticking to the values of hard work characteristic of the American Dream, by gaining more land and emulating the white ethos as the self-made provider and head of his household. Both men's material successes show the two-fold dynamic of their racialization as emasculated. They "surrender … [their] manhood for power" (Harris 45), first as a result of their willing compliance to the white order, which thrives on the marginalization and effacement of black subjectivity, just as their power is gained at the

expense of their communities' humanity and well-being. Tyree is shown several times in the novel to enjoy great influence in the black community thanks to his affluent life and wealth, taking his car, house and money as signs of his powerful position. Silas's individualistic bid to mold his life in the image of the white bourgeoisie, symbolized by his house and land, ironically ruins the dream to which he dedicates his entire life. His hard work causes him to stay most of the time away from his family, leading his wife, Sarah, to feel lonely and seek ways to overcome her tormenting feelings of being neglected by her husband. This ever-widening gap between husband and wife allows Sarah's past sexual memories with her wartime boyfriend to take hold of her. Even worse, it causes her to succumb to the advances of a visiting white salesman and end up having sex with him. When Silas finds out his wife's treason, he kills the white man in a shootout which sees him murdered and his house burned down in front of his wife, who watches the lynch-like scene from her hideout. The same fire which puts an end to Silas' dream engulfs in its flames the property and business of Tyree, spurring him to undertake without avail a series of humiliating acts to win back the support of white people, and ending up dead himself.

In *Native*, the incidents previously discussed show the extent to which subservience to the white order and its prohibitions has become endemic, structuring and conditioning Bigger's physical reactions to his environment. Bigger's specular physical aggression against Gus can be read in terms of JanMohamed's idea of death as a handy border-policing tool which is used, in the context of colonial encounters, by white empires to ensure their upper hand over the indigenous communities located at the periphery. Arguing against Foucault's theory of the life-enhancing use of death in the modern period, JanMohamed says that Foucault "never examines how the symbolic and material economies of those empires mediated between the deployment of death at the

margins and the enhancement of life at the center, how, indeed, the center has thrived on the margins" ("Sexuality" 115). In this light, Bigger's animal-like assault on his friend, Gus, is ritualistic, since it enacts the ritual of denying black subjects access to property, and consequently to manhood, by the "deployment" of death to maintain the racial law which defines who has and who does not have, who is entitled to property and who must be reduced to property.

Among his people and constrained by the abject conditions of poverty in the ghetto, Bigger's corporeality takes the form of fantasies of escape as well as outbursts of physical violence whenever he is face to face with his weaknesses and limited options in life. But this pattern takes a different turn when Bigger crosses the racial boundary to work as a chauffeur for the wealthy white family of the Daltons. Although Bigger's crossing is at the invitation of the man who owns his one-room flat at the South Side, and done with his consent, and not in violation of his order as in other similar crossings in Wright's work, Bigger's awareness of his skin is at its highest here. This awareness of his visibility and embodiment is reflected in his recurrent body-felt tensions which take him over and govern his relation to himself and to the white world from the moment he sets foot into the fancy mansion until the moment he runs away from it for his life, following the murder of Mary Dalton. Bigger's sense of his own embodiment during his brief work-visit to the Daltons is not only shown through his excessive physical irritation and tension but also through his docility and compliance with the white people he encounters and who subject him to their will. Unlike his violent reactions in the previous incidents in the ghetto, Bigger's tensions and physical unease at the Daltons are symptoms of his complete surrender to the racial hierarchy he is forced to undergo, where his feeling of inferiority, sharpened and intensified by the supremacy of his white employers, sometimes verges on complete effacement of self and annulling of agency.

Over the course of his tenure at the big house Bigger's body, becoming a "badge of shame" (67) and an emblem of his emasculation, is weighed against white bodies, both male and female, in a clear juxtaposition of identities which shows that whites' privilege, power and lack of embodiment are discursively constructed and maintained thanks to the invention and preservation of an opposite black subjectivity, defined in terms of its dispossession and hypercorporeality. Saidiya V. Hartman captures what it means to be black for the white system, "the slave was only considered a subject insofar as he was criminal(ized), wounded body, or mortified flesh" (94). Hartman's assessment of the way whiteness constructs black subjectivity focuses on the body as the site of a racist, ideological work which annihilates blacks on the level of representation, by criminalizing them, and in reality by subjecting them to death. Along the same lines, Bigger's body stands for his poverty and marginalization when pitted against the body of Mr. Dalton and is a sign of his criminality when locked in terror against the body of Mary Dalton in her dark bedroom, the night he accidentally murders her.

On his way to the Daltons' mansion, Bigger is overwhelmed by spells of fear and frenzy, spells that will only become more torturing and controlling as he enters the house and is introduced to its white dwellers. He is described as "feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now" (*Native* 45). Denied release through fantasy as he crosses the color-line from the black side of the town to its white side, Bigger is invaded by a feeling of helplessness. His emasculation, expressed through his feeling of "emptiness," derives from his being intimidated by the house of the wealthy whites which, in the narrator's words, is nothing like the world as he knows it in the black neighborhood: "He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him" (47). Bigger's excess of embodiment and its attendant feeling of being

diminished are emphasized by his repeated sense of being out of place in the white world. He feels different, and this feeling of being an Other engendered by the white world is the white man's guarantee that blacks remain in their place as underprivileged inferior subjects. This process of Othering is clear in Bigger's reaction to the white neighborhood:

> The houses he passed were huge; lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. (45)

Bigger's encounter with the orderly space of the affluent white neighborhood brings to his mind the living conditions of his family and community in the black side of the town, prompting him to realize his place of confinement under white law and making him physically tense and prone to violence. This encounter is the first of many encounters with the white world in which he is repeatedly reminded of his body and forced to come to grips with his physical irritations as he realizes his helplessness as a black subject in the face of white power. When Dalton's white servant, Peggy, opens the door for him to enter the house, he engages in a torturing process of physical unease which betrays his exclusion from his surroundings and, thus, his awareness of his difference. As the female housekeeper ushers him in, he feels his body increasing in mass, blocking his way to the house. He struggles to reduce the physical mass of his body by engaging in other physical acts of embodiment like holding his breath and squeezing himself through the door and past the housemaid: "It seemed that there was not room enough for him to pass without actually touching her" (46). Peggy leads the way and Bigger's struggle with his embodiment only gets worse and more embarrassing. In addition to his feeling that his body is swelling and being inflated, he also finds out that it is spinning out of his control. As Peggy takes him inside the house, Bigger discovers that he cannot keep his balance

and that his body is heavy to the point of causing him to fall: "With cap in hand and shoulders sloped, he followed, walking over a rug so soft and deep that it seemed he was going to fall at each step he took" (46). It is not the only time he has this feeling of being about to fall, an indication of his hyper-embodiment as well as his inability to keep his body under control.

Inside the house, and while waiting to be summoned for an interview with Mr. Dalton, Bigger's unease with his body becomes more and more acute. The tension triggered by his discomfort in the new setting renders him incapable of controlling his body so that he can sit down in a chair. Bigger's corporeal estrangement becomes so deeply-felt that when trying to sit in a chair his body makes him "angry and uncomfortable" (47), as if it were no longer his indeed. These acts of embodiment in the presence of the white gaze marks a split in Bigger's character as he realizes that his body is a source of his discomfort and inability to fit in with the new white environment. The pains he takes to sit on the chair ironically foreshadow Mr. Dalton's assured position as he sits behind his desk and inquires about Bigger's past before hiring him. The chair as a symbol of power and privilege and an emblem of how the black boy and the white man relate to the world is used to show the dispossession and corporeality of the first and the secured position of the second, a position which allows him to overlook his body. Reminded of his body, as a sign of his visibility under the white gaze, by his awkward position and his feeling of "confusion" (47) and unease, Bigger finds out that he has been sitting on "the very edge of the chair" (47). Bigger's attempts to control his body and sit properly in the chair get him nowhere and he falls deeper into it. In the Daltons' mansion, Bigger is held in a new relation to his body, one in which it is torn away from him by the stereotypical image of the white gaze and his unease represents his disavowal of this split in his subjectivity. The narrator describes how Bigger's body crumbles at the proximity

of whites, leading him to suffer the same feelings of discomfort and unease: "[the chair] had collapsed under him. He bounded halfway up, in fear; then, realizing what had happened, he sank distrustfully down again" (47). Even though words like "confusion," "edge," "collapsed," and "sank" are used to describe the hostility of the chair, as symbol of power, to Bigger, they also convey his separation from his body in the presence of white people. Later in the company of Jan and Mary, Bigger steps out of his body, denouncing it for becoming a source of his shame very much like all the other white forces which reinforce his feeling of humiliation and helplessness. Having been transformed into a negative image by the distorted perspective of the white gaze, Bigger either relates to his body as a sign of his inferiority or feels that he is naked without a body. This is how he feels when engulfed by the white looks of Mary and her boyfriend, Jan:

> But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him …
> He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated,
> the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin … He felt naked,
> transparent. (67-8)

This extreme case of disfigurement and dismemberment, when embodiment means shedding one's skin, is first articulated in this chair-scene but keeps recurring throughout the narrative, highlighting the splitting and cleavage of Bigger's identity as the white gaze incarcerates him in the visibility of his color and tears away his body to define it negatively and pejoratively. In these highly corporeal instances, Bigger internalizes whites' view of his body which becomes a locus of his shame and a sign of his inferiority. This process is carried out in a protracted and painful manner from the time Bigger enters the Daltons' house, stressing and detailing his gradual loss of control over his body as it is claimed by the white gaze as possession and property. Highlighting

the ways the black body is scripted by whites' imagination as a commodity for ownership, Henderson says, "These representations, when read symptomatically, draw attention to the central practice of pathologizing the body and accentuate the abject status of slaves as commodified flesh" (*Scarring* 24).

In his encounters with white people, Bigger is reminded of his body not as a means of connecting with and making sense of their world but as a sign of his difference, a tool to police and maintain the racial boundary and its attendant hierarchical classification of whites as superior and blacks as inferior. In this regard, Bigger's status is determined by his appearance and body which become the mark and space of white discursive inscription. His alienation from his body whenever he is in the presence of white people speaks to the process of "pathologizing the body" defined by Henderson, a process by which Bigger disowns his body and begins to view it as white people do. Defined by whites and for their use, Bigger's body becomes a white property which he looks at with shame and over which he has no control. As with Mary's and Jan's looks, white society's negative definition of blacks as mere color and body causes Bigger to see his body as deformed and disfigured. His state of physical visibility which results from the loss of his body to the white gaze not only accounts for his status as inferior but also stands for his emasculation by white hegemony. Building on Hortense J. Spillers' theoretical distinction between the "body" and the "flesh" in the formation of identity, James Gonzalez argues that in its imagining, production and eventual enslavement of the black body, white ideology plays a counter-role to the one identified by Spillers. He challenges Spillers' view that colonialism controls the black body by commoditizing it as property while failing to own the flesh which stands for black self, culture and roots. Spillers' theory holds that the black body is the site of white ideological work, enslaved, disciplined and tortured by it, while the flesh is the realm of identity which preserves and

passes on to the subject its cultural and historical credentials. Arguing for a black form of identity conceived through the lenses of hegemony, Gonzalez draws a picture of colonialism which reduces the black subject to property, and in the process of doing that transforms him "physically and symbolically … from 'flesh' into body"(130). Describing this transition as an act of commodification, Gonzalez argues that black subjects were historically subjected to cultural denigration and uprooted from their "habitat" to be later forced into a metamorphosis in which "This objectified entity journeys in a state of non-identity, packed inhumanely and in transport to a place where it is further stripped of its 'outer' appearance–slightly molded into something identifiable, useful and valuable to the property owner" (131). The black subject is, therefore, transformed by colonialism through two stages. First, as "flesh," the black subject, through hegemonic cultural formation, is denied access to its own culture and made to internalize and adopt the colonial culture. Second, the subject becomes of use to the slave-master, or the colonialist, who starts to see it as a property, a "body." This journey of objectification sees the black subject molded in an initial phase of "flesh" in which white ideology shapes the subject's worldview so that it behaves in line with the governing structure of the white system. The black subject, then, moves into the carnal stage of the "body," where, as a property, it is "physically transformed to act in accordance with this new relation" (131). Read in terms of this "flesh" and "body" dynamic, Bigger's experience of the Daltons' mansion and its white neighborhood is clearly marked by a carnal initiation into property and body. Not only is Bigger accepted into the wealthy house as a driver whose physical labor frames him in terms of utility but also the fancy mansion and the corporate system it symbolizes are sustained thanks to Bigger's poverty and the rent he and other black tenants of the South Side pay to Mr. Dalton. In this light, Bigger's feeling that he is losing his physical wholeness and his

struggle to keep his body under control are expressions of excessive embodiment that brand him as a white property and a nonidentity. Commoditized as mere useful body, Bigger is presented with his next challenge in the form of the last and most deadly of all the white taboos, the white woman. Inside the white house, Bigger's shifts to property and body are needed to save the myth of the white woman from its counter-myth of the black rapist. His passing the test of black male sexual threat determines his complete commodification and utility to the white master who oversees the transition from "flesh" to "body" to keep the black man away from the white woman and to ward off fears of miscegenation.

Like all the other forces of whiteness to which his racialized being is subjected in the ghetto, the taboo of crossing the sexual barrier, of having sex with a white woman is introduced early in the novel before Bigger has to face it and suffer its deadly implications for his life. Already, Bigger has a glimpse of Mary Dalton and her ostentatious life-style at the movie theatre. He has a chance to release his fear of the white woman by watching a newsreel of her and her communist boyfriend, Jan, on a Florida beach. Bigger and his best friend Jack, who are seeking diversion at the movie theatre, go to see a movie entitled *The Gay Women* at the Regal theatre. Displaying white wealth and the good life through scenes of dancing and drinking and through images of white women lolling on the beach, the movie unleashes Bigger's fantasy about the tabooed but much-desired white women. Thus, in addition to his masturbatory fantasies about her, Bigger's imagination starts associating Mary with the rewards of the American Dream and the much-valued opportunities that the white world has to offer. To him, Mary is not only his key to financial benefits but also to accessing the inner heart of an unknown white world from which he is locked off:

Maybe he [Mr. Dalton] had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money; maybe she'd like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometimes. Or maybe she had a secret sweetheart and only he would know about it because he could have to drive her around; maybe she would give him money not to tell. (*Native* 36)

Bigger's fantasy is true on many accounts, especially in terms of the plot, since it foreshadows events that will take place in Bigger's life. As the events unfold, Bigger finds out that Mary has a "sweetheart" and that he will take both of them on a tour to discover the black side of town. His fantasy also comes true when he gets the ransom money after killing Mary and sending a kidnap note to her father. What does not materialize, though, is the knowledge part, namely his access to the secrets of the white world. For the hidden secret of the white world is none but the idealized white woman, whose mythic virginity has been used to criminalize black bodies and to emasculate black subjects through the disciplinary practice of lynching. Unlocking the secret of the white world, in Bigger's case, is equivalent to crossing the sexual boundary and being accused of rape leading eventually to mob lynching. This reality, which holds that a white woman spells death for black men, is one of the grim truths that Bigger has to decipher while reading the many ominous writings on the Daltons' wall and the white world for which they stand. The conflicting images of the white woman as both a real threat to the black male subject's life and an object of his desire and fantasy mark Bigger's first encounter with Mary as she storms her father's office, interrupting Bigger's work-interview with the wealthy old man. Her sudden appearance calls Bigger to the disparity between her alluring image in the movie and the danger she represents in real life: "on the screen [she] had not seemed dangerous and his mind had been able to do with her as it liked" (*Native* 56). And yet, after driving her and Jan to the black neighborhood, Bigger ends up alone

with her in the car and his sexual fantasy grows uncontrollable, leading him to cross the sexual barrier which regulates sexual relations between black males and white women. He carries her in his arms into her bedroom in the mansion and puts her on her bed. Bigger, who has been drinking like her, loses sight of her body as a threat and starts to fantasize about the stimulating sexual effect of her body as object of desire. But unlike his previous instances of fantasy, Bigger's desire for Mary this time around does not relive him of his physical tensions but plunges him into an intense and prolonged embodiment which begins with Mary's body as a sexual stimulant and ends with it as the purveyor of castration and loss of manhood. Holding her between his arms, he succumbs to the demands of his fantasy:

> His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer. Her face was buried in his shoulder; his arms tightened about her. Her face turned slowly and he held his face still, waiting for her face to come round, in front of his. Then her head leaned backward, slowly, gently; it was as though she had given up. (83)

The emphasis on Bigger's body movements and physical reactions is reminiscent of the pool scene early in the novel when he becomes all-body trying to assault his friend Gus. Even though the sexual diction sets this scene apart from the violent language in which his aggression against his black comrade is cast, Bigger's loss of voice and his overembodiment betray the potential violence which is endemic to all instances of sexual rapprochement between the black male and white women. In this scene, Bigger loses speech very much like when he fights Gus and is repeatedly seen through physical acts and adjectives that highlight his transformation into voiceless corporeality. Time and again, he is described in terms of his sexual arousal and how he is stirred by his desire for Mary, without saying a single word throughout the scene: "He eased his hand, the

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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" (84). Yet his imagination is soon checked against the reality of sexual taboos which lock the two sides to the sexual encounter in a deadly moment. Without prior notice, Mary's mother, Mrs. Dalton, suddenly appears at the door, giving the scene a different twist and changing Bigger's arousal to crippling fear as his fantasy clashes with sexual prohibitions. When the door opens behind him: "He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body" (84).

Recalled from his fantasy to the real world of white taboos and prohibitions against black sexuality, Bigger's awareness of his embodiment takes hold of him again at the sight of the white figure standing by the door. The "hysterical terror," "falling," "seize[ing]" and "gripp[ing]," all are epithets which frame, limit and freeze Bigger's being into his body, reminding him of his sub-human place in the white order. In a sharp contrast to Bigger's emasculating embodiment, Mrs. Dalton's apparent physical fragility and her being more of a voice than a body stand for a white world that projects an outward show of non-violence and peaceful humanity to mask its inhuman subjection of black people. Her unexpected appearance, which catches Bigger off guard, reflects the inevitable threat that the white system poses to black subjects when they decide to violate the sexual boundary separating mainly black men from white women. Although the lights are turned off in Mary's bedroom and Bigger knows Mrs. Dalton is blind, her appearance jolts him from his fantasy into the real world of his embodiment because of his awareness that, if discovered, what is going to decide his fate is not what Mrs. Dalton can see or not see in the room but the stereotypical image in her mind which holds him culpable and guilty in these kinds of situations. Thus, his embodiment, triggered by his fear of the

"white blur," accounts for Bigger's immediate awareness that his body has changed from a locus of sexual pleasure to a criminal body likely to be accused of rape and then transfigured and lynched. Wallace offers a reading of the murder scene in terms of a masturbatory ritual conducted by Bigger to ward off the threat of lynching and mutilation of his member. He argues that Bigger's excessive embodiment results from his fear of being exposed to Mrs. Dalton, and thus, losing his penis when his nakedness becomes public. In Freud's castratory terms, Bigger's body, Wallace argues, mutates in one instant from the ease of sexual fantasy prior to Mrs. Dalton's appearance to the tension of sexual incrimination which follows from it. So fixed by terror lest his presence be known, "he waited tensely, afraid to move for fear of bumping into something in the dark and betraying his presence" (*Native* 84). According to Wallace, the link between Bigger's fear of exposure, of being rendered naked and the tense stiffness of his body explains how "Mrs. Dalton's haunting of the scene stands more profoundly for an inescapable indictment against black men as consummate sexual outlaws" (37). If, according to Freud, stiffness of the terrorized body means erection and the consolation it offers that one has not lost his sexual organ, then Bigger's hysterical embodiment at the sight of Mrs. Dalton is a reassurance that as long as he is not exposed he will not be lynched and have his manhood mutilated. Enacting the deeply felt threat of emasculation, Bigger's body "grew tight and full, as though about to explode" (*Native* 84) as Mrs. Dalton approaches him. The images of being "tight," "full," and "about to explode" are all indicative of the terror of lynching and the mark of dismemberment it leaves on the black body, especially the mutilation of the male sexual organ. They are also photographic frames permeated with erotic arousal as they describe Bigger's symbolic masturbatory drama in his struggle to make sure he still keeps his member. The connections between stiffness, fear of lynching and masturbation grow clearer and their effect on Bigger more

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acute when Mrs. Dalton gets closer to the bedside: "He clenched his teeth and held his breath, intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. His muscles flexed taut as steel" (*Native* 85). Bigger's embodiment cast in images of steel is sharply contrasted to the almost bodiless figure of Mrs. Dalton, who is "floating" thanks to her position of power as white. As a guardian of Mary, symbol of white femininity, Mrs. Dalton incarnates whiteness's privileges of voice and authority in the face of which Bigger is thrown back into embodiment, losing control of the situation. Once he sees her at the door, he ceases to act as a conscious subject and proceeds instead to think and act out of fear of the white law, which she represents and which views him as an all-body and sexually-minded black who enters Mary's bedroom to rape her.

Wallace explores Bigger's embodiment further, arguing that his nakedness dramatizes his loss of identity and helplessness in the face of white prohibitions. As if foreshadowing the police pursuit of Bigger following the murder of Mary, Mrs. Dalton engages in a brief but highly significant moment of pursuit which could have been disastrous had it lead to the discovery of Bigger lurking by Mary's bedside. She gropes along through the dim room using her touch, instead of her eyes, and as she gets near to him, exacerbates Bigger's fear of exposure and eventual castration. To avoid her touch, Bigger becomes almost like her shadow, emulating her moves to stay at a remove from her. This chase which Wallace calls a "game of blind man's buff, say, or hide-and-seek" (38), enables Bigger to escape the approaching white danger and preserve his physical wholeness: "With each of her movements toward the bed his body made a movement to match hers, away from her, his feet not lifting themselves from the floor … his muscles flexed so taut they ached" (*Native* 85). With these physical maneuvers, Bigger succeeds in averting his discovery and preserving his body from white terror. The masturbatory overtones of this survival chase, in which Bigger's manhood hinges upon invisibility and

keeping his member, are implicitly articulated in Bigger's physical state when Mrs. Dalton eventually leaves the room:

> He relaxed and sank to the floor, his breath going in a long gasp. He was weak and wet with sweat. He stayed crouched and bent, hearing the sound of his breathing filling the darkness. Gradually, the intensity of his sensations subsided and he was aware of the room. He felt that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free. (*Native* 85-6)

The sexual release which Bigger experiences when the danger of castration elapses reveals how far embodiment can go in the racialization of black male subjectivity. The white order which defines the black subject as mere body without intellect maps that body and sets limits to it in a bid to control it. The threat of castration not only produces the black body as a potential threat to white femininity, reducing it to mere carnality, but is also used to destroy the black body in case the black subject decides to violate the law banning sexual intercourse between blacks and whites. Embodiment, therefore, leaves the black subject with impossible choices of self-negation: either to comply with white law and be denied humanity and agency or violate it and face annihilation. Black embodiment in this regard is about a mode of white representation and a way of seeing that sanction the disavowal of black subjectivity by either excess of the body or total destruction of it. The discursive construction and the network of institutions that support and sustain it will be the subject of the following chapter which analyses black identity in terms of white stereotypical regimes of representation.

CHAPTER TWO

STEREOTYPING BLACKNESS: ARRESTING BLACK MALE SUBJECTIVITY

"Uncle Tom" and the Negation of Black Manhood

The study of black embodiment allows the achievement of twin acts of deconstruction, each act shedding a special light on the inner workings of white racial discourse and its perception of the Other. On a first level of analysis, embodiment exposes the ways whiteness as a hegemonic discourse relegates black male subjectivity to mere biological existence, denying it manhood and self-fulfillment. On a second level, the realization that whiteness is not the humanistic and enlightened discourse it pretends to be (since it can defend its presumed high moral standing only by dehumanizing its black Others), leads to the notion that whiteness is an anxious form of subjectivity predicated and dependent on a complex process of difference-making. In this regard, the exploration of black male embodiment not only helps retrieve the status of the black male subject as an identity denied by white racial discourse but also tells more about the instability of white identity itself and its mythical formation.

Yet for a full understanding of the place of black male subjectivity in the hegemonic discourse of whiteness to be possible, this chapter will study the white discourse of identity through the prism of the discursive regimes of truth which make it and which it galvanizes to produce the black subject in the restrictive terms of its embodiment. It will map out the ways in which white discourse relies on an arsenal of truths, values and claims in its adamant bid to confine blackness to biology and deny it the intellectual and human traits necessary for subjectivity. Deploying Foucauldian

theory of discourse, it will show that whiteness as a discourse functions and is the articulation of a subtle relation of knowledge to power. Foucault defines discourse as the manifestation of networks of truths and knowledge which are deployed to favor and disenfranchise or include and exclude social subjects. As such, discourse presents power as an intricate configuration which is wielded on the level of systems of values and social institutions which draw and maintain the boundaries between what is true and what is not (*Order* 52-3). In this light, whiteness as a discourse produces regimes of representations and truths about the black body in order to control it. These systems of truth which are produced as a form of stereotypical knowledge are maintained through a network of institutions, varying from journalism to court law and the values of white mass culture.

It is these bodies of knowledge and institutions that simultaneously determine what should be said and not said about blacks, and define the economy of truths about them, but more importantly make blacks embrace these values and truths about their moral and physical depravity as inherent and ontological. Relations between stereotypes as whites' knowledge about blacks on the one hand and institutions of control on the other are articulated in Foucault's insistence on the interdependence of power and knowledge in discursive formations: "It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (*Power / Knowledge* 52). White racial discourse cultivates the stereotype to reinforce white hegemonic control over blacks through the power-knowledge nexus. The systems of representation which come together under the encompassing trope of the stereotype along with the civil institutions of media, law and mass culture work to discipline and keep blacks in their place, in the marginality and disenfranchisement enforced upon them by the white supremacist order.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the stereotype as a discursive strategy that colonial discourse deploys to freeze and arrest the representation of the Other is key to the demystification of the self-Other dynamic underpinning whiteness. Bhabha departs from the humanist and enlightenment-inspired reading of the stereotype as a false knowledge at the service of power and control and uses it to explore the splitting and ambivalence characteristic of positivistic modes of identification. Striking back against mimetic forms of secure and pure identity in the name of which the stereotype is read as an ideological misrepresentation of the Other, Bhabha contends that the construction of the Other in colonial discourse is based on an ideological "fixity" which is the sign of the difference of the Other. He says that: "Fixity, as the sign of cultural / historical / racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (66). To unlock this "fixity," Bhabha introduces the stereotype as a mode of discursivity, negotiated along the lines of sameness and difference, familiarity and absence and desire and fear. What this mode of knowledge, which hovers between what is familiar, fixed and stable and what is alien, different and changing, amounts to is a process of ambivalence that denies clear-cut and closed forms of identification and subjectivity.

By placing ambivalence at the center of colonial discourse and its stereotypical knowledge, Bhabha hopes to redefine inherited spaces of identification which are mapped by nationalistic beliefs and longing for purity of race and culture, modes of subjectivity that are based on the familiar and the same. If the stereotype as a form of ambivalence enables the overcoming of positivist knowledge and its attendant closed discourses of identity, it is because it initiates a split in the subject by showing how it hinges on unrecognized desires, fantasies and fears of the Other. This notion of ambivalence that destabilizes traditional subjectivity has also to do with the fetish. After

arguing that the stereotype, through processes of avowal and disavowal, makes possible the exposure of "The myth of historical origination–racial purity, cultural priority," Bhabha sets out to explore it as a form of identification predicated on fetishism:

> The scene of fetishism functions similarly as, at once, a reactivation of the material of original fantasy–the anxiety of castration and sexual difference–as well as a normalization of that difference and disturbance in terms of the fetish object as the substitute for the mother's penis. (74)

Thus defined, the fetish pictures an identity constructed on the basis of a lack and an attempt at substitution. The child recognizing that pure identity is impossible and imaginary, because his mother lacks a penis, tries to make up for that lack by using the fetish as a substitute intended to arrest the absence of the penis as a permanent presence. But the domain of identity, represented by the familiarity and the presence of the fetish, is always haunted by the lack which makes it possible in the first place. Bhabha likens this dynamic of lack and substitution, absence and presence which introduces fissures and anxiety in the certainty of traditional mimetic identification, to the tropes of metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor stands for "the anxiety of castration," while metonymy speaks to the object of the fetish which represents the desired but missing penis of the mother. In terms of the discursive constructions of blackness by white mythology and ideology, metonymic fetishization of the black subject as a different Other allows white subjectivity to claim as present what is originally missing and desired, namely a mythical and imaginary identity that is whole and pure. Put differently, by arresting black subjectivity in a negative stereotypical framing that presents blacks as lacking in humanity, white identity is able to indulge in an exorcism that purifies the white self of all the negative traits attached to blackness and thus reinforce whiteness as the opposite of blackness, as a realm of humanity and purity. It is only by purging the self of these

unwanted traits that white subjectivity is able to claim its imaginary identity. Arresting blackness in the fetish not only freezes black subjects into a negative misrepresentation but also, in a specular fashion, holds them for the white eye to see and recognize its difference from them.

Both Foucault's poststructuralist concept of subjectivity as a disciplinary mode of surveillance carried out through a complex overlap of power and knowledge and Bhabha's psychoanalytic theory of the fetish as a fissure and a splitting moment in hegemonic forms of identification, share a common bid to destabilize the Enlightenment's idea of the unitary and autonomous subject, on the basis of which whiteness promotes itself as a discursive cultural and historical space that is whole and coherent, a realm of certainty and identity. Viewing whiteness through Foucauldian theory of discourse helps reconstruct the regimes of truth and misrepresentation which legitimize its institutions and exercise of power. In so doing, a process of bracketing the validity of the truth claims and the mimetic pretensions of whiteness is unleashed, exposing the relation of these claims to power and focusing on how power in its turn produces these regimes of truth. To the same end, although from a different theoretical perspective, Bhabha seizes upon the stereotype, whiteness's sole knowledge about the Other, and uses it to show that identity in general, and white identity in particular, is not under the control of the subject. He argues that rather than being an expression of transparent ideological self-understanding, identity slips away and out of the subject's control and shows the subject to be captured between contradictory moments of avowal and disavowal, presence and absence, metaphor and metonymy. And it is these conflicting moments of identification which account for identity as a process of splitting and disjuncture. Significant as it is, Bhabha's theory of identity as stereotype and fetish

is only possible thanks to his introduction of the Other as a sign of difference which threatens any claim by whiteness to autonomy and wholeness of identity.

In *Lawd Today!* (1963), white ideology's construction of black subjectivity in terms of the arrested fixity of the stereotype is complete. Unlike *Native Son* (1940), *The Long Dream* (1958), *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and other novels and stories of Wright's corpus, *Lawd* stands out by the fact that it takes place in an almost exclusively black social setting where blacks and whites hardly engage in any exchange of any kind. In Wright's corpus, blacks usually interact with white society in ways that reveal the limitations placed on them by white institutions. They deal with them only to get menial work that generates income to survive. They also relate to white society through acts of violence like beating, lynching and castration which target the bodies of black subjects who are suspected of violating the rules and prohibitions which maintain white supremacy and black subordination. *Lawd* depicts the everyday life of Jake Jackson, the protagonist, and his three post office friends who deal with whites on a few occasions only, all of them at the workplace. Jake's only exposure to white people is through his job at the post office where he performs tasks assigned to him by his employer. The other instances where he gets into contact with whites are at the meeting with the Board Review of the post office when he is interrogated and humiliated over abusing his wife and when he comes to borrow more money from the white accountant, increasing his debt and worsening his financial situation. Apart from these interactions, Jake's exposure to the white world is evinced through his consumption of and subjection to its cultural discourses disseminated through mass culture discourses of the cinema and the press.

Key as these encounters are in showing Jake's subordinate position to the white order, their limited number, however, reveals that Jake's world has already succumbed to hegemonic white structures and institutions to the extent that he acts out the ideology

of whites without the need of their intervention. These are the institutions of popular culture and mass media like the radio, newspapers and movies which dominate Jake's perceptions, set his priorities and channel his energies into a blind faith in the popular master narrative of the American Dream of success. Brannon Costello argues that Jake's passivity in the face of the challenges facing his life under white rule is a reflection of how much he is subjugated and penetrated by these discourses of white popular culture. He says that "If Jake does not have a primary alternative belief system, another master narrative that explains the world to him, he finds it in the American success myth pervasive in the popular culture–newspaper, radio, films–that he consumes" (66). The appeal of this popular culture to Jake is translated into his optimistic and happy relation to the prevailing consumer culture of capitalism, in spite of the fact that his poverty and exclusion are direct results of its logic.

The narrative of *Lawd* is patterned around this gap between Jake's fantasies of integration in the white system of consumerism and the grim reality of his life, which reduces him to marginalization and the mere struggle to make ends meet. A failed husband and Depression-era urban worker, Jake's exposure to the institutions of mass culture subjects him to the pursuit of popular myths of pleasure, success and material gratification and, thus, blinds him to his actual position as a victim of the American Dream he strives to incarnate. The hegemonic subjection of Jake, which revolves around this gap between the warring forces of fantasy and reality governing his life, is cast in terms of the stereotype as a form of arrested, fixed and rigid subjectivity. Wright deploys the two stereotypes of the "fool" and the "boy" to fathom out and explore the extent of Jake's penetration by the discourses of popular culture. And while the "fool" stereotype is used as a trope to show Jake's blindness to the real dilemmas of his life because of his subscription to the myths of white ideology, the other stereotype of the "boy" shows his

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infantilization and emasculation by the dominant patriarchal culture of the white man. The overlap and complementarity between these two stereotypes is crucial in two ways: the deployment of the fool stereotype helps chart the inner geography of Jake, which is mapped out by white hegemony while that of the boy explores the power relations which precisely follow from Jake's arrested mental image as fool. These power relations picture Jake as a boy in his relation to the white Father, symbol of Law, in terms of an arrested development and a denied manhood. Anthony Dawahare comments on the economy of the "boy" stereotype as a rigid mode of (mis)representation deployed by white culture to fix the development of black subjectivity and deny it access to masculinity. He says that:

> Black men/"boys" are infantilized by white society, making American racism conterminous with sexism, since the infantilization of black men symbolically aligns them with "women", that other figure long associated with weakness and dependency in patriarchal society. (455)

The hegemonic economy involved in the stereotype of the boy indicates that black subjectivity, arrested in its development because of its conditioning by white racist discourses, is subjected to the will of the white male, as a father-symbol who stands for the Law and sustains the patriarchal order of racism. Denied agency and reduced to infantile status, black males become dependent on their white masters as boys whose growth to manhood and maturity is frozen. This gendered power imbalance between boys / women and men / fathers, which confines blacks to a subordinate and helpless position, is usually expressed in the similar stereotype of the Uncle Tom who accepts his white master's treatment and happily celebrates his marginal place in the white racial system. The Uncle Tom boys who act in compliance with white expectations and try to live up to their image of blacks as subhumans are yes-sayers who have accepted their emasculation as they act "the role of docile servant" (Schultz 7).

Jake's complete subjection to the white system and his acceptance of the Uncle Tom and boy status it assigns him is clearly indicated in the first scene of the novel: the opening dream of endless steps that Jake tries to climb in a futile attempt to reach a destination which he continually misses as he discovers that he does not move forward or go anywhere toward his goal. Urged by an authoritative voice which he finds out to be that of his boss, Jake's Sisyphean dream of climbing the steps and the fact that he goes nowhere, foreshadow the gap between his unrealistic hopes of social mobility under capitalism and his failed life both as a husband and a worker. The flights of steps he takes and the endless futile running and the commanding voice of the Father/boss are all components of the mythical discourses of popular culture which promise social mobility, self-development and moving forward in life while dashing blacks' hopes of access to manhood, relegating them to the boy status of dependency on whites. The narrator describes Jake's submissive pursuit of this ever-receding promise symbolized by his futile running after the steps:

> He stopped and looked to see if he could tell where the steps ended, but there were just steps and steps and steps. *Shucks, they needn't be in such a helluva hurry*, he thought as he stretched his legs and covered three and four steps at a time. Then, suddenly, the steps seemed funny, like a great big round barrel rolling or a long log spinning in water and he was on top treading for all he was worth and that voice was still calling. (*Early Works* 5; emphasis in original)

There are two important elements in this scene that fully articulate Jake's indoctrination in the structures of the white ideology of popular culture. The first element has to do with the appeal of this culture and its power of representation which condemn Jake to a futile quest to realize the promise of success and to draw a line beneath his life of dire poverty. The staircase and Jake's running after it represent this dynamic which

features him in a nihilist moment, driven and penetrated by promises of prosperity which white culture instills in his mind in order to confine him to his place as a marginal character and a victim of the white order. In spite of all the running, Jake, still dreaming, realizes that he "*Ain't moving a peg*" (5; emphasis in original), highlighting the gap between the discourse of promise and possibility championed by popular culture and the reality of subjection it breeds among black people.

The disparity between the discursive representation which shapes Jake's view of his reality and of the world and its fixing and arresting of Jake in his place is what legitimizes the power relation between Jake and the Boss, the boy and the Father in this opening dream. Not only does the boss appear to be all-voice, repeatedly calling upon Jake to run and cover more steps, but he is also the symbol of corporate power, the command, order and law which Jake has to heed and respect. The association of voice with the power of the boss and subservience of Jake is stressed repeatedly: "But somebody was calling and he had to go up," and later in the scene "*Jeeesus, all that running for nothing* … But that guy, that guy who had a voice just like his boss, was still calling" (5; emphasis in original). In a stark contrast with the boss, who possesses narrative, voice and agency, stands Jake, all-body, an obedient boy and Uncle Tom-like, who goes out of his way to meet the expectations of the boss and execute his orders. Jake's excessive embodiment as he sleeps indicates the extent to which he is at pains trying to act out his boy role and heed his boss's command: "Jake turned and lay on his stomach. His head rested in the crook of his right elbow. His left arm clung close to his side, dingy palm upcurled. He smacked his lips softly, as though over a dainty and dissolving morsel" (5).

Fixed in the stereotype of hyperembodiment, Jake's role and status in the symbolic white order is well set and defined as a boy who internalizes the dehumanizing

structures of white hegemony and, consequently, accepts his emasculation to fit with the white image of him. This is why as the dream draws to a close, Jake shouts, "*I'm coming! I'm coming!*" (6; emphasis in original). The word "coming" indicates Jake's compliance to whites' will and the pleasure and satisfaction he derives from answering the command of his boss and the call of white popular culture. The sexual connotation of "I'm coming" resonates very well with Jake's happiness with his subject-position in white culture as a boy, a status of emasculated manhood of which he is not aware given his repeated boasting about his sexual omnipotence. He undertakes several adventures in the narrative to gratify his sexual drives as part of his pursuit of popular myths of success and possibility, further emphasizing the chasm between his illusions of manhood and virility and the reality of subjection and infantilization which hems him in. Awakened from his dream by the voice of the radio, Jake is euphoric about his dream experience and the illusions it entraps him in, "He remembered being on the very brink of something, on the verge of a deep joy" (6).

In *Native*, Bigger Thomas, a more complex and ambivalent character than Jake, presents a consciousness and a worldview marked by the discourses of popular culture. According to Ross Pudaloff, "Bigger knows only the self and the world mass culture presents to him" (156). And like Jake, Bigger's vulnerability and exposure to the white master narrative of mass culture forces him into the category of boys who know their place in the white racial hierarchy, accept it and act on it. The "boy" status, as a signifier of arrested black manhood, freezes Bigger into the stereotype of the meek and happy Uncle Tom, further consolidating the white structures of hegemony which keep him in his place. Describing how the fixing of the black subject into this stereotype enables the white order to maintain itself, Dawahare asserts: "As long as he tries to forget his emasculated 'boy' status in a patriarchal white society, he is condemned to act the part"

(457). This is exactly what Bigger does. Mindful of his place, Bigger knows full well that compliance to the exigencies of his stereotypical image is justified by the ideology of racial difference that envisages race relations in terms of polarities. Following one of his encounters with Mrs. Dalton, Bigger puts it this way, "She was white and he was black; she was rich and he was poor; she was old and he was young; she was the boss and he was the worker. He was safe; yes" (122). In this regard, the stereotype as a form of white knowledge about black people not only keeps black subjectivity in its place of inferiority but also maintains whites' position of superiority. It is cultivated by whites, through the institutions of mass culture, to assure blacks' docility and acquiescence to the binaries and oppositions of the racial system.

Unlike *Lawd* which is a study of Jake's and his postal cohorts' subjugation to the myths of popular culture, Bigger in *Native* is presented from the beginning as a stereotype and object of white knowledge. No wonder then that in as much as his being is fixed in the stereotype, he is depicted as accessible to white knowledge. This availability of Bigger as stereotypical product of white knowledge is evident in the case of Mrs. Dalton, who, in spite of her blindness, is ready to trust Bigger and give him work as a driver because she assumes that she knows him. Mrs. Dalton's knowledge is not of Bigger as an individual with a specific story and singular experience but rather a stereotyped view based on the Uncle Tom type, the reassuring image of blacks as happy with their status, loyal and obedient to whites. Her knowledge of Bigger is along the lines of what Abdul R. JanMohamed describes as the tendency of colonial discourse to eclipse the specific traits peculiar to each individual in favor of a metaphysical stereotype in which all colonial subjects are made to fit ("Economy" 61).

The Uncle Tom stereotype as a handy knowledge of black subjects which is reassuring and comforting for whites, accounts for Bigger's terror when Mrs. Dalton

unexpectedly arrives at Mary's bedroom while he is by her bedside. Bigger's fear was that if discovered in Mary's room he would contradict Mrs. Dalton's metaphysical image of him as a docile and quiet black who knows his place. In this light, it becomes clear that the stereotype racializes Bigger and defines his place by making him knowable and accessible to whites. Very much like Mrs. Dalton, Mary presents another case of white knowledge about blacks. Bigger's reaction the first time he meets her at the mansion was that he "felt that she knew every feeling and thought he had at that moment and he turned his head away in confusion" (65). Later, on their way to school, Mary surprises Bigger by saying they are going to see one of his friends, meaning Jan. Almost all white characters assume they have an intimate knowledge of Bigger, defining him in a stereotypical way in order to rationalize and justify their supremacist position over him.

Given the discursive construction of Bigger's subjectivity on the ground of stereotypical fixity, Bigger is the peaceful Uncle Tom black boy when he shows up at the Daltons' house for the first time. In their presence, he denies himself, acts behind his "wall" and does their bidding. Whether responding to Mr. Dalton, his wife, their daughter or to the housemaid Peggy, Bigger keeps using the deferential words "Yessuh" and "Yessum." In the same emasculated manner, Jake awakens from his dream to discover that the voice of authority incessantly urging him to seek the unattainable myths of popular success is none other than the voice of mass media. He awakens to the voice of the radio programme announcer celebrating the birthday of Abraham Lincoln; segments of the programme will be aired repeatedly in a sharp contrast with Jake's worsening life conditions. Coming from Lil's radio, the voice of the announcer, Jack Bassett, introducing Lincoln specialist Professor Weatherspoon, initiates a pattern of ironical incidents which set Jake's enslavement to mass media and popular culture against his "boy" status and life of deprivation. The ironic contrast between the Lincoln radio

programme, with its symbolic emancipatory message, and Jake's failed life is developed through the stereotype of the fool, for every time Jake boasts of his dreams of success and manhood through endorsement of the dominant ideology, he is shown to be trapped and victimized by the impact of this ideology on his deteriorating life.

The fool stereotype does not only capture this duality between Jake's dreams of success and their hegemonic and infantilizing effects on him on a thematic level but also reflects the two sides of the duality on the level of plot development. Awaking from the dream to the sound of the radio, he goes to the bathroom and stands in front of the mirror. As he looks at the reflection of his hair and face, Jake starts to enact a series of common stereotypes about blacks that are disseminated by popular culture and that determine his identity. In this bathroom scene, Jake experiences what Jacques Lacan calls "the mirror stage" in which he, like a child, identifies with the stereotypical image reflected back to him in the mirror. Denied manhood and maturity, the mirror stage of his child status presents a form of identity that is whole, imaginary and unmarred by difference. According to Lacan, this stage of child development precedes the symbolic stage in which the child starts to develop language and understands difference (54). The child looks at the mirror and what it sees is full identity, not a representation or a reflection of itself as lack and absence. As a child, Jake fully adopts the stereotypical image reflected back to him in the mirror. His alienating incarceration into the stereotypical frame of his image is further substantiated by the fact the he does not develop into the other two phases of the mirror stage, the first being the child's ability to separate between the image and his identity, recognizing it as mere image and the second, his realization that the image is the cultural representation of his own identity (White 76). Jake remains fixed in the first phase of this three-stage mode of identification, seeking his white-perspective-

produced image as his true identity. He looks at himself and what he sees is a sight he compares to that of an enemy:

He next tackled the big job of the morning. His hair had to be combed, combed flat so that not a ripple, not a crinkle, not a crease must show. Going to the mirror, he surveyed the unruly strands with the apprehensive air of a veteran fieldmarshall inspecting the fortifications and wire entanglements of an alien army. (23)

Completely formed by the dominant white ideology, Jake views his African look and his kinky hair as an ugly sight. Like Bigger who considers that his body is a "badge of shame," Jake's hate for his hair indicates that he adopts the white stereotypical view of it and also the extent to which he is trapped in the consumer culture's emphasis on appearance over substance. Later he reminds himself that he needs to have a haircut because, "he could not be around the sweet girls tonight with hair bristling like cockle burrs on his neck" (34). Obsessed with appearances, he recalls how he used to hate his friend Streamline only because his hair was straight, "Streamline's slick black hair always irked him, made him envious and uneasy. That was why he was called Streamline, on account of that slick, straight, black hair of his" (55). Constituted by mass culture's ideology of consumerism, Jake values everything by its appearance. That is why he hates Streamline, whose straight hair makes him feel inferior, and by the same token he is disgusted with his look in the mirror and wants to change it.

Using the same military images as when he refers to his hair as an enemy, Jake picks an item from the many products of mass culture available to him to conquer it, to overcome his stereotypical image of it: "Jake now brought forth the most powerful weapon at his command. This deadly contraption was a pink jar of hair pomade labeled, LAY 'EM LOW" (24). As a result of his indoctrination by white ideology, Jake's

emphasis on appearance, on his mirror image, shows that his view of beauty is shaped by white values as he looks with disgust and derision at his kinky hair and wants to make it straight. Such an enslavement to white values, which is the result of exposure to mass culture, is clear in his use of the "LAY 'EM LOW" pomade to get rid of his African image and identity. The pomade, which stands for the influence of consumer culture, is used by Jake to fix his stocking cap on his head in order to suppress "thousands" of "triumphant kinks" and to win the battle against his image in the mirror. After searching for the stocking cap, humiliating and accusing his wife Lil of ruining his caps, Jake is eventually able to stand up again in front of the mirror, capped and rebranded. Like a model, he admires his looks in the mirror and starts singing a love poem, feeling the same ecstasy at the opening scene of the dream.

In addition to its being one of several initiation rites in the popular and mass culture of appearance that Jake goes through, this scene launches him into the thick of the narrative action capped like a fool, boasting of incarnating a culture of which he is a victim. A signifier of his subjugation by white ideology, the fool cap, like his opening dream and the radio story of emancipator Lincoln, speaks for the irony of Jake's life, a life that lends credence to appearances over individuality and identity. For as much as he values the myths of success generated by mass culture and earnestly tries to incarnate them in his life, Jake's life is shown to be in total ruin, domestically torn asunder by his neglect of his wife and publicly by the humiliation of a job that does not pay off.

Two predominant discourses of popular culture, always set against the values of domesticity and family through his abuse and humiliation of his wife, present Jake as completely subjugated by white hegemony. The discourses of the mass media and consumerism respectively highlight his love of newspapers and food, with the first shaping his view of life and the second his priorities in it. In addition to its stereotypical

deployment by the racist discourse of whiteness to fix blacks as devoid of reason and intellect, food is a source of joy and satisfaction for Jake. At home, his moments of content and ease are those where he eats or reads newspapers. Very much like Bigger, who lives out most of the critical episodes of his story while eating or drinking, Jake enjoys eating his food at the breakfast table, even though he keeps humiliating his wife and blaming her illness for his bankruptcy at the same time. The emphasis on food, along with sex and violence, as dehumanizing aspects of consumer culture, strips Jake of his individuality and reduces him to a consuming animal. Wright comments on the effects of consumer culture on human subjectivity when he says that, "The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume" (qtd. in Fabre, *The Unfinished* 325). No wonder, then, that Jake's excessive appetite is an epitome of his loss of character and identity under the influence of mass consumption. That is why he avoids fixing his problems as head of his family and blames all his troubles on his ailing wife while escaping into his food-induced dizziness, "*Lawd, how good it feels after you done eat a good meal.* His eyelids drooped. *Wouldn't it be good now if I could go back to bed and sleep some? Yeah, but that would start Lil's old big mouth again*" (34; emphasis in original).

Images of sleep recur many times in Jake's one-day story, stressing the emptiness of his life and his inability to develop an awareness of his real predicament as "rakish creature of habit and appetite, an ordinary or slightly more-or-less-than-ordinary black man sinking deeper and deeper into debt in a racist, hard-times, urban America beset by confidence men and phony remedies" (Burrison 101). The fool stereotype which captures Jake's identity in terms of a disparity between his real life of confinement and his blind pride fueled by the myths of popular culture is also manifested in his uncritical

consumption of newspaper material. Like food, sleep and the emphasis on appearance, newspapers are recurrently presented as Jake's only source of understanding and ordering of his life. Along with radio announcements of the emancipatory myth against the background of which the cruel irony of his experience is played out, Jake's life is defined by newspapers editorials, headlines and content.

While eating his food, Jake's enslavement to the media becomes amply clear in his reaction to the newspaper at the breakfast table. In a manner typical of his fool status, Jake denies Lil's view that blacks starve under the white system of popular culture, which he boasts about as he reads morning newspaper headlines. He tells her "Nobody but lazy folks can starve in this country!" (33). He repeats his pride and belief in the system later with his local barber, "Doc" Higgins, who is an embodiment of the success myth, affirming that if black communists, "kept their damn mouths shut and tried to get hold of something, some money, or property, then they'd get somewhere" (63). Just how far it gets him is a question Jake never shows a willingness to address as he and his exemplar-barber endorse the entrepreneurial drive of mass culture, championing individualism and integration within the American Dream of consumerism above black popular folk culture and Marxism. In both instances, Jake expresses his arrogance over Lil, a symbol of black folk culture, and contempt for the Communist organizer, Duke. The irony of Jake's subjugation by white culture resides not only in his rejection of black culture and Marxism but also in the fact that he will be cheated by Doc, who promises to use his connections to save Jake's job when the post office Board of Review questions him over his mistreatment of his wife. The deal was that Jake would pay Doc seventy-five dollars to fix his problem with the Review Board, but as it turns out, the barber is willing to settle for nothing short of 150 dollars, which Jake accepts gratefully and wholeheartedly.

Let down by both his idol in life, Doc, and by the Board of Review, rocked by bankruptcy and abuse of his wife, Jake is, though, adamant in his belief in the system of mass culture which comes to him through newspapers. Reacting positively to the headlines of his morning newspaper, Jake displays a consciousness enslaved by the dominant culture and its myth of endless possibilities. He reads aloud one headline about Roosevelt's economic reforms and it unleashes his anger against the Democrats, dubbing them "Trouble makers." His tirade against the Democratic party highlights yet again his own ironic plight as a black fool who embraces dreams of success and indulges in fantasies of wealth in spite of his escalating debts. Jake lays down his rationalization about the Democrats' incompetence: "They ain't got no money. And what in hell can a man do without money? Tell me that! Nothing! And empty words don't mean a damn thing, neither" (29). Jake's materialist worldview in life justifies his uncritical admiration for wealthy men like Morgan and Rockefeller whose authority and power places them above the law. Like his idol-barber who cheats him of his money, these two men are idols of his envy because "them men owns and runs the country!" (29). Either drinking or eating every time he contemplates one of the headlines, while insulting and abusing Lil in the meantime, Jake "took a mouthful of egg and bacon, and turned to the paper again" (29). Like Bigger, he contemplates a news headline about Hitler's campaign against the Jews and comes to the xenophobic conclusion that all "foreigners" should be sent "back where they come from. That's what I say" (32). Alternating between eating and drinking, Jake goes through several headlines and newspaper editorials, displaying how he derives his identity not from reality as he lives it but as it is presented to him by media institutions.

In the same fashion, Bigger shows a keen interest in newspapers, displaying a consciousness dominated by mass media like that of Jake. Following the murder of Mary,

Bigger is exposed to media when reporters come to cover the story of her disappearance at the Daltons, first capturing a picture of him accidentally and later demonizing him as the culprit killer. In spite of the negative and racist media narrative of the murder, Bigger is happy at the popularity and celebrity the papers bring to him. His attachment to newspapers is clear in his desire to read the paper he saw on the floor of the basement where Mary's body was being reduced to ashes by the burning fire in the nearby furnace. Bigger's interest in reading the newspapers remains high even when he discovers that the media coverage of Mary's death before the revelation of his involvement in it is wrong. His interest does not go away even when later the media also misrepresent the motives of the murder, saying that it was caused by rape. He insists that he wants to read his story in the newspapers and goes out of his way to get them, endangering his life sometimes. At one moment, he risks his life and goes out of hiding to pay for a newspaper with his last two cents. Likewise, he devises elaborate plans to be able to read what the papers say about him. Even after his capture and in a move reminiscent of Jake, Bigger's first demand after he wakes up in his cell is to enjoy a meal and ask for a paper. Pudaloff accounts for Bigger's enslavement to mass culture by highlighting his submission as an individual to the world in which he lives and consumes: "What gives Bigger the ability to live and assert himself in the world is the act of consuming what the world gives him" (162).

Bigger and Jake, as two characters, drawn in the tradition of the Uncle Tom stereotype, who respect their place of confinement in white culture and, therefore, assert a white imaginary identity, experience myths of white popular culture through various forms other than the media. Both are shown to be attracted to violence as a means of self-assertion. This violence-prone mentality is made clear when Jake admires the way gangsters' are not afraid of dying as he marvels at the courage of one of them: "He just

looked up at 'em and smiled! By Gawd, it takes guts to die like that" (30-1). At the end of *Native*, Bigger adopts a similar position, accepting his death fearlessly: "He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut" (392).The gangster idol as an epitome of how black subjectivity is arrested in the realm of fantasy by mass media is also present in "Big Boy Leaves Home." Contemplating from his hideout ways of revenge against the lynch mob which sets his friend ablaze in front of his eyes, Big Boy's fantasy is expressed in terms that emphasize media influence on him: "N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. Tha wouldnt be so bad, would it?" (*Early Works* 266). Admiration of fearless idols is also reflected in Bigger's fantasy of blotting out the world if it does not live up to his expectations as well as in his and Jake's emphasis on their sexual potency when the irony of their fate shows them to be mere boys emasculated by the false promises of white popular culture.

There are many incidents in both novels which point to the paradox of both men's sexuality. In the case of Bigger, he boasts of his penis being a night stick and images of his sexual power are reiterated many times, especially when he was raping his black girlfriend, Bessie, before murdering her. Similarly, Jake's one-day story culminates with the night he spends along with his post office cronies at the Calumet dive where they spend their money on prostitutes. Yet as the logic of the fool stereotype dictates, both Bigger's and Jake's sexuality is clearly countered by its disastrous impact on both of them. Like fools, their sexuality finds release only in fantasy as both are crushed and emasculated right after their assertion of their sexual potency by the forces of a life they do very little to grasp. Bigger is captured by vigilantes and Jake beaten and robbed of his money.

Also among the discourses of popular culture that shape the unfulfilled dreams of Wright's black characters are movies and films. In "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" (1961), the black protagonist, Saul, blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality, which in the case of Bigger and Jake was kept in place, when he awakens the day after he murders a white woman and recollects the incidents of the event as in a movie: "When at last the conviction of what he had done was real in him, it came only in terms of flat memory, devoid of all emotion, as though he were looking when very tired and sleepy at a scene being flashed upon the screen of a movie house" (*Eight Men* 197).

Bigger and Jake, like most of Wright's black characters, view life through a prism greatly influenced by the subculture of movies, transcending the barriers of their environment through fantasies inspired by images from films. While Bigger takes his most dramatic decision due to the impact of movies on him, most of what Jake does, thinks or plans is inspired by posters of heroes and heroines of movies he contemplates in the movie theatre. The appeal of movies as a space of fantasy and escape from blacks' confinement in the ghetto is what attracts Bigger and his friend to the movie theater. The hegemonic discourse of movies is not only reflected in the binary opposition between the lavish style of the movie featuring whites dancing on the sunny beach and the black movie which plays on the stereotypes of primitive people, content with dancing naked in the jungle. The two black boys' reactions to the two movies indicate the extent of their indoctrination and conditioning by the white supremacist discourse of movies. Being completely penetrated by white hegemony, Bigger and his friend fail to see the racist import of the movies and, as if that is not enough, are so taken by the white style of life that they engage in a rivalry of masturbation, fantasizing about the beauty of Mary Dalton who appears in *The Gay Woman* movie. The impact of the movie is so strong on Bigger that he takes the most dramatic decision of accepting a driver job at the Daltons: "Yes,

his going to work for the Daltons was something big. Maybe Mr. Dalton was a millionaire. Maybe he had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money" (*Native* 36). The influence of the movies on Bigger, like that of the newspapers on Jake, is articulated in the myths of success they trigger in the imagination and fantasy of both of them.

The American Dream of overcoming poverty and becoming rich along with myths of pleasure, sex and easy life are the things that are at stake when Bigger decides to go to the Daltons, a decision he had turned away from several times before, in spite of his mother's and sister's insistence that he has to accept the job. Like him, Jake also has a great passion for movies, as indicated in his deeply-felt remorse that he will not be able to watch *The Death Hawk* because it will be run only for three days when he is at work and his attraction to the villain, hero and heroine of the film are quite telling about the extent of his acculturation by white mass media. Jake is shown to admire and adore the physical appearance of both hero and heroine. He is especially taken with the latter's golden hair, in an apparent contrast to his hate for and war with his own hair and appearance at the outset of the novel. But Jake is not only attracted by white values of beauty as displayed by the poster but also captivated by its sexual appeal as the hero engages in a sensual courtship to seduce the heroine. Unable to tell the difference between his mass media-fueled fantasy and real human affection, which he denies his wife, Jake looks again at the poster "where the girl was tied so that her thigh was exposed" (54). Jake's identification with all the different stereotypical discourses that the poster presents to his mind is another testimony to his acceptance of the values of mass culture and his subjection to their hegemonic influence.

Jake is one of several black characters in Wright's fiction who present a form of subjectivity that embraces the dominant white hegemony which forms their choices and

shapes their priorities to ensure their subservience and loyalty. Completely subjugated by the dominant regimes of stereotypical knowledge, these black subjects mistake the racial reality of oppression and marginalization for fantasy and false hopes of integration. Seen by the white ideology as obedient and trustworthy fools, they keep the marginal place of subordination assigned to them by it and, thus, perpetuate the very system that treats them as not quite human. The next section of this chapter tries to pose and address the question of what happens when black subjects decide to break white law and counter the pejorative images attached to them by its defining framework. By the same token, it explores how the dominant culture's regimes of truth and institutions deal with them both on the level of representation and in terms of the exercise of power and control.

The "Black Beast" Stereotype: Inventing Black Male Threat

The construction of black male subjectivity along the lines of contented subordination to the white order is thus the site of two complementary and mutually reinforcing trends that are typical of forms of white hegemony in Richard Wright's corpus. It on the one hand speaks for the penetration of black male subjects by white hegemonic culture, denying them agency and reducing them to mere embodied infants. It works, on the other hand, to consolidate and preserve white supremacy over blacks, since the configuration of bodies across the racial map determines the distribution of privilege as well as civil and political rights. In the Jim Crow societies that populate Wright's novels, whites are able to monopolize voice and culture and map the public sphere to their own interest only by casting black male subjects in the negative stereotype of permanent boys, whose worth stems from their bodies and not from their intellect. In this light, the hegemonic discourse of whiteness pictures its black Other in terms of desire, of what the whites want black male subjects to be. It presents an image of blacks as arrested in their development and maturity, happy and docile boys whose existence not only consolidates the social and racial disparities at the heart of the white order of segregation but also morally justifies them. The rationale behind this discursive construction of black subjectivity rests on the assumption that since black males are incapable of reason and do not display intellectual qualities, they have to be locked in inferiority and stripped of their political and civil rights. It, therefore, becomes morally incumbent on whites to draw the racial line of privilege and mobilize their cultural hegemonic discourses to make sure that blacks do not cross it.

Yet this aspect of whiteness which envisages black male identity in the exclusive terms of contented, faithful and happy-go-lucky boys masks ambivalences and anxieties which, at the unconscious level, threaten to tear apart the transparency, the certainty and

the moral righteousness with which the infantile stereotype is repeatedly articulated and sustained. One such ambivalence is that while whites use the stereotype of inferior and faithful black boy to consolidate their supremacy, it is also, in the words of Joel Williamson, "a device by which white slaveholders day by day masked a terror that might otherwise have driven them over the edge of sanity" (23). This terror is nothing less than the possibility of the black male subject defying the white order, crossing the racial divide and entering the realm of "savagery." For whiteness constructs black male subjectivity around conflicting and ambivalent images inherent in the two-fold stereotype of an obedient and happy boy and rebellious, monster-like beast. Andrew B. Leiter captures this contradictory imagining of the black body and the attendant unconscious state of being it engenders among whites:

> In essence, the dominant stereotype supported the idea of contented domestication while the subordinate stereotype allowed for innate savagery. This polarization of the black male personality in white minds reflected the difference between what whites wanted the black man to be and what they feared he was. (30)

Whiteness oscillates between the infantilization and feminization of the black male through stereotypical images of contentedness and subservience and his criminalization through the black beast stereotype when he defies the white-imposed social, political and moral order which sustains the color-line separating blacks and whites in Wright's fiction. This ambivalent picturing shows the black body as a script that reflects in a specular way an identity-crisis in whiteness itself. For what whites see when they look at the black body is the reflection of their conflicting desires and fears, of the uncertainties which shape their very being. The black subject itself remains absent and invisible in this form of discursive misrepresentation, an absolute other which comes

into being only in the form of an alienated image captured by the stereotype. Nathan Huggins develops this function of the stereotype when he speaks about blackface as a travesty of identification:

> Lest we ignore the tragic aspect of this psychology, we should remember that the compulsive racism in the travesty suggests potential crisis in white men's identity … The white common man, whatever his distance from power, could sense his belonging to a civilized, democratic society to the degree that he could see the Negro as ludicrous in it. (268)

That whiteness in its framing and fixing of the black body through conflicting stereotypes strives to create a black male alter ago against which it can define itself is all too clear in the antithetical attributes conferred on blacks through Uncle Tom images of the black as child-like and, conversely, black beast images. Both the benign and malevolent qualities with which whites invested the black male serve as a purgatorial experience to ease the moral conflicts and civilizational uncertainties gripping white identity. For example, white fantasies about the black male as a supposed child are, according to Huggins, a psychological outlet for whites in America to escape the rigorous exigencies of puritan discipline and moral strictness and live through the stereotype the possibility of "being transported into black innocence" (30). Fixing black males in the negative image of being credulous, obedient and trusting renders possible the experience of a fading world of peace and happiness which whites long for but are obliged to suppress under the demands of religion and culture. Yet at the same time, whites find genuine satisfaction in the myth of the happy and foolish Negro not only as a gateway to a lost world of innocence but also as a site of repulsion and dread. For the black male's presumed lack of restraint, foolishness and innocence stand in stark contrast to the values and ideals of the American Dream of hard work and disciplined self-reliance. With their

chaos and disorder, the qualities of black passion and lack of restraint allow whites, in the words of Huggins, to "order their fear of failing their dream and civilization" (25).

In his analysis of colonial discourse, JanMohamed points out this polarity of the stereotype, saying that it accounts for the failure of whites to understand the Other. Motivated and determined by an identity politics of the Imaginary and of the same, colonial discourse is not concerned with exploring difference but with an intellectual exercise that is specular and, therefore, doomed to uphold the familiar values of the self while denigrating those of the Other. This binary opposition predicated on the valorization of one's culture and the disavowal of the Other is what constitutes, according to JanMohamed, the Manichean allegory which he describes in terms of an "us" versus "them" logic:

> The dominant model of power–and interest–relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory–a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object. ("Economy" 63)

The terms of JanMohamed's argument are seized upon by Carol E. Henderson in her thesis that whites' insistence on creating a surrogate self by inventing blackness does not only represent a will to knowledge but also a will to power. She contends that power configurations and relations within American society are determined by the positioning and imagining of bodies black and whites. She says:

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This polarization of black and white bodies would serve a crucial function in the burgeoning colonies as evolving social attitudes about inferior and superior characteristics of African and European people framed the context of racial interactions of various ethnic groups in the coming decades. These beliefs would primarily manifest themselves during the inception and subsequent institutionalization of chattel bondage in various regions and cultural spaces as public policies and social mandates sanctioned the vile behavior of white slaveholders and their mistresses toward their slaves. (*Scarring* 20)

The relation of the Foucauldian couplet of "power and knowledge" to the white hegemonic racialization of the black male subject, and its underpinning concerns about white identity, longings and anxiety, are tacitly at play in the deployment of the Uncle Tom stereotype, picturing the black male as child-like. For the white order preserves itself only at the expense of the black male subject's self-fulfillment and access to maturity. The white order's stereotypical deployment of ideology as a means of controlling and policing blackness and perpetuating its own system of privileges is also at work in the counter-stereotype of the black beast. Black males are not only denied subjectivity and relegated to subservience on the grounds that they are unequal children, but they are also subjected to the same process of racialization through the deployment of the "bad nigger" stereotype or the black beast myth when they rebel against the racial boundary confining them to a permanent immaturity. The white imagining of the black male body immediately shifts from the familiar and acceptable, trustworthy and docile images of black inferiority associated with the Uncle Tom stereotype to a process of othering that defines the black male as a beast of a degenerate and brutal nature when he defies the scripts of white culture. The black beast in this light is about transgression of white norms, laws and structures defining blacks in the negative terms of obedient and

happy sub-humans who accept the dominant regimes of truths and representations. Cedric Gael Bryant argues that white culture views black subjects' defiance as a monstrous deviation from what is familiar and acceptable: "Monstrosity, then, is measured by the extent to which an act deviates from social constructions of what is 'natural,' 'normal': the greater the distance, the more monstrous" (151).

The black beast fantasy projects blacks in images of monstrosity if they transgress the way they are constructed by the social system and thus destabilize the hierarchies of power and privilege which flow from it and which have it that whites rule blacks. So, the space of the familiar and "natural" Bryant is talking about is nothing other than the full extent of the white hegemonic order which makes both racial misrepresentation and political subordination of blackness an indisputable and natural reality that is accepted as given not only to whites but also to blacks. White hegemonic order becomes complete with the acceptance of the Uncle Tom stereotype as a natural state of being, the revolt against which is viewed as an act of monstrosity and an initiation into the myth of the black beast.

Wright's fiction is set in the social and cultural atmosphere of the Jim Crow society of the post-Emancipation South, with its segregation rules and strict jurisdictions separating whites and blacks in all aspects of life. Racial relations of all sorts across the color-line which separates whites from blacks are mediated through "the definition of the 'Other', in this case the black American as non-identity, as a being who does not belong to the human realm of the master's society and who consequently has no 'rights' within that society" (Baker, 'Richard' 91). The creation of a space of exclusion inhabited by blackness and its enforcement through law and state apparatuses to deny blacks access to civil and political rights account for the emasculation and infantilisation of Wright's black male subjects. Racialization of black subjectivity in this light is the result of the

deployment of this Draconian code meant to keep blacks in their place on the other side of the color-line as disenfranchised and subhuman. It is maintained by regimes of stereotypical truths picturing black subjectivity as inferior and by juridical prohibitions enforcing this imagined status. What this amounts to in Wright's archaeological mining of black subjectivity is that black males are left with only two choices: to embrace servility and childhood and keep their place as defined to them by the white order or cross the boundary and accept the black beast myth and its attendant punishment of brutal castration and death.

In Wright's fiction, transgression of the racial divide takes always the form of the rape of a white woman, an act of miscegenation in which the black beast rapes and kills the white woman and gets killed in return. The sexual rendition of the violation of the racial barrier through mutual acts of violence is presented by Clare Eby as the essence of the black beast stereotype: "the black beast delineates a particular linking of eros and thanatos: the rape of a white woman as a prelude to her death and/or to the lynching of her accused rapist" (439). JanMohamed develops this point further, arguing that since all forces across the racial boundary are defined by rape then the barrier itself becomes a "sexual border." His contention rests on a definition of rape as a process of racialization by means of which black male subjects are metaphorically raped and penetrated by the hegemonic discourses of the white system, holding them captives to a collective state of physical and moral negation. But the deployment of sexuality as the driving force in the process of racialization is only one side of the black beast stereotype which, in the event of violation of the racial-sexual border, is shown to be itself an effect of a process of racialization. For when the black male violates the sexual taboo organizing and policing the border and rapes the white woman, he is in fact enacting the terror and fear which he has internalized from his racialization. The rape of the white woman is just a projection

of the mechanisms of racialization to which the black subject has been subjected. In this light, transactions across the barrier, in Wright's fiction, are conducted through a process of othering that places sexualization at the heart of racialization, with the black beast becoming the haunting specter of the black male's lust for the white woman that should be kept at bay even at the cost of murder if the sexual barrier is transgressed.

The formation of black male subjectivity in terms of the black beast myth betrays and brings into the open the sexual and racial anxieties of the South in its attempt to establish its white supremacy over its black population. For whites traced the racial line establishing their power and privilege over the black community and accused black subjects who crossed it of lust for white women and rape, violently punishing them with castration and lynching. In this way, the white order makes use of a mixture of race, sex and violence in order to enforce a bizarre configuration of space and race that sustains its supremacy and ensures the subjection of the black population.

The deployment of the black beast fantasy as a political tool allowed whites to deal with and manage their fears of racial equality and the freedoms that came along with Emancipation. Leiter draws this parallel by tracing the black beast to its historical origins in the South's struggle to cope with the challenge of Emancipation in the second half of the twentieth century:

The white South's struggle for complete supremacy and strict segregation at the turn of the century has forced the specter of interracial sex back into the spotlight of national attention … [there] appeared the image of degenerate black men roaming the southern countryside looking to ravage unprotected white virgins. (18)

Emancipation and the Reconstruction era that followed it spelled black political empowerment for the white South. It was believed that because degenerate and driven

by their bestial lusts, black men once given political and civil rights would desire and rape white woman. According to this postbellum logic, Emancipation unleashed the black beast by giving the black population political responsibilities which, by virtue of their degeneration and inefficiency, they would not be able to carry out. Unable to fit in their newly acquired empowerment and out of control, blacks would associate their new freedoms with access to white woman. So whites' struggle for supremacy identified the emancipation of black subjects with fears of miscegenation, portraying the South in terms of a chaste and fragile white femininity threatened by the sexual excesses and lust of an uncontrolled black beast. White women, therefore, became the symbol of a new perception of race that confined race relations to its most feared and tabooed aspect, namely interracial sex.

The centrality of the chaste and pure white feminine figure to the elaboration and deployment of the black beast myth is, consequently, two-fold. On the one hand, it points to the belief that blacks are lacking in humanity and that, as such, they are fit only for service. What this amounts to, in the context of Emancipation and its concomitant black beast myth, is that black subjects are entrapped in the new freedoms which expose them as lower types when they step out of their role of subservience. Eby comments on this strange logic which associates blacks' freedom with fear of miscegenation: "The bizarre slippery-slope reasoning, by which political and social equality translates necessarily and inevitably into sexual contact of black men and white women, takes us to the core of the white fantasy of the black beast" (4).

But as is the case with all types of identities constructed around false stereotypical knowledge of the Other, the touting of the black beast fantasy has less to do with blacks' degeneracy, political inefficiency or sexual lust than it does with whites' fears of losing supremacy as well as their inability to deal with blacks' ascendance towards social

equality. The deployment of the fear of interracial sex serves to order racial relations according to the supremacists of white patriarchy. By imposing a strict ban on and exaggerating the danger of black male and white female sexuality, white men redeem their own impure selves when they themselves cross the racial line by having sexual relations with black women. So there is a morally cathartic side to the idealization of the white woman and its attendant fear of miscegenation which has it that white men can redeem their defiled morality by safeguarding and protecting the white woman as a symbol of cultural purity and moral righteousness. The only way to do this is by preventing the sexual crossing of the racial barrier from the other side through invoking fears of bestiality and monstrosity in the form of the black beast. Yet the strict interdiction of black male-white female sex has more to it than cultural insecurity. It betrays a patriarchal fear of having this type of interracial sex take place outside its authority and thus undermining the social order upon which it thrives. When a white woman has sex with a black man, she does not only challenge notions of female chastity but also threatens and undermines white authority over the black male body. Such relations of miscegenation are seen as a threat to the social order in two ways: a loss of control over the black boy and a challenge to white superiority if the relation is consensual.

The triangle of sex, violence and politics that forms the basis of the beast stereotype is clearly at play in *Black Boy* (1945), Wright's fictional autobiography. Centered on the theme of black subjugation under the Jim Crow code, the book probes Richard's rise to self-awareness through harsh, humiliating and life-threatening encounters with white society that teach him how to adapt to the white order and survive under its Draconian prohibitions. Key to Richard's self-awareness and survival is his recognition of the sexual barrier and the violence that whites are willing to exercise on him if he transgresses it. In addition to learning different ways of dealing with whites,

the threat of violating the sacred and inviolable spaces of white femininity and entering the realm of the black beast proves to be the most serious challenge to his life in the South. Earlier in the painful rites of his racialization as a submissive black boy, Richard gets exposed to the black beast fantasy when he is selling newspapers to his black neighborhood. Out of economic want to buy food and school books, he accepts this job as a newspaper boy and unwittingly becomes a tool of white hegemonic ideology. One day as he is going about selling copies of the newspaper, a black man explains to him how the paper promotes racist views about blacks. The brief incident builds on a leitmotif in Wright's canon about the relationship between institutions, in this case the media, and whites' dominant ideology which thrives on stereotypical misrepresentation of black male subjectivity. This couplet of institutions of power reinforcing false knowledge that frames and fixes the black male subject in the negative space of the stereotype is dramatically emphasized in this incident, opening Richard's eyes to the discursive regimes of truths and claims producing black subjects as inferior and threatening. He contemplates a picture in the previous week's issue:

> I looked at a picture of a huge black man with a greasy, sweaty face, thick lips, flat nose, golden teeth, sitting at a polished, wide-topped desk in a swivel chair. The man had on a pair of gleaming yellow shoes and his feet were propped upon the desk. His thick lips nursed a big, black cigar that held white ashes an inch long. (*Later Works* 125)

The detailed description of exaggerated physical traits is a discursive strategy which stresses the embodiment of the black body, stripping the self of its human qualities and relegating it to the status of the animal beast. The newspaper's graphic portrayal shows how institutions of power promote and legitimize the marking and production of blacks as different Others whose existence is limited to their biological qualities. This

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process of Othering fits very well within Foucault's concept of productive power when he speaks about institutions' relation to knowledge and the production of subjects: "The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (*Discipline* 194). The power of the newspaper's discursive misrepresentation lies in its construction and production of the black male subject as mere physical mass, justifying his exclusion and marginalization since he does not possess the intellectual qualities that allow him to enjoy political and civil privileges reserved for human beings. But in so doing, it betrays the specular nature of this form of racialization which holds only thanks to its inscription and exoticizing of the black male body as different and inferior. According to the paper's rationale the following litany of black beast credentials tells more about whites' worries over blacks' access to public life than any black essence of unrestrained sexual lust:

> Across the wall of the room in which the man sat was a bold sign, reading:
>
> The White House
>
> Under the sign was a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, the features distorted to make the face look like that of a gangster. My eyes went to the top of the cartoon and I read:
>
> The only dream of a nigger is to be president
>
> and to sleep with white women! Americans, do
>
> we want this in our fair land? Organize and save
>
> white womanhood! (*Later Works* 125)

Intent upon steering his course safely in white society by learning the strict racial hierarchies in the South, most of the time the hard way, Richard is given his first lesson in the strategies of whites' deployment of the black beast fantasy. Behind the ideological racialization of blackness and its stereotypical constructions along the lines of biological

difference lies whites' struggle for supremacy and power and their fears that Emancipation spells racial equality. The comment placed above the cartoon unequivocally sets in motion the components of the black beast myth, which like all master narratives of control and domination, involves a dual process of avowal and disavowal. It, on the one hand, exposes the claims related to black males' inability to shoulder the responsibilities that come along with freedoms, (mis)using them to unleash their bestial nature on white women. This supremacist view defends the moral and civilizational necessity to hold black subjects in subservience and strictly separate the races in order efficaciously to police and control black male sexuality. To make this possible, whites mobilize the stereotype of the docile and happy black boy as the only viable means to keep the races apart, protect white femininity, and ward off miscegenation. Yet, on the other hand, the newspaper comment reveals the latent subtext generating and deploying the myth of the black beast. What the white narrative keeps silent on is that the apparent fear of miscegenation and of sex between the black male and white female is only a tool to galvanize racial support in the face of black subjects' accession to agency.

Richard quits his job following this eye-opening lesson. But if he lets go of the paper the message of the black beast rapist it cultivates keeps haunting him, regulating his relation to a white world in which he has to seek for employment to keep going. Moving from one menial job to another and getting more and more exposed to whites' expectations of him, Richard gets a job at the Walls family which consists of helping in cleaning and bringing firewood. Although the family is very liberal and provides him with a comfortable work environment that he enjoys, he is harshly reminded of his place and his "boy" status when he unintentionally transgresses the sexual barrier organizing interracial and intersexual relations between blacks and whites and protecting white

women from black sexual desires. One day, as he is bringing wood, he accidentally walks into Mrs. Wall's bedroom while she is in the process of dressing. This primal scene which sees the fifteen-year-old boy harshly reprimanded by his liberal employers teaches him how whites see him as a potential criminal and predator. Michel Fabre comments on the accidental intrusion in terms of whites' ideology of the black beast, describing how "The sin of being a potential, if not intentional, ravisher only reinforced the guilt deriving from his first disturbing sexual experiences" (*The Unfinished* 47).

The pathologizing of the black man as a rapist happens in an earlier incident when Richard's fellow whites at the optical company start indulging in the common stereotype of black sexual potency. Even though the aim is to humiliate him and test his capacity to behave like a "nigger" when challenged, the incident probes whites' fear of black sexuality and the alleged black savagery that can unleash it on white women. One of the white co-workers called Reynolds asks Richard "Richard, how long is your thing?" When Richard feigns not to know, he expressed his request in imagery of bestiality reminding Richard of what he heard about whites' views of blacks as sexual animals: "You know what I mean…The thing the bull uses on the cow." But the animal images also imply savagery and primitivism, attributes which are used to deny black subjects' the rights of dignity that normally go with humanity. Reynolds' racist fantasy takes a comic turn when he asks Richard to do acrobatics with his penis, extending the animal imagery to involve the usual stereotype of happy, playful and incredulous child: "I heard that a nigger can stick his prick in the ground and spin around on it like a top" (180).

This incident develops the beast myth, not only through white fears about black sexual potency as a threat to white femininity, but also through Reynolds' deceitful tactics to push Richard to act defiantly so as to be expelled from a job considered to be exclusively white. What is at play here in addition to anxiety about black male sexuality

is fear of blacks' access to decent jobs that would allow them to compete with whites. The underlying motive behind the white deployment of the black beast as a threat to white femininity, decency and morality is a bid to preserve racial supremacy and discredit blacks' qualification to civil rights which whites assume to be exclusively their own. In this light, Reynolds' evoking of black sexual potency and its attendant stereotype of lack of sexual restraint and savagery are ploys meant to confine Richard to the degraded status of the animal and by that token prove he is not fit to work in the optics store. Richard's professional ambition to learn a white job that requires mental skills at the optical company is viewed as a threat to whites' privileges as defined by the rules of Jim Crow and a rebellion against the status of blacks' marginal place of powerlessness and subordination. By aspiring to acquire such skills, Richard displays a desire to possess intellectual capacities and achieve economic independence, and therefore defies the very foundations of racial segregation which rest on the utter dispossession and savagery of the blacks on the one hand and the complete supremacy and humanity of the whites on the other. Richard will be pushed out of the job and forced to quit in a more violent way when he is accused of failing the test of using the title "master" when addressing a white man.

To counter the myth of the white female's virginity and purity, *Boy* puts its main character in other situations where he has to observe his behavior as a "nigger" even though he is dealing with white prostitutes and not the chaste and delicate white female figure upon which the South staked its civilizational and moral survival. Yet the black beast rapist who poses a threat to the sexual and racial border between whites and blacks is always invoked, notwithstanding the fact that the white female body in this case is for sale and on show. As he moves from one job to another, Richard gets a job as a bellhop in a hotel in Jackson where he undergoes more exposure to white prostitutes,

demystifying the aura of ideality and purity for which the white woman stands. Richard relays how this world reacts to him:

> I grew used to seeing the white prostitutes naked upon their beds, sitting nude about their rooms, and I learned new modes of behavior, new rules in how to live the Jim Crow life. It was presumed that we black boys took their nakedness for granted, that it startled us no more than a blue vase or a red rug. Our presence awoke in them no sense of shame whatever, for we blacks were not considered human anyway. (193)

This passage, in addition to its importance to Richard's learning and racialization, redefines the deployment of the black beast fantasy in two ways. It exposes the lie about the black male's threat to the white female by first questioning the chastity of white women and second by presenting blacks as an absence hardly noticed by the white feminine figure. Contrary to the image of fearful white virgin females besieged by a population of aggressive black rapists, this passage shows the black subject as a victim of the encounter, reduced to non-identity and forced into utter invisibility. Against the backdrop of sexually unrestrained blacks on the rampage to rape virginal white women, the narrative voice casts a different light on the myth of the black beast, stressing that it is the black male subject who is threatened by the white female and not the other way around. This reversal of roles is clear in the unequal positioning of characters in this passage where white prostitutes occupy the center while black bellhops are relegated to peripherality and reduced to oblivion.

Yet while white prostitutes seem to be free from the black beast fear, white males are not. The narrator on several occasions relates how white men are always ready to brandish the myth in front of blacks when they happen to be in the presence of white women and can go as far as lynching and castrating blacks who are caught sleeping with

white prostitutes. Richard tells about one incident in the hotel when he was caught by a white man while he was looking at a naked prostitute. He receives a serious warning to observe his place on the racial / sexual divide when the white man tells him, "Keep your eyes where they belong if you want to be healthy!" (194). Other more tragic events involve the castration of a fellow bellhop who is caught sleeping with a white prostitute but manages to run away from town. But if he is lucky to survive the violence inflicted on blacks who cross the sexual barrier, others like the older brother of Richard's friend or Chris in *The Long Dream* (1958) are not. These characters who populate Wright's canon face annihilation and dismemberment by castration or by lynching for their sexually transgressive acts which set them on a collision course with white establishment. Wright will come back again and again to this fatal crossing as the most important experience of racialization that blacks are subjected to in their passage from the humiliations of a stereotypical obedience to the more violent black beast fantasy.

In "Big Boy Leaves Home," the lead story of Wright's series of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), the main characters perform the fatal act of crossing the color-line only to be met with the full wrath of white punishment in the form of death and displacement from kinship and community. Where in *Black Boy* the black beast stereotype is presented as one of the most ghastly aspects of the "ethics of Living Jim Crow" that Richard has to comply with if he is to survive, in *Boy* the transgression and defiance of these ethics which form the essence of the myth are enacted out both to expose the precarious life of black male subjects and to show that the white system provides for blacks only as emasculated. It accepts them as infants as long as they are content with their status of inferiority and meets them with death, as the black beast fantasy requires, if they rebel against that status.

Bryant captures the historical, social and cultural bind gripping black male subjectivity in the story when he points to the violation of the racial / sexual boundary as an initiation into monstrosity. He argues that the story, like Wright's other texts, portrays how white culture defines the black beast myth as black males' shift from a normal to a monstrous life:

> What is impermissible in these texts is codified in transhistorical, ideological 'norms' concerning race and sexuality. To violate or transgress them as do Wright's characters, uninvited by patriarchal, that is, by either white male privilege *or* white female authority, is a monstrous act precisely because it destabilizes the myth of a naturally hegemonic social order. (144)

For Big Boy and his comrades in the story, stepping into the realm of monstrosity would be equal to shedding the happy and childlike image that the social order attaches to them and the subordinate racial status that follows from it. As a norm-setting and value-conferring system, whiteness recognizes as normal or natural only that brand of blackness which it defines as an inferior surrogate self and keeps at bay behind the racial barrier. In this light, venturing outside the boundary will always come as a threat to the established norms of whiteness and, thus, be deemed by it as monstrous.

Monstrosity in the story is dramatized through two acts of transgression, one physical and the other sexual. The four boys violate on two occasions two sacred inviolable spaces which, according to whiteness, define normality as an order of white supremacy and black subordination. These two spaces, the violation of which will unleash white wrath and the drama of the story, are none but the inviolable physical space of property and the sexual space of tabooed white women. *Boy* maps the racial and ideological mythologies forming and informing these no-go zones through prohibited

encounters with the Other, introducing each with idyllic scenes that only serve to emphasize their dramatic and disruptive nature.

Before the first crossing into old man Harvey's property, the narrative offers an idyllic scene of dance, play and joking, stressing the bond of friendship between the four black boys. Big Boy and his three other companions, Buck, Bobo and Lester, running leisurely in the woods and playing hooky, reflect a perfect setting of innocence and harmony unaffected by the abrupt and devastating intrusion of difference. Michael Atkinson argues that monstrous violations of white sacred spaces are intimately related to these prior moments of shared companionship and its unmediated oneness with nature. He describes the first scene thus:

> The boys are playing hooky, hardly a crime, and the warm day is made to walk in the woods and giggle at scatological jokes that seem the timeless staple of adolescence. Mixed with this is the singing of the old hymn about the train bound for glory. (131)

In classical American fiction, the sudden emergence of the train in an idyllic setting like this one would stand for the penetration of the machine as a symbol of modern civilization in upon the pristine world of nature. But the four black teenagers celebrate the train's destination, that is, its voyage northward, more than the machine itself, adding a sense of social justice and hope for freedom to the egalitarian experience of carefree and innocent exchange between them. The pastoral-like moment is a rare occurrence in Wright's fiction which typically portrays a black existence always already shaped and subjugated by white hegemony. It is the absence of white presence and lack of differentiation and otherness in this first section of the story that make the idyll possible. Yet the white world is always around, ominously haunting and threatening in its symbols and violent encounters. It intervenes into the teenagers' union with nature, gradually but

violently starting with the boys' coming over the symbols of its inviolable physical and ideological spaces and culminates with the encounter with the ultimate taboo, the white woman.

Singing and playing, the four comrades cross the first symbol of racial difference, a fence marking the physical property of Harvey, but also setting the boundary for how far blacks can go. The narrator describes this first violation of the sacred space of white property which sets the four black boys in the realm of the black beast myth in these terms: "They climbed over a barbed-wire fence and entered a stretch of thick woods" (*Early Works* 244). The "woods" is used both literally to indicate Harvey's property but also metaphorically to signify the ideological racial difference, the world of the white man, the moral space that black subjects must not enter unless invited. This underlying metaphorical meaning is further impressed on the boys as they reach Harvey's "swimming hole." This forbidden territory is guarded by the symbol "NO TRESPASSIN" the significance of which the merry boys do not miss. It is a reminder of the overwhelming force of the white world and the differentiation that comes along with it. The sign immediately brings discord between the teenagers where harmony reigned and introduces disagreement where a sense of community had taken place. Mindful that the sign refers to Jim Crow rules of segregation the breaching of which would mean entering the space of the black beast and thus incurring white wrath, the boys proceed to argue whether to go ahead with their plan to swim in the "hole" or keep their place in the racial geography:

They came to the swimming hole.

"Ah ain goin in," said Bobo.

"Done got sacred?" asked Big Boy.

"Naw, Ah ain scared … "

"How come yuh ain goin in?"

"Yuh know ol man Harvey don erllow no niggers t swim in this hole."

"N jus las year he took a shot at Bob fer swimmin in here," said Lester.

… "See tha sign over yonder?"

"Yeah."

"Whut it say?"

"NO TRSPASSIN," read Lester.

"Know whut that mean?"

"Mean ain no dogs n niggers erllowed," said Buck. (245-46)

The whole passage elaborates on black subjects' crossing into the forbidden territory of the black beast. The acts of defiance that start with jumping over the fence, breaching the warning of the sign and swimming in "the hole" are rites of passage into the black beast fantasy. When the black boys cross the racial barrier as indicated in the last comment by Buck, and enter the realm of racial difference, they intentionally defy their status as "dogs n niggers" and, subsequently, assume the black beast status of a threatening and rebellious black subject. The black beast stereotype holds that when blacks clamor for their rights and breach segregation laws, they in fact are after white women. This forbidden fruit represents the next encounter with difference and the most devastating one for the boys who enter the forbidden territory when they decide to swim in the "hole." Just as the breach of the rights of whites which comes as a crossing into white property is preceded by an idyll, the encounter with racial difference in the form of a white woman is preceded by another experience of idyllic nature.

The second scene is centered upon swimming and unfolds as a repetition of the same trinity of forces that makes up the experience of the idyll in the first scene before the trespassing. Here again, nature, the boys' bonding into a solid sense of community

and the political economy of the train heading north are at play in the ongoing moment of lull and peace before the emergence of the Other, the white woman as a disruptive force of fear and annihilation. Always in the spirit of play and camaraderie, the narrator describes the boys' cheerful and carefree jump into the waterhole as a communal act of sharing: "Laughing, Lester and Buck gave the two locked bodies a running push. Big Boy and Bobo splashed, sending up silver spray in the sunlight" (247). This play goes on for a while with the boys spraying water on each other and chatting under warm sunlight. In spite of the uninterrupted idyll, the narrator is keen on showing that the boys' transgression of the barrier is done with full knowledge of the consequences and that it is a premeditated act of will. This is clear not only through their talk about the possibility of Harvey showing up at any time and their disregard of the danger implied in that eventuality but also in their awareness that the "hole" is a property, a right and a privilege which the white can enjoy and which they are denied. When Bobo, very much like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* dreaming about flying as a symbol of freedom from his cramped one-house apartment, exclaims: "Ah wish we hada bigger place t swim in," Big Boy explains why that wish is denied: "The white folks got plenty swimmin pools n we ain got none" (247). Notwithstanding these highly charged moments which shine a light on the boys' racial consciousness and intentional breach of the inviolable spaces of whiteness, the entire scene is one of pastoral satisfaction and contentment. It acquires a more political edge of hope and freedom when the whistle of the train takes the trail of the four black teenagers away with it to imagined places of liberty:

Far away a train whistled.

"There goes number seven!"

"Headin fer up Noth!"

"Blazin it down the line!"

"Lawd, Ahm goin Noth some day."

"Me too, man."

"They say colored folks up Noth is got ekual rights." (248)

Playing on this second component of the idyll is, in terms of the plot, an anticipation of Big Boy's final escape from the lynch mob to the North at the end of the story, but there is also an introduction of an element of agency that creates hope and establishes, in the words of Atkinson, "a larger and more profound political communality" (132) between the black boys. The third and last part of the triangle constituting the idyll is nature, which is presented in the image of a mother, a womb in which the boys nestle in peace and safety. The narrator describes this relationship in the following tone of celebration:

> They grew pensive. A black winged butterfly hovered at the water's edge. A bee droned. From somewhere came the sweet scent of honeysuckles. Dimly they could hear the sparrows twittering in the woods. They rolled from side to side, letting sunshine dry their skins and warm their blood. They plucked blades of grass and chewed them. (248)

The peace and serenity of the pastoral lull reinforces both the happy-go-lucky boys' relation to one another and their unity with the surrounding world. It also reflects a sense of tranquility and rest that the black teenagers experience as they dry and warm their bodies after swimming in the forbidden pond. This idyll proves, though, to be ephemeral as it is suddenly riven by the fatal intrusion of absolute otherness. In the next line, the happy boys are awakened from the elapsing moment of pastoral to the reality and implications of their trespassing upon the inviolable space of the white world. All of a sudden an exclamatory "Oh" disrupts the dreamy scene, plunging the boys into the dynamics of the racial restrictions and prohibitions and, thus, casting them into the

position of the black beast. For the exclamation is uttered by a white woman who abruptly shows up on the other side of the waterhole, surprised and shocked by the intrusion of blackness into white premises: "a white woman, poised on the edge of the opposite embankment, stood directly in front of them, her hat in her hand and her hair lit by the sun" (249). The sudden appearance of the white woman performs two acts of emasculation that are the result of the boys' crossing of the racial barrier and their inevitable stepping into the status of the black beast. The first is that it reminds the four companions of their precarious being as black subjects and the second that it shows the overwhelming power of the white world, which comes as a natural force, so abrupt and strong that the black boys can neither predict nor avoid it. The state of endangered masculinity finds expression in the terror-gripped reaction of Big Boy who announces the identity of the visitor: "Its a woman … A *white* woman!" (249). For Trudier Harris the appearance of the white woman and her exclamatory scream means that "The myth of the threat to white womanhood raises its ugly head" (106). This myth surfaces, according to Tara T. Green, because of "[Big Boy's] nakedness in close proximity to Eve, a white woman, as he trespasses in Eden" (45).

What is at play here is a fear of miscegenation that rests on the view that black male subjects have to be separated from the white world lest they cross the border, enjoy whites' privileges and rape white women. The sudden emergence of Bertha, a symbol of white morality and purity as the myth goes, speaks for this very dynamic of the black beast. It comes after the boys have violated on two occasions white restrictions and enjoyed their exclusive privileges, the fenced property and the waterhole being emblems for the civil rights of ownership which blacks are denied and about which the boys were dreaming when they first saw the pond. The black beast stereotype is therefore an indication of a black monstrosity, unleashed when the black teenagers deviate from the

normal and natural order as defined by white ideology. Bryant reads Bertha's fear at the sight of the naked boys along the lines of black rapist ideology:

In a sense, she is paralyzed by a fearful conjunction of historically codified racial myths–the inviolate white female and the bestial black male, on the one hand, and the Jim Crow laws and customs that both prescribe and proscribe her responses to black men, on the other. (140)

Bertha, separated from her escort who is a military officer called Jim, finds herself alone in the presence of four naked blacks. Her fear, screams and her backing away from them reinforce the image of the fragile and defenseless white woman left prey to the sexual excess of black rapists. Standing between the boys and the tree under which their clothes are piled, Bertha starts shrieking when Big Boy and Bobo approach trying to retrieve their things. For her, every move the black boys make spells rape, since their very nakedness brands them as sexual animals and their defiant presence at the waterhole defines them as monsters. Rushing to her rescue, her man comes along with a rifle and shoots two of the boys and is about to shoot Bobo when Big Boy overpowers him and takes the gun. Even though warned, Jim tries to regain control of the gun, forcing Big Boy to shoot him. The two boys flee the scene to their homes in the black community which devises a plan for their escape to Chicago. Bobo is caught and lynched, while Big Boy makes it to the North after a night of torment in which he has to fight against all odds for his life and watch the mob setting his friend alight.

Very much like Bertha, her fiancé and protector Jim, when he comes upon the scene, does not wait to know what is going on because the blacks are condemned by their color not their deeds. To him, racial mythology prohibits interracial contacts, especially between white woman and black man. Worse still, if any such contacts ever take place they are seen through the sexual lens of the black beast trying to rape the white woman.

Harvey was acting on the basis of this black beast mythology which orders and determines relations across the racial divide. Even the black community does not bother about the killing of Jim, worrying more about rape charges against the boys. When Big Boy mentions the presence of the white woman as he tells the story of what happened to his mother, she cries "*White* woman?" (254), shifting the crime from killing Jim to approaching the white woman. She makes the same emphasis when she tells the news to his father, "Saul, its a *white* woman!" (255), and he in turn presents the tragedy to the community elders as emanating from the presence of the white woman and not from the shooting of her escort and son of the property owner. The same goes for the white society which makes it clear that the lynching of Bobo is meant to allay the fears and calm the mythical terrors of white women: "Ef they git erway notta woman in this town would be safe" (268). The burning of Bobo, according to the logic of the mob, has nothing to do with the murder of Harvey and all to do with the crime against the sacred feminine figure who crystalizes the purity of the white race and stands for its civilization.

It has also to be noted that the fear of miscegenation as the central leitmotif of the story and its attendant pathologizing of the black body are key to both the interracial encounter between Bertha and the four boys and the drama it unleashes. When Bertha first sees the boys naked by the pool she screams for help for a number of reasons that have to do with the white mythology of the black beast and that include her seeing the boys as monsters who have defied the natural order by stepping out of their physically defined worlds. But it includes also the nakedness of the boys and the privilege of seeing accorded to the white woman as two vital and fatal factors in the encounter. Bertha's gaze, a symbol of her power and privilege, transfixes and frames the boys, stripping them of their humanity and relegating them to the status of matter. Commenting on her gaze, Atkinson says, "To fix another in one's gaze is, at root, a powerful gesture, for in doing

so, one defines and dehumanizes one's object, demotes him in the scale of being, makes him a thing" (134). This dehumanizing gaze further denigrates the black boys because it freezes their naked black bodies into excessive visibility at the expense of their essence and humanity. When the boys try to run to the tree to retrieve their clothes and cover their bodies, Bertha cries for help and thus triggers the bloody shootout. Her fear emanates from the boys' attempt to escape her gaze which imprisons them in their visible blackness as mere bodies and as sub-humans. For what is at stake here is nothing short of Bertha's gaze trying to restore the order of whiteness which defines whites as culture and soul while arresting blacks in their bodies as animals. And when the boys dare yet again to defy the moral barrier imposed by her gaze as they did when they defied the inviolable spaces of property and waterhole, they immediately fall victims to rape fears. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright makes this connection between crossing the boundary of taboo and rape accusations:

> In the main, this delicately balanced state of affairs has not greatly altered since the Civil War, save in those parts of the South which have been industrialized or urbanized. So volatile and tense are these relations that if a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is usually called 'rape', that catchword which has garnered such vile connotations that it can raise a mob anywhere in the South pretty quickly, even today. (*Native Son* VI)

As in this critical statement, "Big Boy Leaves Home" unfolds as a story of black masculinity denied, since black boys are caught in the myth of the black beast not because of racial segregation but because of their attempt to break it. Unlike the happy and contented black male subjects who in other stories are stripped of autonomy and identity because they observe their place under segregation, the four boys undergo emasculation because they break these laws, and enter the realm of the beast myth as rapists.

The construction of black male subjectivity on the basis of the denigrating and emasculating black beast mythology takes a more confrontational and aggressive turn when Wright chooses to develop his main character, Bigger Thomas, in his most influential novel, *Native Son,* on the ground of the stereotype. In *Black Boy*, the taboo around interracial sex is presented as part of the strict code of Jim Crow that the narrator must learn to deal with and respect. The myth of the black beast is, thus, shown to be a policing tool that whites deploy to keep blacks in their place but also a vital aspect of the narrator's ascent to maturity as awareness of the structures governing life in the South and modes of black survival in it. "Big," on the other hand, portrays the fateful crossing of the racial barrier as the defiant acts of the four boys bring them in contact with the ultimate Southern taboo symbolized by the white woman, leading to the murder of three of them. For Big Boy, the only survivor, it is defiance as opposed to subservience that defines his development to manhood and subjectivity.

Writing of *Native*, Sterling Brown credits Wright for presenting his protagonist along the lines of the defiant black beast renegade: "It took courage to select as hero, a wastrel, a sneak thief, a double-killer. Most writers of minority groups select as heroes those who disprove stereotypes. Here is the 'bad nigger' set down without squeamishness, doing all that the 'bad nigger' is supposed to do" (98). Even though Brown hails the novel's attempt to demystify the stereotypical myth by facing it head on, Wright contends it is a turning-point in the way his literary enterprise addresses race relations in the South and their debilitating impact on black subjectivity. He qualifies the change he hoped the novel would effect in his readers as no less than trend-reversing and mind-changing when he describes his collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* to be appealing to white sentiments and vowed never to do the same again:

I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (*Native* xxi)

Indeed, Wright's avowed revolt against pathos in writing was expressed even earlier in his essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which he lamented African American scholarship which tried to appeal to mainstream white America, calling for a more adversarial form of writing that speaks for and to the black community. He accused black writing of being interested only in courting recognition from the white establishment:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of 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. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (52)

A look at the plot of *Native* suffices to illustrate how far Wright has gone toward effecting a break from a black culture bogged down in acquiescence to the white order and a move towards an adversarial consciousness that tries to expose the founding myths of white culture's representations and imaginings about black male subjectivity. For Wright does not only choose to set his novel in the Northern city of Chicago, depicting the sexual fears of the black beast myth to be nationwide and not exclusive to the South, but also carries out his interrogation of these national fantasies about the black body through a narrative plot that involves a "bad nigger" accidentally murdering a white

woman in the heat of erotic passion and sexual stimulation and getting legally lynched for the crime. There is no doubt that by centering his plot on white culture's fantasy about the black beast, Wright denies his readers the cathartic emotional experience of tear-shedding and takes them deeper into the inner recesses of white mythologies and fears about self and Other, the latter an emasculated black male subject.

While the formation of Bigger's identity in terms of the negative image of black beast and criminal becomes more articulated only after he kills Mary Dalton, the novel engages in the rehearsal of the beast mythology even before he physically meets whites' symbol of morality and civilization. The public treatment of the murder, through institutions of the press, the legal system and the coercive forces of the police and the mob reveals that Bigger's public image predates his killing of Mary and transcends any individual action of his. This is clear in the manner these institutions try to read the murder, and Bigger's identity with it, through the racial lens of mythologies about black bestiality and primitiveness instead of the act itself and how Bigger views it and why he is driven to commit it. What white institutions' constructions of Bigger's identity show is a way of seeing the black body that transcends individual acts of subjectivity in favor of a racial representation that freezes blackness in the stereotypical image of predator and sexually unrestrained primitive other. And although institutions of white representation and power focus on the murder, the discursive images and rationalizations they use to indict Bigger point to the fact that "he exists as a fantastically dreadful formula. This formula takes its outline from the ensconced societal notions of black bestiality that were the legacy of radical racism … [and] it is a formula that remains well-suited to encompass and subsume the particulars of Bigger's crimes and identity" (Leiter 198). The public's treatment of the murder as racially representative of blacks, regardless of Bigger's motives and the circumstances of the crime, reflects what Maurice O. Wallace calls "the

problem of spectragraphical misrepresentation" (35). "Spectragraphia" is about a fetishistic vision which fixes the black subject in terms of its skin color, making it permanently present to the white gaze as mere body without human depth. It is, therefore, a way of seeing and knowing that ensures the presence of the black body as a sign of racial visibility while it loses sight of the true black self which remains ever absent from its framing gaze.

As an imaginary form of seeing, spectragraphia emphasizes the visibility of the Other, reducing it to an exaggerated corporeality without essence. Yet because of its fetishistic nature or "self-serving blindness," it ends up with a misrepresentation that claims the presence of the black other only through the prison of physical visibility produced by the racial gaze. In this regard, spectragraphia as a way of seeing and a will to knowledge of the black other through an arrested representation of his physical and corporeal visibility is alienating because it sees only what it wants to see, that is, fears of the black beast and its attendant threats of miscegenation and political and racial equality. Caught in the arresting lens of such spectragraphic processes, Bigger finds his representational potential frozen in the stereotype of the depraved criminal primitive and a cluster of other negative and corporeally framing definitions that eternally picture him not as an individual with a special experience and identity but a representative of the black masculine as beast.

While the racial regimes congealing Bigger into the image of the "bad nigger" unleash their denigrating discursive arsenal of debilitating stereotypes when public institutions of power and knowledge are set into motion in Book Two and Book Three, their theoretical grounding takes place much earlier in Book One. In his first outdoor venture, not very far into the novel's opening pages, Bigger is confronted with the first glimpse of his beastliness as constructed by white eyes. When Bigger and his best friend

Jack go to the movie house seeking diversion from the boredom of a senseless morning in the black side of their town, they are introduced to two movies, *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*, which present the dual side of whites' image of black subjects as black beasts, namely black primitiveness and carnal lust for the white woman. The representation of blackness on the screen is a projection of blackness as perceived by the vision of whites. So, what Bigger and his peers are about to see in the theatre movie is nothing short of their own and other black subjects' image in the whites' minds. It is the vision of the black beast that sets boundaries around black life and threatens those who dare cross them with deadly violence. Inside the theatre, Bigger and Jack watch the two contrastive images that make up the black beast fantasy as the frozen image of blackness produced and perpetuated by the white gaze. They see a newsreel of white affluence and wealth, featuring Mary Dalton as the sexualized epitome of the best in white culture and the capitalist system. And as the black beast fantasy goes, the cultural elevation of white femininity is soon shown to have the expected effect on the black company watching the movie clip, fantasizing about the sexuality of white women and dreaming of going to Florida with the high-class wealthy girls. But the scenes of merry and erotic white femininity chased and kissed on the beaches of Florida with "cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels" (33) are highlighted against the background of images of blacks in *Trader Horn* as the narrator registers the effect of both movies on the mind of Bigger:

> He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing. (35-6)

Bigger's desire for the white world symbolized by the charming daughter of his wealthy landlord and would-be boss, Mr. Dalton, and his dismissal of the black African dance, play into the misrepresentation of black men as subjects limited to sexual lust for white women and desire for the privileges of the white world. This misrepresentation is also made explicit in the depiction of blacks in the movie as primitive creatures of nature who are eternally locked in a happy world of childish immaturity. Eby captures the beast motif in the two movies in terms of a "juxtaposition" between white refinement and wealth and black backwardness and sensuality. To her the beast is portrayed through a dual craving for the sexual benefits of the white world and the depravity of blacks: "the interlocking assumptions determining the white fantasy of the 'beast': the desirability of white women and the essentially 'primitive' nature of people of African descent" (2). What the movie theater shows is that films, like other institutions of white power and knowledge, capture and freeze at an early stage in the novel what Wallace calls "Bigger's public potential" (40) within a cognitive framework of beastliness that makes his killing of Mary inevitable but also determine what whites make of it, reproducing his identity in the fixed frames of their denigrating and stereotypical representations.

The visual framing of Bigger in the public mind outlined cinematically at this early stage in the novel and at the first appearance of Mary discursively constitutes him in terms of the sexuality of the black beast myth. Little wonder then that when later Bigger, carrying the drunken Mary between his arms to her bedroom, finds the same black spectrality and visibility replayed across the film of his memory: "he felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (83). Unlike in the movie theater, when Bigger was watching an image of his own arrested representation, now, in real life, he is the object of the white gaze which casts him in atemporal metaphysical terms that are traceable to experiences far back in time. The word

"acting" is very important because it stresses that Bigger's existence is reduced to his physical availability to whites' vision and that his real identity always escapes the image he rehearses on stage. It also denotes another typical assumption about the black beast as an arrested visual white representation which has to do with the eclipsing of Bigger's individuality in favor of a metaphysical racial category that condemns his entire black race as bestial.

Since the analysis of *Black Boy* and "Big" has covered essential components of the black beast fantasy like the metaphysical rendition of black masculinity, the crossing of inviolable physical and ideological spaces and the monstrosity of the deviant black beast, the reading of *Native* will put the focus on other aspects of the myth that aim to emasculate black male subjects through institutions of power and knowledge. And even though the novel teems with inviolable spaces the crossing of which further entraps Bigger into the myth, the discursive representation of his crime and its enforcement by coercive public institutions determine more than anything else the inevitable fate of Bigger as a stereotypical projection of white society's fears about blacks. These physical thresholds include the completely segregated and sealed off black neighborhood in the southern side of the city, Bigger's room above Dalton's mansion, the corridor through which he carries Mary to her bedroom, the bedroom itself and the bed where Mary sleeps. Every crossing of these spaces Bigger undertakes violates a social and ideological taboo and gets him closer to Mary's bed and his eventual incarnation of beastliness.

Before the discovery of Mary's charred bones in the furnace, white society's disregard of the possibility that Bigger could be behind the murder is very revealing. It points to whites' blindness, in spite of their exaggerated focus on sight and visibility, when it comes to knowledge about blacks. He was spared initial suspicion because his image is cast in another frame of docility and loyalty. As a matter of fact, Bigger is

accepted as a chauffeur to the Daltons and invited to their world out of a conviction that he is the typical helpless boy who needs a gesture of compassion, a job to help his family make ends meet. This alienating image inherent to the stereotype of the childish nigger accounts for white society's failure to see any connection between Bigger and the murder before the discovery of Mary's remains among the bellowing smoke. It is only when the discovery is made that white eyes turn to him through a different prism, more threatening and denigrating this time around. In Book One, Bigger himself, holding the slain Mary between his arms, outlines how white society is going to frame his story: "She was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black; he might be caught; he did not want to be caught; if he were they would kill him" (88). He rehearses the same foregone conclusion in Book Two:

> Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said. (101)

In addition to the light they shed on Bigger's belief that his fate is sealed anyhow and that he will be judged not on the ground of his own act but as a representative of the black race, these two statements provide a clear and detailed breakdown of how the public is going to frame his story. In each statement, Bigger reiterates the different racial epithets and assumptions that make up the black beast fantasy which rests on violating the inviolable space of white femininity and the deadly fate that follows from it. Bigger is well aware that the crime is not about his killing of Mary, but rather about ideological absolutes that ban physical proximity between black males and white females, making any such interracial/sexual encounters punishable by death.

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Bigger's brooding about how the picture-taking white public gaze is going to account for the murder of Mary does not only echo his arrested image as white-female lusting and jungle-inhabiting black beast as shown at the movie theater but also anticipates the brutish portrayal that the newspapers give of him to a fear-stricken and excited white public. That these metaphysical and pejorative attributes frame Bigger in regimes of representation that highlight his bestiality is clear in the way his story is constructed by the press. Very much like the stereotypical image in the newsreel, the press casts Bigger in the familiar degrading image of the primitive and as a historical black subject who is arrested in development. Even though suspicion still rests on the communists as being behind the murder of Mary, one reporter sets the frame for Bigger's representation according to the white narrative: "Say, I'm slanting this to the primitive Negro who doesn't want to be disturbed by white civilization" (201). Even though at this stage in the investigation, Bigger still enjoys the blessing of whites' blindness and is safe from accusation, he is subjected to a process of othering that feeds into whites' imagination about blacks as different and primitive. But the angle of the story the reporter is developing is a typical and familiar one as it portrays Bigger in terms of the stereotype of "the black boy" who is a happy with his immaturity and, thus, his being untouched by "civilization." This image of naivety and innocence associated with blacks is reiterated a few pages later in the novel when Bigger sees his picture in the newspaper with a caption that reads "REDS TRIED TO SNARE HIM" (210), further stressing his childish character as black and highlighting the ease with which he can be duped and manipulated.

Much later in the novel it is the press which seals the fate of Bigger when reporters discover Mary's incinerated body in the furnace, prompting him to flee the basement of the wealthy Daltons' mansion and face a relentless pursuit by police and vigilantes geared to his arrest, as a paper's front-page reads: "HUNT BLACK IN GIRL'S

DEATH" (227). In addition to the unearthing of his crime, newspapers go on portraying Bigger's act as a rape crime instead of murder. Embracing the rapist stereotype, the angle of the newspapers' story shifts from the primitiveness of innocent "boy" to the bestiality of the "bad nigger," with one headline framing Bigger's public image in the black beast carnality of *Trader Horn*. The headline reads: "AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME" (229), arresting "[Bigger's] representational potential before white eyes within a bestial frame-up" (Wallace 41).

The paper's hint at rape becomes a certainty further on in the article when all shadows of doubt are removed in favor of black beast condemnation while Bigger reads his representational arrest as rapist and his imminent capture by the encroaching police force on a map published in the paper: "shaded portion shows area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White portion shows area yet to be searched" (230). Bigger's reaction is that "He was trapped," caught in the dual frame-up and arrest of the press and police, in the brutish image of black beast "rapist." The complicity between institutions of knowledge and those of power is amply clear in that the state law enforcement apparatus embraces rape charges promoted by the newspapers instead of pressing for a criminal inquiry into the killing as murder, making his arrest in Book Three just an extension of Bigger's arrest on the level of representation as black beast. The emphasis on rape defines not so much Bigger's crime as the whites' sexual anxieties and fears about black male and white female encounters. It shows, in the words of JanMohamed, that all crossings of the racial boundary are cast in terms of rape to further consolidate the black beast fantasy as an arrested and unchangeable representation of the black masculine:

the deep, wrenching penetration of the racialized subject by racist discourses, which are responsible for the very formation of that subject, is represented by

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Wright as 'rape.' In fact he characterizes the entire region of the racial border as defined by rape. Rape is simultaneously the metonymy of the process of oppressive racist control…and a metaphor for the construction of the racialized subject … the racialized subject is always already constructed as 'raped' subject in Wright's view. Rape thus subsumes the totality of force relations on the racial border, which is in fact always a sexual border. ("Sexuality" 109)

JanMohamed's definition of rape as a dual process of white control and black emasculation producing the "raped subject" is identical with the black beast masculine framed in the dual arrest of white representation and police oppression. Yet JanMohamed's idea has the merit of exposing white mythologies about black subjectivity since it reveals that it is not the white woman who is the victim of rape but the black man, who is doubly raped by the weight of culture and regimes of stereotypical representation and crushed by the brutality of the legal system. Further, the rape of the black man is not only metaphorical but also literal since rape charges against blacks always lead to mob lynching and castration of the accused. Seen in this light, the black beast fantasy becomes a white beast fantasy, denoting the crippling effect of white sexual fears on black male subjectivity and their power, in the Foucauldian sense, of producing and forming black male identity always already arrested in cultural representation and denied civil rights. The figuring of black subjectivity on the grounds of "radicalized sexuality" is clear in that all black characters in Wright's fiction who kill white women and are accused of raping them one way or the other are driven to the act not out of sexual attraction but out of their fear of being accused of rape, castrated and hanged. This is the case with Bigger whose fear of being detected by Mrs. Dalton as he stands by the bed of her daughter leads him to kill her accidentally. Big Boy in "Big" is seen by the white woman Bertha first instead of him seeing her and even though he tries to cover his naked body, which she

associates with carnal lust, he has two of his friends gunned down. Running for his life, from the fear of encounter with the white woman, he is obliged to watch his friend Bobo lynched and castrated in front of his eyes. The same fear of castration propels Saul, in "The Man Who Killed His Shadow," to murder the white female librarian who tried to blackmail him to have sex with her. The emasculating effect of carnal black bestiality on the black masculine is clearly expressed by the narrator as he explains Bigger's developing consciousness in relation to his murder:

> Every time he [Bigger] felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But 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…to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face…But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (213-14)

Rape in this sense stands for the confined condition of black society under Jim Crow where a border is set up by white society ensuring its supremacy and the subordination of the black Other. White society deploys the black beast myth to police black behavior and restrict the Other to the Uncle Tom status of childhood, dispossessed of agency and a sense of self. Ironically, Wright's characters rush to kill white women because of their fear of being accused of rape, making the laws which breed this fear counter-productive. After a protracted chase that ends in Bigger's capture by police, newspapers draw a detailed image of his black body for a fear-stricken and excited white public. An edition of the *Chicago Tribune* projects whites' sexual fantasies about the crime, further highlighting the black beast image: "NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS AT INQUEST" (260). At some point the article rehashes the primitive theme outlined in *Trader Horn* at the outset of the narrative, highlighting the disfigurement of the black

body when it is caught under the spell of the stereotypical picture-taking white gaze. The article quotes a young girl terrified of Bigger exclaiming, "He looks exactly like an ape!" If Bigger's criminal and representational arrest strips him of voice and ability to speak about his body disfigurement under the white gaze, Fanon retains enough voice to articulate his loss of body and self when seized by white visual representation:

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema … I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects … I took myself far off from my own presence … What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? (*Black* 110-12)

What Fanon outlines, and what happens to Bigger, is that the deployment of images of bestiality by whites breaks up black bodies, creating a gulf between the self which is always an absolute other and outside representation and the arrested stereotypical image which Fanon describes in the imagery of a tearing apart of flesh and a "haemorrhage" of blood. This process of dismemberment, dissection and disfiguration of the black body comes to light later in the article when the reporter gives a breakdown of Bigger's body parts, showing the body bleeding with each image taken of it and each stereotype attached to it. To each part of Bigger's body the article attaches a stereotype drawn from the white imagination and a wound to his selfhood. For example, even though "the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built," he is presented with monster-like powers and "gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength." The article proceeds with the display of Bigger's body parts and the brutish attributes attached to them: "His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast." And since "His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees," it becomes, then, "easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex

passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into a roaring furnace to destroy the evidence of his crime." The physical description goes on: "His shoulders are huge, muscular, and he keeps them hunched," and, so goes the pejorative representation, "as if about to spring upon you at any moment." Now that the portrayal ends up with Bigger being painted as a predator threatening to strike at any time, the article proceeds to deny him any human feelings: "He looks at the world with a … stare, as though defying all efforts of compassion" (260).

The *Chicago Tribune*'s depiction of Bigger as an animal predator is accounted for on the ground that he rebelled against the happy-boy stereotype of Uncle Tom and moved into the realm of the black beast when he raped Mary: "he lacks the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people" and therefore, "seems a beast utterly untouched by softening influences of modern civilization" (260). The newspapers' construction of Bigger's identity reflects the general status of the black community which is left with either of two choices: to accept the borderline of total non-identity or step over it and suffer denial of its humanity and the right to civilization. And since Bigger defies the "darky" and "genial" black image of the happy boy, the newspapers reduce him to black bestiality without the hope of any redemption to civilization: "He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man's civilization" (260).

In addition to the racialization of Bigger according to the sexual fears of the white imagination, the press joins law enforcement yet again to have him return to the scene of the crime and act out what happened the night he choked Mary to death. But as the police fail to incriminate him because he refuses to do their bidding, the photographers succeed in arresting Bigger through the frame of a picture which shows him with bared teeth, seething with anger and resentment. In their bid to frame Bigger's identity for the public,

the newspapers undertake research into his social background and bloodline. They quote a Mississippi editor whose comments on Bigger's ancestry evoke miscegenation, stressing that whites' fears of the black beast are nationwide. The *Jackson Daily Star* editor from Dixie, Mississippi, sends this wire: "I think it but proper to inform you that in my quarters it is believed that Thomas, despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature" (261). The accusation of Bigger being a mixed race makes the anatomy of the black beast complete by appealing to whites' fears about the link between blacks' emancipation and miscegenation.

White imagination bans miscegenation for fear it will create a mulatto nation in which blacks take the lead and corrupt white civilization. In this light, Bigger's crossing the sexual/racial barrier makes him a living embodiment of what could happen to the nation when emancipated blacks are allowed to satisfy their sexual lust for the white woman. This rationalization is buttressed by arguments put forward by psychologists from the University of Chicago quoted by the newspaper saying that blacks have an "unusual fascination" with white women, and "they think…white women are more attractive than women of their own race" (363). Little wonder then that the solution to the problem of the black beast and the mulatto nation lies, according to the newspapers, in implementing the segregation laws of Jim Crow. Put differently, to address whites' fear of miscegenation and interracial sex is to restore the barrier and keep blacks behind it. Such are the proposals outlined by the Southern editor:

> Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all
> Negroes in parks, playgrounds, cafés, theatres, and street cars. Residential
> segregation is imperative. Such measures tend to keep them as much as possible

out of direct contact with white women and lessen their attacks against them. (261)

The solution according to this bizarre logic is a recycling of the black beast myth of maintaining the sexual/racial barrier to ward off black male sexuality and keep the black man as a "raped" subject. In his defense of Bigger, Max wonders how to present an accurate picture of his identity to the court "when a thousand newspaper and magazine artists have already drawn it in lurid ink upon a million sheets of public print?" (355). Even though, Bigger's lawyer himself casts his client's story in biological terms and fails to articulate his humanity, his point about the invention of Bigger by white institutions of knowledge is a valid one. It is the newspapers' construction of Bigger on the basis of fixed and unchangeable stereotypes that determines his public identity as a rebellious black beast.

Bigger's construction by the press as a "bad nigger" is also taken up by the legal system which forces him into this debilitating stereotype through economic dependency and geographic segregation before the murder and picks up his physical and moral representation as a beast after it. Early in the novel, the dehumanizing life of the black community is shown to be maintained and enforced by the legal institution which through segregation laws keeps the racial barrier intact, preserves racial hierarchy and imprisons blacks in conditions of deprivation and dispossession in the black belt side of the town. The configuration and distribution of power and privilege in this racially divided society is made on the basis of a legal system that protects the color line, asserting the supremacy of whites while relegating blacks to a status of subordination. JanMohamed explains how the legal apparatus, by protecting the barrier, ensures the non-existence and complete powerlessness of blacks:

Juridical prohibitions are extremely powerful in this space because all socio-political-cultural relations on the racial border are predicated on the definition of the 'other,' in this case the black American, as nonhuman, as a being who does not belong to the human realm of the master's society and who consequently has no 'rights' within that society. ("Sexuality" 97)

After the first opening scene of the novel which depicts the inhuman living conditions to which his family is reduced, Bigger gets out of his cramped one-room apartment only to come face to face with the coercive and threatening force of the law. As he stands by the street, he sees workmen hanging a huge campaign poster of the State's incumbent attorney, Buckley. The poster shows a huge portrait of Buckley threateningly pointing his finger at Bigger with a comment that reads, "IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN'T WIN!" (16). A sign of Bigger's confinement, the legal figure planted at the heart of the black community reminds black passers-by of their non-existence under the legal system and warns them not to break the law which preserves racial disparity and configures geography in a way that protects and sustains white privilege. Bigger does not only understand that Buckley is corrupt but also is aware of his complicity with the wealthy people who benefit from the strict enforcement of the law to the detriment of blacks. Bigger concludes: "You crook … You let whoever pays *you* off win!" (17; emphasis in original). This latent complicity between the legal establishment and affluent whites and its dehumanizing impact on the black community is underlined later in Book Two when Bigger sees a board on a building:

THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one-rat infested room…He [Mr. Dalton]

owned property all over the Black Belt, and he owned property where white folks lived, too. But Bigger could not live in a building across the 'line.' Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. (164)

Bigger is quick to grasp that the color-line defining him as a black beast Other operates thanks to the alliance between the law and property and their respective symbols, Buckley and Mr. Dalton. While the first mobilizes a coercive state security apparatus against blacks who defy the color bar, as will be the case with Bigger following Mary's murder, the property system racializes geography, excluding blacks from opportunity and confining them to inhuman living conditions. The geographical demarcation that Mr. Dalton's real estate company maintains is institutionally supported by Buckley's warning to blacks not to break the law. The two conspire through economic restrictions and juridical prohibitions to consolidate "the civil and political boundary between 'black' and 'white,' and to confine civil and political rights to one side of that border" (JanMohamed, "Sexuality" 99). The construction of Bigger's racial identity as a "bad nigger" is realized through interlocking discourses of law and property prior to his transgression of both, first by breaking the physical geographical boundary and working as a chauffeur at the Daltons and second by seemingly violating the sexual and ideological boundary of miscegenation through his purported rape of Mary. At this early stage in his racialization as black other, white society mobilizes its arsenal of legal prohibitions and system of economic exploitation to brand him as a beast which should not only be banished from humanity but also kept under the policing white gaze to avert its danger to society and civilization.

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After the murder of Mary and Bigger's capture, the legal system, represented by the court, takes center stage as white society's main ideological institution, engaging in a campaign of stereotypical denigration against Bigger and the black race. The court legitimizes and completes through physical arrest and incarceration the representational arrest of Bigger that the press undertakes in Book Two after the discovery of Mary's ashes in the Daltons' furnace. In this regard and as a site of Bigger's trial, the court becomes the public stage on which the dehumanizing portrait of the press is not only rehearsed and promoted but also brought to bear on Bigger's life when he is handed down a death sentence, emphasizing the legal system's role in the exclusion of blacks. Petar Ramadanovic highlights the significance of Bigger's trial to the racial configuration in the novel: "The trial places the allegedly impartial courtroom at the very center of race relations. The trial thus represents the culminating phase—the phase in which we still live—in the long history of American racism, where the legal sphere becomes the primary site of the regulation and definition of race" (109). In this sense, the court is credited with a dual function in ordering and "regulating" race relations: first it functions as a policing and prohibitive tool restricting blacks to their sphere of economic dependence and political disenfranchisement and second it is an ideological apparatus that promulgates pejorative images of blacks. The privileged and central place of the courtroom in the white imagination is nowhere more visible than in the personal posturing and moral conduct of prosecutor Buckley during the trial and his construction of Bigger as a typically and racially representative black beast.

When Buckley's turn comes to make his speech in front of the judge, the narrator pictures him as a brutal animal ready to terminate his spoil. The irony is that by choosing to cast him in animal imagery the narrator subverts whites' views about blacks as animals and reveals that rather than being victimizers they are victims of the ruthless animal

nature of people like Buckley: "Bigger turned his head and saw Buckley rise…The man's very look and bearing, so grimly assured, made Bigger feel that he was already lost. What chance had he against a man like that? Buckley licked his lips and looked out over the crowd; then he turned to the judge" (371). Just as the narrator uses Bigger's fear of being caught in Mary's bedroom as the reason behind the murder and not his sexual attraction to her (as the official press narrative puts it), in this case, he destabilizes the legal system's attempt to condemn Bigger on the ground of his inhumanity as a black by showing the spokesperson of the system to be an incarnation of animal ruthlessness. In addition to the animal imagery which puts his superior position in stark contrast with Bigger's defenselessness, Buckley uses tactics and posturing that anticipate his supremacist view of Bigger as a sub-human other which he outlines in his speech. In order to arouse the emotions of the court and cast his argument in racial terms, Buckley opens the window to let people inside the courtroom hear the shouts of angry crowds outside and provokes the audience's anger against Bigger when he expresses surprise at having to enforce the law in the presence of the people who elected him. Buckley goes even further and brings a furnace into the courtroom and asks a young girl to place her head inside it, in order to prove that the furnace is wide enough for Bigger to burn Mary's own head in it.

At one stage in his statement, he threatens to resign if Bigger is not given a death penalty verdict. The prosecutor's strategy lies in stirring the audience's emotions and racial sympathy through these tactics which depict Bigger as a demonic beast. A perfect representation of the legal system's subjugation of blacks, the District Attorney is revealed to have other ambitions that are more earthly than the noble cause of serving justice as he claims to be doing. Like the campaign poster in the beginning of the novel where his political ambitions account for his eyes policing Bigger as he walks away,

Buckley's political motivations and his self-serving defense of the legal system are repeatedly highlighted by the narrator. In one instance, the young communist and Mary's lover, Jan, asks him "You're afraid that you won't be able to kill this boy before the April elections, if we handle his case, aren't you, Buckley?" (271). At the courtroom, Buckley's conduct is governed by the same corrupt political positions as he tries to use the trial for his reelection campaign, depicting himself as the guardian of white civilization with Bigger the beast heralding its demise. He opens his address to the court with an emphasis on the rule of law and its status as the embodiment of the society's spirit: "Your Honor, we all dwell in a land of living law. Law embodies the will of the people" (371-72). To Buckley, the definition of people does not extend beyond his supremacist white-centered view to include blacks, whom he regards as not fully human. This is why a few sentences later he states that as a representative of "the organized will of the people," he calls upon the court to make sure that "the full extent of the law, the death penalty–the only penalty of the law that is feared by murderers!–be allowed to take its course in this most important case" (372).

Spelling out the segregating edicts of the Jim Crow system, Buckley's argument rests on a definition of "people" whom the law represents and protects that draws a clear distinction between "us" and "them," white and black, the human and the inhuman and the people and the murderers. With blacks throughout his speech occupying the second part of the dichotomous pair, Buckley's ardent defense of the sanctity of law excludes blacks from the realm of humanity, casting them as "murderers" to be targeted by the legal system. No wonder then that he views Bigger as a beast who breaks the most sacred of laws–raping a white woman–and disrupts the social order of racial hierarchy, thus meriting nothing less than total extermination.

Following the same reasoning, Buckley's definition of people takes a clear racial turn when he casts it in terms of kinship and family ties. He contends that the death penalty should be enforced to protect "our society, our homes and our loved ones," asserting that it is the only way to restore the order that Bigger has destabilized and to see "the administration of law is just, that the safety and sacredness of human life are maintained, that the social order is kept intact" (372). In this light, Buckley's rationale is simple and has been foreshadowed by his poster warning for blacks not to break the law and disrupt the social order of racial segregation. It ironically restates the racial problem engendered by Jim Crow laws as the solution to the problem.

In his seven-page long speech, Buckley tries to tell Bigger's whole story from the day he crosses the border to work at the Daltons until his arrest. His interest in capturing the whole story betrays the gruesome realities of the social order he wants to preserve, one that pays attention to and bothers about Bigger only when he trespasses into white inviolable physical and ideological spaces. The story he presents to the court constructs Bigger as a monster, relating his physical looks to some evil and degenerate black essence which he claims drives blacks to break the law and threaten the order of white society. He offers a litany of heinous epithets that are well calculated to arouse the audience's hatred against Bigger: "hardened black thing," "black shadow of death," "sly thug," "sub-human killer," "half-human black ape," "rapacious beast," "ghoul," and "black mad dog." Drawing parallels between Bigger's physical traits and his "animal" nature, Buckley constructs blackness as a dangerous other threatening white existence and civilization. This process of othering is meant to demonize blackness and intensify whites' sense of fear and, thus, sense of racial identity. It is a part of Buckley's scheme over the course of the trial to construct Bigger's identity solely in terms of external appearance and to cast him as a beast whose crime shows black bestiality and shakes the

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foundation of white society and civilization by chopping off the head of its symbol of virtue and morality, Mary Dalton.

Speaking about the District Attorney's rhetoric, John M. Reilly argues that, exaggerated as it may be, it still speaks for the "beliefs that justify the subordinate status of the blacks as the other" (59). Reilly's connection between the subordination of blackness and the invention of the other is very significant because it shows the power-knowledge nexus at play in Buckley's push to denigrate Bigger before he convicts him. He undertakes a process of othering that produces Bigger as a degenerate animal, arrests him in the stereotypical image of beast, and then invokes the restoration of the political and legal institutions of Jim Crow as the remedy to his breach of the color-line. Yet the prosecutor's construction of Bigger's identity as different and other reaches its climax when he evokes the miscegenation motif and places it at the center of Bigger's story. Throughout the novel, Mary is equated with all elements of success in and the sanctity of white society. In addition to her young age, she represents the best of the American Dream, especially in terms of her opulence and material wealth. In light of her symbolic significance to white society, Mary's alleged rape is seized upon by Buckley who presents it to the general white public as a transgression of the ultimate taboo of miscegenation. He invokes white patriarchy and rallies white men to avenge Mary, the emblem of a white civilization whose death he blames on Bigger's savagery: "It is a sad day for American civilization when a white man will try to stay the hand of justice from a bestial monstrosity who has ravished and struck down one of the finest and most delicate flowers of our womanhood" (373). Because Buckley stands for a legal system which defines Bigger as a threat, he is unable to see the accidental murder as anything but yet another instance of miscegenation in which the black beast predator gratifies his sexual lust and kills the idol of white civilization. Fear of miscegenation according to

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Buckley's rationalization is caused by the prospect of the "animal" black defiling the purity and chastity of white womanhood. Once again, he uses images of the beast threatening and disrupting the harmony of the white order, constantly articulated around the feminine figure and the intimate values of home. This is clear when he assures his audience that the law allows them "not [to] tremble with fear that at this very moment some half-human black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape, murder, and burn our daughters!" (373).

The equation between the private and public spheres that patterns Buckley's theorization about miscegenation finds expression in what Eby calls "the mulatto nation." Eby contends that whites' anxieties about black male and white female sex stems from their fear that such encounters can bring about hybrid mulatto monsters who would run the country and put an end to a white civilization of intellectual refinement (443). Within these terms, Buckley's deployment of images of raped white womanhood and endangered kinship and family reflect a broader concern about the fate of the public sphere of power and privilege where black men's access to sex with white woman is always seen in tandem with political empowerment and eventual control of the nation. Like white society's institutions of power and knowledge–the press and the legal system– Bigger is also subjected to the double arrest of representation and police incarceration by the system of law enforcement.

The relation between the three institutions and their control over the black man's fate through the black beast myth is foreshadowed at the outset of the novel. Bigger reminds his companion Jack, who is relishing fantasies about white women, that the cost of his dreams will be nothing less than his execution by hanging. A variation on the same theme is highlighted a few pages later as the two black boys at the theater marvel at the ostentatious life of the white world and Bigger wishes to be invited to a night-club

attended by white couples. Jack reminds him of the public perception that stands in the way of his wishes being realized: "Man, if them folks saw you they'd run…They'd think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo and put on a tuxedo" (33). But whether it is Bigger warning Jack he would be hanged from a tree like a banana or Jack warning him not to dream of sharing the white world's privileges lest he be taken for a monster, the underlying rationale is the same. It is that of the anatomy of the black beast which pictures black males as monsters when they dream of white women and of equality with whites.

This theme is laid out in the newspapers, legitimized by the legal system and enforced by law enforcement. Bigger faces law enforcement after he kills Mary and enters the realm of the black beast even though his life before as an obedient Uncle Tom is controlled by fears of breaking white law and being punished by law enforcement. He faces it in terms of the state apparatus of power, the police, but also in terms of the rule of the mob, which is constantly present in the background calling for his death. Ramadanovic argues that keeping the mob in the background and allowing the state apparatus to take center stage in Bigger's chase, capture and trial underlines the fact that deciding the fate of blacks has shifted from the street mob to the state system of power: "The force behind the law is no longer the white mob, but the state's apparatus of power: its police, National Guard, military" (109). Yet in spite of the historical shift from the illegal rule of the lynch mob to the institutional legal system, both forms of law enforcement join forces in consolidating the cultural arrest of Bigger as a monster-rapist and contribute to his physical arrest, incarceration and impending death. And while the mob repeatedly calls for Bigger's conviction, labeling him sometimes as a "beast" and sometimes a "black ape," the police, aided by vigilantes, engage in a chase to find and capture Bigger. James Smethurst aptly compares this chase to the pursuit of Frankenstein's monster:

The thousands of police officers with flashlights and searchlights who pursue Bigger through an urban gothic landscape of abandoned tenements on the South Side at the end of the second section of *Native Son* closely resemble the villagers with the torches who chase Frankenstein's monster through an expressionist landscape. The final fight scene at an old windmill between Frankenstein and the cornered monster also resembles the battle between Bigger and the policeman he knocks unconscious. (32)

The chase undertaken by the police to capture Bigger among the deserted old buildings of the south side of the city is portrayed as a hunt for a black figure whose monstrosity follows from his ravishing and killing a white woman. Bigger is stripped of his humanity and declared a beast the moment he breaks the law banning black male and white female interaction, and declaring white women off-limits to black males. Outside the law and humanity, Bigger's chase by the police is cast in images of bestial monstrosity. All the elements involved in the door-to-door and street-to-street manhunt contribute to his overall picture as a much-feared monster that threatens the well-being of society. These elements include: the hot pursuit, his being a dangerous individual running from law enforcement authorities and his blackness versus their whiteness. Already in "Big," the protagonist, Big Boy, and his friend Bobo suffer the same chase when they break the law protecting the white woman from the black beast. Even though the hunt is done in the South, in a rural setting and by a white mob, the two black boys are chased by an angry crowd of white people with flashlights and hounds, leading to the capture and lynching of Bobo. This image of the fugitive monster who is caught and punished by the mob after ravishing a white woman is also present in *The Long Dream* where Chris, the protagonist's friend is found in a hotel room with a white woman and is killed by an angry mob. He is dragged by a car through the town and his entire body

dismembered. Law enforcement does not only treat Bigger and the other boys in Wright's fiction as monsters that have to be chased, hunted down and killed but also cracks down on them as racial types and representatives. The police and the vigilantes do not search for Bigger as an individual who has committed a crime of which he is alone responsible but rather as a black man, distorting his identity and individuality into the metaphysical image of the black savage promoted by the stereotype. This is clear when the police hold the entire black community responsible for Bigger's deed, brutally raiding the blacks' neighborhood, cordoning it off and searching it house-to-house. The search also sees hundreds of black community members arrested, beaten and humiliated. This collective punishment of an entire community on the basis of its color is characteristic of law enforcement's response to presumed or real black male and white female sexual relationships. Big Boy makes it to the North after his pursuers fail to discover him hiding in his Kiln but he leaves behind him the scars and memories of shattered friendship as his friends are eradicated and a community is torn apart as his parents' shack is set ablaze. Chris' community, though spared such violence, is terrorized by an angry mob firing bullets in their pursuit of him and gripping his parents with hysteria and fear. Harris captures whites' fear of the black beast and how it translates into a collective punishment of all black males who would follow Chris's lead:

> The power of Chris's action, and the gripping effect it has upon the black community, is reflected in the way in which the fathers of the boys near Fish's age drive to school to take them home after Chris has been discovered; they know that the mob will descend upon any black boy or man it deems capable of having committed the offence or any who shares racial affinity with Chris. (121)

The common denominator between all these experiences of pursuit is that white sexual fears of miscegenation arrest the black male on the level of representation,

producing him as a non-identity and a racially representative monster. These fears also translate into a ruthless and brutal physical arrest of the black beast, ending up in lynching in the case of the mob chase and incarceration in the case of the police manhunt. The double arrest of the black monster is not simply motivated by sheer sexual lust for the white woman as law enforcement portrays it, at least. It rather stems from whites' fears of social equality and black economic opportunity, fears that lead to firing black workers.

If law enforcement captures Bigger and maintains an overwhelming presence before, during and after the trial conviction as whites' guardian against the monster, the mob emerges as repeatedly influencing the major actions and precipitating Bigger's downfall. Its presence is significant in that it rallies white supremacy against the perceived threat of blackness and monstrosity and also shows that this tradition is not limited to the South but also extends to include the North. By being there in the background in all the major events which determine his fate as a rapist, the mob's calls for Bigger's death illustrate that whites' sexual fears of the black beast and their related anxieties about racial equality are not limited to one region in particular but bespeak a nationwide fear towards the black male Other. Bigger is subjected to mob violence on several occasions in the run-up to his conviction as a rapist-murderer. He first faces the mob at his capture when crowds of whites angrily call for his death and shout "Lynch 'im!" (253). Then again when he returns to the alleged scene of the crime at Mary's bedroom he is met on his way out by a white mob burning a cross in a scene reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan, and demanding "Shoot that bastard!" (312). And during the trial, shouts and lynch calls by the mob to kill the "beast" are heard in the courtroom itself. But nowhere is the lynch mentality of the mob so clearly revealed in the novel as when Bigger faces it at Cook County Morgue. The narrator describes the mob's impact on Bigger's consciousness:

It was not their hate he felt; it was something deeper than that. He sensed that in their attitude toward him they had gone beyond hate … he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control. The atmosphere of the crowd told him that they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world. (257)

This passage spells out the various assumptions underpinning the black beast fantasy through the role of the mob and the white racial imagination it symbolizes. In addition to the construction and invention of the black body as object of fear and hate, the mob mentality is not content with the death and physical arrest of Bigger's body but uses it as a text upon which it inscribes its fears and anxieties, and in so doing achieves a cathartic self-purgation. Bigger's body is thus invented, demonized and pathologized as a monstrous other by the mob with the aim of transforming it into a surrogate self upon which whites' fears and uncertainties are projected. Yet the mob's backlash against Bigger does not only produce him as an object of white representational fantasy but also uses him to reinforce the surveillance control of blacks in order to keep them in their place as content and childlike Uncle Toms.

The racialization of black male subjectivity involves the production of a false form of knowledge that discursively produces it as either compliant or rebellious. The deployment of the two generic stereotypes of Uncle Tom and Black Beast imprisons black men in metaphysical conceptual frames that deny their particularity and specificity, making them available for the white gaze and knowledge. Seen exclusively in these terms, their true identities are disavowed and sidelined in favor of a binary mode of thinking which reflects white society's desire for control and subjugation and fear of

difference rather than any legitimate form of knowledge production that seriously attempts to understand them. The conflictual and yet complementary stereotypes of peaceful and happy boy and bad nigger speak to the duality of knowledge and power which discursively constructs and invents black manhood to facilitate its subjection and to sustain white supremacy.

The question that arises from this difference-blind white discursive representation is whether black men can find an alternative way of belonging in their own black community and culture or whether they are equally displaced and antagonized by its social values which privilege conformity and homogeneity over difference and individuality. Wright's turning away from the lure of race and nationalism as an easy alternative to white hegemony forms the primary focus of the following chapter. His idea of black subjectivity will be explored in light of his poignant and unabated search for an identity unrestrained by the totalities of culture, race and group thinking, one that is not at home with mainstream white America just as it is alienated by a black nationalism which foregrounds racial typicality and cultural uniformity.

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND NATIONALISM: BREAKING THE CLOSURE OF BLACK CULTURE

Geographies of Despair: Blacks' Place of Confinement

Wright's fiction locates the plight of black male subjectivity in the essentialising narrative of Enlightenment which grounds identity in the realm of absolute difference, producing a unitary, whole and fixed self that is anchored in the purity of nationalistic culture. To pinpoint the shortcomings of this imaginary mode of identification which sustains the supremacist allegations of white culture and its negation of black identity, this chapter will explore how Wright's fiction does not fall back on a simplistic celebration of his own nationalistic black folk culture, focusing on its resistance to and denigration of any unproblematic embracing of black culture that asserts identity in the exclusive terms of origin and race. In a fashion similar to his debunking of white culture's positivist assumptions about blacks, Wright denounces nationalism and black culture, showing that they are governed by the same forces and founded on the same premises that trapped black male subjects under white racism. Mindful of this specular relationship between white culture and black nationalism where identity is figured in the positivity of a central self that is defined in relation to its negating other, Wright's fiction sets out to explore black culture's collaboration with the white system in denying black male subjects access to agency and the limitations it places on them as a proxy agent of domination.

The overlap between white Law and black culture resembles a kind of a division of labor where the first uses the threat of death and lynching to define and police black

subjects in the public sphere while the second uses the family as a site to coerce them into conformity and acquiescence to their place of marginality. The family Law stands, therefore, for black culture's complicity in forcing white hegemony upon black males and ensuring their acceptance of its dictates. It is, in the words of Stephen Michael Best "an heuristic tool of lynch law. That is to say, family law is the site where hegemony is made tangible, the domain where blacks *give over* their rights to agency" (115; emphasis in original). Instead of providing black subjects with the moral support and cultural coherence necessary to protect them from the disorienting effects of white Law and its ubiquitous use of violence, black culture, considered in this light, becomes an extension of white hegemony that further consolidates their formation as racialized non-entities occupying a place of non-identity. The grounds on which Wright denounces the black family and by consequence black culture, are better understood in terms of Orlando Patterson's concept of social death which delineates the sociopolitical conditions and power configurations that produce black subjects as slaves. In his *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson points out the cultural and historical factors that account for blacks' precarious existence and their cultural impoverishment under the system of slavery:

> Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. *He was truly a genealogical isolate.* Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. (5; emphasis in original)

Exploring the formation of black subjects by the practice of slavery, Patterson identifies different forms and degrees of social deaths that plague their life and confine them to the permanent status of enslaved isolates. As genealogical outcasts, enslaved

subjects have no claim upon their life or conditions because they are cut off from their past and denied access to their cultural and social roots. As such, they are bound to (and unbound by) the present through fragmentation, dislocation and social disconnection. Slavery, which Patterson charts from pre-modern to modern societies, isolates enslaved subjects from temporal linearity and memory and imprisons them in a culture of death where a relation to the present is disrupted and agency denied. This cultural and historical uprooting of slaves is followed by other forms of social death, each unearthing a facet of blacks' powerlessness and strained conditions of living under slavery. What these have in common is that slavery mediates blacks' utter helplessness through the use of violence, producing them as socially and culturally dead subjects. Patterson clarifies slavery's devastating toll on blacks' agency through these three forms of black subjection: slaves' powerlessness, lack of honor and social death. Although complementary, each of these highlights the complete dispossession and marginality of the slave while stressing the supremacy and power of the master. The slaves' powerlessness emanates from his subjection to the permanent threat of death by the master who wields and enjoys absolute power over him. Patterson argues that slavery is sustained thanks to a paradoxical structure or relationship that relies on the deployment of death to break the slave and renders him powerless so that he accepts his place as a subordinate and marginal. The paradoxical twist in this ruthless deployment of death is that the slave by acquiescing to his sub-human status contributes to the perpetuation of slavery, validates the utility of death as a controlling mechanism and thus seals his own fate.

Following Patterson's lead while focusing on death as tool of discipline, Trudier Harris contends that the aim of lynching as an arbitrary and extrajudicial act of violence conducted by the mob is to police and control blacks in their place:

The history of lynchings and burnings in this country is the history of racial control by a specific form of violence … White men in the South used forms of intimidation ranging from beatings to lynchings in order to keep Blacks contained politically and socially during the years of Reconstruction. Mysterious and ghostly in their appearances before their victims, these white men conveyed to Blacks that there was always someone watching over their shoulders ready to punish them for the slightest offense or the least deviation from acceptable lines of action. (19)

The surveillance and "Panoptical" effect of death serves to reinforce blacks' social death by keeping them in their place of peripherality and political disenfranchisement. Harris captures black social death, not only in the use of lynching to maintain the sociopolitical limitations placed on blacks' life but also in terms of Patterson's power relations between blacks and whites. She asserts that the destruction of black bodies reflects and solidifies the power of the master and powerlessness of the slave, just as it teaches both sides of the divide that their subject-positions are determined by and mediated through this unbalanced power configuration:

White superiority must be maintained even when no crime has been committed … and black people must realize thoroughly their helplessness and powerlessness. The black children envision their fate in terms of possible victimization, just as the white children … envision theirs in terms of power. (11)

Consistent with Patterson's worldview, Harris depicts the deployment of death in the post-emancipation South as a strategy to produce a socially dependent black people, who are politically dispossessed, helpless and entirely subdued by white hegemony. And when "black children" internalize the white hegemonic gaze and succumb to their fate as victims, they couple literal death with social death. Living under the constant threat of

lynch law, black people's life becomes without value and can subsequently be dispensed with at any time and for whatever reason. Yet it is this valueless life that the black subject under the threat of death is coerced into accepting and preserving in order to stay alive. According to this dialectic, lynch law effects a double negation of black people in its bid to maintain white supremacy and black inferiority at the core of slavery and the Jim Crow society of the South. It forces the black subject to negate himself, do away with his pride and accept complete subservience or face negation through the use of actual death. As a tool of hegemonic control, lynch law's arbitrary deployment of death negates the value of black life which can be taken away at the white man's will. In so doing, it strips the lived experience of black subjects of significance and meaning, reducing them to social death as agents to white hegemony.

Examining Wright's use of death as a trope to understand and analyze the bane of blacks' life in the post-bellum South, Abdul R. JanMohamed uses Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life to describe how slavery forms blacks as a social surplus that can be done away with at the master's will. Revealing how death is fundamental to processes of the slave's subjugation and production as a pliant and submissive subject, JanMohamed stresses that bare life is primarily about a zero level of subjectivity resulting from the absolute power of one party and the utter powerlessness of another:

> For Agamben, the subject existing at the absolute minimal end of the circulation and accumulation of power is the *homo sacer,* or "bare life," of Roman Law: that is, the subject who can be killed by anyone without that act of killing being considered either a homicide or a sacrilege. *Bare life*, in other words, is neither human nor sacred, and, since the taking of that life is neither a homicide nor a sacrilege, it defines the boundaries of these two realms: "Bare life remains

included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion.'" (*Death* 8; emphasis in original)

The inclusion-exclusion dynamic as the force defining bare life aptly captures Patterson's qualification of the slave as a being entrapped between an ever-present threat of literal death and a social death. The slave as bare life is, therefore, excluded from the system of privileges and rights that define and keep the boundary between the human and sub-human and, as such, he is included only as a property of the master, a socially dead subject who is spared death because he is of value to the master. In this context of complete power imbalance, the master does not only monopolize the right to use death but also owns the slave's life; and it is the value the master places on the slave's life as bare life and as a property that keeps him from terminating his life.

Important as they are in understanding the formation of black subjects by the apparatus of white oppression, social death and bare life fall short of charting how that subject relates to these forces of subjugation hemming him in to a state of non-existence. The two concepts depict the production of the subject as a non-entity by the white structure of control which possesses all power over him but they are silent on that subject's relation to his condition. Put differently, they do not address how the slave contributes to his own bare life and social death and the way in which he colludes with the dominant system in perpetuating his status as a property. To understand this complicitous dimension of the black subject's collaboration in his own formation as bare life, Antonio Gramsci provides a better insight into how regimes of power produce subjects who are agents in their own subjection. Gramsci's hegemony helps explain the formation of black subjects by the white lynch law, showcasing the important link and interdependence between black subservience and white supremacy. In his discussion of hegemonic processes, Gramsci asserts that political and civil society which he calls

"political government" and "social hegemony" represent two complementary modes of domination. In the first, which constitutes the state's coercive apparatuses like the army and police, citizens passively succumb to the dominant group through coercion and accept it because they do not have power to stand up to it. In the second category of hegemony, compliance of subjects is won through consent and is an active and collaborative subscription to the values and political agendas of the leadership. Viewed in this way, hegemony brings to the forefront not only the ruthless use of power by white society against blacks in order to keep them in their place of bare life but also shows that the relation is a two-way street, since black subjects themselves have a hand in their subjection by consensually acquiescing to the dominant order.

Wright's fiction articulates the major predicament of black masculinity in spatial terms, mapping its incarcerating inner and outer geography within the context of the general narrative of black people's displacement and uprooting in America. It charts both the physical place of deprivation in which the black subject is forced to live and work and the psychological and symbolic place he inhabits due to his hegemonic formation by the dominant white order. While the first place depicts his bare life in light of his miserable and abject living conditions under white supremacist rule, the second denotes his mental and cultural enlistment into accepting and perpetuating his bare life. According to Wright, years of hegemonic subjection have led black people to settle for and be content with their physical residence and place which stand for their poverty, marginalization and exclusion from the advantages of the system. The inner geography of blacks has been mapped by hegemonic formations for so long that they end up accepting their outer geography of despondency and bare life, represented by the space of home, assigned to them by white society.

In the context of the first pole, Wright's work, both fiction and non-fiction, probes the debilitating living conditions of blacks to expose the effects of their white-inflicted social death. It is in *12 Million Black Voices* that place becomes the locus of black collective experience and the trope that makes a counter-historiography possible, one that accounts for blacks' enforced placelessness under antebellum and postbellum American society. In this documentary text, Wright embarks upon the task of retrieving a genealogy of place as defined to and forced upon blacks by whites, right from the first phase of the Middle Passage up to modern life in the urban metropolis. This genealogy of place is charted along moments of discontinuity in blacks' spatial journey, even as the same forces of social death and bare life that mark black existence stitch them into one seamless and static structure of confinement. Houston A. Baker, Jr. outlines the contours of black place in white cartography in terms of dispossession of agency, arguing that:

> If one is constituted and maintained, however, by and within boundaries set by another, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire. Under such conditions what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one's own place would be, from the perspective of human agency, *placeless*. ('Richard' 87)

Baker's insightful statement captures the place of black people in terms of their social death and powerlessness. His contention is valid for a description of Wright's genealogy because it points to the continuous forces of subjection that shape the different places blacks occupied in their long journey of displacement. In light of his place-as-prison thesis, Baker points to the power relations at the core of blacks' changing places that differ in terms of geographical and spatial terms but not in terms of the lack of value and agency they confer on their black dwellers. Governed by this static structure of bare life and social death, *Voices* defines black place in terms of three geographical shifts or

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places: the Middle Passage, Southern plantation and urban tenement. Each of these bears testimony to the bare life status that whites enforced upon black people.

In the Middle Passage, Wright's narrator takes the slave ship as the new place of blacks uprooted from their African homeland. The ships carrying blacks to the new alien lands are branded from the outset of the narrative as "floating brothels for the slave traders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (14). The denigrating label "floating brothels" literally describes white slavers' disposal of the black body as a property, through rape of black females, just as it metaphorically stands for the displacement and moral degradation characteristic of the place reserved to the black people by whites on deck. Forced out of their lands, blacks, aboard the slave ships, are doomed to remain adrift and placeless, as they mark the forced passage from a state of agency in their homeland to that of a tool or a property at the disposition of white people. Given that for Wright, racialization is always gendered as a form of feminization in which white Law strips black males of manhood and relegates them to female status, literal rape against black women aboard the ship is metaphorically used to indicate the dehumanizing conditions to which the black male body is subjected by the new masters to discipline him into acquiesce to and acceptance of his new status as slave. Cheryl Higashida's claim that "Accommodationist black men are also feminized" (79) reflects the racializing and emasculating processes deployed by the slave traders to produce the ship as black man's place of powerlessness and the site where he is reduced to chattel in his transition from homeland to homelessness.

The narrator presents a litany of facts that determines both life on the ship and its journey. The first of these describes the historical context of the slave trade, pointing out the new commercial logic ordering black place and bodies in terms of mere commodification:

The slavers continued to snatch us by the millions from our native African soil to be used as tools to till the tobacco, rice, sugar-cane, and cotton plantations; they built powerful empires, replete with authority and comfort, and, as a protecting superstructure, they spun tight ideological webs of their right to domination. (16)

The market rationale inscribes black bodies aboard the ship into a dynamic of physical labor, defining them as a tool for white power and prosperity. The new bare life born on the sea confers upon blacks a place of bondage and confinement where the white man has absolute power over black subjects. Mainly driven by market forces, this new place is not one of freedom but ownership, in which the value of back subjectivity emanates solely from a capitulation to the mercantile bondage of labor: "Slaves were valuable; cotton meant cash, and each able-bodied slave could be depended upon to produce at least 5000 pounds of cotton each year" (14). What is significant about blacks' new place aboard the ship is that the value of their bodies is transformed by the slave trade into their physical power to generate more wealth for the master, further constraining their existence to a sub-human life of toil. According to the new definition established by mercantile profitability, place gains its value only as a diminishing and restrictive prison that denies blacks humanity and produces them as tools for work.

Earlier in the text, the narrator refers to this journey of black displacement in terms of a certain illegal commercial commodification of African bodies when he describes it as a "traffic in our bodies into the 'big business' of the eighteenth century" (13). He then comes back pages later and describes this journey as "jettisoned cargo" (15). It is clear that what is at stake here is no less than a passage to a new fate the rituals of which impose on Africans a new relation to their bodies as they are transformed by the constraining boundaries of their new place. Inside the ship, place is explicitly shown to be a prison that confines black bodies, breeds physical degradation and illness. A

symbol of the slave trade and the commodification of black bodies as property, place aboard the ship is where blacks are locked and denied freedom and liberty. Throughout the long journey, the narrator stresses that place is defined according to the logic of the slave trade which see blacks through the exclusive lenses of ownership and commodity. He says:

> Laid out spoon-fashion on the narrow decks of sailing ships, we were transported to this New World so closely packed that the back of the head of one of us nestled between the legs of another. Sometimes 720 of us were jammed into a space 20 feet wide, 120 feet long, and 5 feet high. Week after week we would lie there, tortured and gasping, as the ship heaved and tossed over the waves. In the summer, down in the suffocating depths of those ships, on an eight-or ten-week voyage, we would go crazed for lack of air and water, and in the morning the crew of the ship would discover many of us dead, clutching in rigor mortis at the throats of our friends, wives, or children. (14)

As well as being a kind of brothel, slaves' place aboard the ship develops into a mass grave that breeds pain, suffering and death. The packed hold of the ship not only builds on the image of the "cargo," redefining the black body as commodity, but also marks the beginning of black bare life where intimacy is denied. In this new place the boundary between private and public is eroded as black bodies are jammed into living conditions fit only for animals. George Yancy, using Foucauldian ideas of how place orders human experience, probes the black experience of place during the Middle Passage as a policing and hegemonic tool producing compliant and inferior bodies:

> From the moment that the first black body was placed in shackles, it was being disciplined to embrace the 'truth' about its 'inferiority.' Like the disciplined penitentiary prisoner, the black body / self is kept obedient and disciplined by the

process of instilling certain beliefs and habits that produce a new subjectivity, a subjectivity which is imbued with a sense of self-surveillance, a mode of seeing blackness through white eyes. (111)

What Yancy poignantly reveals, using the Foucauldian idea of surveillance, is that the structure of black place in the Middle Passage and the jammed positioning of bodies within it form a regime of truths which legitimizes white superiority and black inferiority in the minds of transported slaves. This discursive arrangement teaches black bodies in their confinement aboard the ship about their depravity and degeneration just as it disciplines them to look up to the white master as morally superior. Kept in tight spaces and left prey to disease, hunger, pain and death, black bodies are transformed in their new confinements from freedom to acceptance of subjugation and the conditions that produce it. Yancy elaborates further on black bodies under the panopticism of the Middle Passage:

The Middle Passage was itself a regime of 'truth,' teaching the black body / self that it was chattel, bodies to be herded into suffocating spaces of confinement. This was not an issue of how many people could be comfortably accommodated, but how many *things*, owned property, can be stuffed into spaces of confinement. (113)

In addition to conceptualizing the Middle Passage as an experience of initiation into social death, relegating blacks to the helpless conditions of bare life, Yancy introduces consensual subordination as one of the rituals that mark the construction of black subjectivity in its place. The Middle Passage which starts with the ritual of social death as blacks are uprooted from home, culture and history, develops into bare life status where the new slaves are constrained to a bare life status of abject poverty and powerlessness. Thus initiated in these two rituals, black bodies are then subjected to a

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regime of discipline which produces a new compliant black subjectivity that does the bidding of whites and reinforces the hegemonic order that defines and limits its human potential. The narrator is very explicit on the panoptical effects of the Middle Passage on blacks and how it confines them into their prison-like place. He makes this dynamic clear through repetitions of and variations on scenes of captivity where black bodies are initiated into the life of chattel and inferiority, and also through expositing the use of death by slavers to police the boundaries of black place and enforce compliance upon their captives:

> To quench all desire for mutiny in us, they would sometimes decapitate a few of us and impale our black heads upon the tips of the spars, just as years later they impaled our heads upon the tips of pine trees for miles along the dusty highways of Dixie to frighten us into obedience. (15)

Black subjects formed by social death have few options in life. Either they affirm and contribute to their total negation as disenfranchised subjects or rebel against it and face actual death. The predicament of living in this place lies in that blacks have to choose between accepting their own social death as agents in life or refuse it and get killed either by decapitation on the ship or by mob lynching as ordained by the laws mapping their next place in the American South. Either way, the dominant system does not allow them to develop as human beings but confines them to a place defined in terms of symbolic and actual non-existence.

Blacks' second place in the plantation in the South both under slavery and during the post-emancipation era is an extension of their first place of Middle Passage. Their bodies and consequently their lives are held captives not to the cramped hold of a floating ship but to the narrow walls of flimsy cabins that are dismantled every time they are forced by the bondage of slavery to move from one farm land to the next. The picture

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drawn by the narrator for this new phase of displacement is of a place in motion, a permanent state of restlessness where the dilapidated shacks become symbols not of home and stability but rather of the life of chattel that blacks are forced to endure. Blacks' temporary shelters become signs of their new place in the South as chattel and as a labor tool that the "Lords of the Land" move from one place to another, keeping them adrift from one plantation to another to maximize their profit. Baker describes blacks' place in the plantation in terms of a triangle of cabin, chattel and motion: "The cabin's space is a function of those bent backs that give design to plantation economies; it is precisely not a proud sign of home ownership . . . [then] there is the motion in which bent backs and cabins combine" ('Richard' 92).

The three aspects of blacks' place characterize a sort of deterritorialization in which both the subject as property and tool of work and his temporary shacks become the epitome of the new state of rootlessness and of being in fact constantly out of place. In this life of motion the tool cannot add value to the cabin to transform it into a symbol of blacks' property and security because the tool is always the object of property and not its subject. Similarly, the cabin, being valueless, can only create a relation with the tool that furthers and deepens its status as a property to be sold or moved by the owner from one place to the other and from one farm to the next. The narrator, describing his historiography as a counter-narrative that demystifies the ostensibly positive image of blacks' place as projected by whites, presents it rather in terms of this triangle of tool, cabin and motion: "They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of the fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks that sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay" (35).

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The text of *Voices* is replete with similar scenes which link self-discipline and inferiority in the context of the power relations between whites and blacks, constraining blacks to unstable residence as a site of deprivation from rights of citizenship. "The fear" and the "grinning" are dissemblance strategies blacks deploy to endure in the hostile world they are forced to inhabit. As such, they also show how much blacks internalize the white hegemonic gaze and perpetuate their own constraining place by living up to the demands of the dominant system's code and to whites' expectations of subservience. To analyze the dynamics of black place in the plantations both under slavery and in the aftermath of Emancipation, the narrator outlines an inventory of the practices and regulations that the white rulers of the South use to keep blacks in their place and to thwart their dreams of going North to freedom. He builds a counter- memory recording what Jack B. Moore sees as "the series of shocks" that black life "was forced to experience during slavery and the fake emancipation that followed it when black people were chained to the land by the demands of cotton growing" (142). This inventory exposes the networks of strategies that "the Lords of the Land" use to enlist black labor and to keep it available in abundance for their mercantile purposes. It illustrates how an unfair economic system is developed to trap blacks into debts which compel them to stay in the South, and the longer the stay the heavier the debt becomes. This vicious circle is at the heart of blacks' predicament as they are kept further on the move deep in the South by what was known as sharecropping:

> Lord, we *know* that this is a hard system! Even while we are hating the Lords of
> the Land, we know that if they paid us a just wage for all the work we do in raising
> a bale of cotton, the fleecy strands would be worth more than their weight in gold!
> Cotton is a drug, and for three hundred years we have taken it to kill the pain of
> hunger; but it does not ease our suffering. Most people take morphine out of

choice; we take cotton because we must. For years longer than we remember, cotton has been our companion; we travel down the plantation road with debt holding our left hand, with credit holding our right, and ahead of us looms the grave, the final and simple end. (59)

This picture of bare life on the drift and out of place with its hands held by an unjust economic system represents the state of incarceration that life on the plantation inflicts on the black population. Place under such conditions emerges first as a trap which blacks cannot avoid because of their hunger and deprivation. It is more of a bait which lures them to the captivity of cultivating cotton by promising to alleviate their physical suffering. Blacks, in this light, do not relate to place as home–something that provides security, intimacy and healthy social experience–but rather as a workplace where bodies are disciplined and coerced by hunger into submission. Like the crowded and chained bodies in the Middle Passage, physical hunger, an emblem of denial of citizenship rights, is a coercive tool that the "Lords of the Land" deploy to keep black bodies in their place of permanent displacement and dislocation. Second, place is described as a prison with images of black hands tied to an exploitative economic order. Unlike somatic and physical hunger, this is a less visible and therefore more efficacious form of incarceration because it is systemic and institutional. And contrary to physical acts of violence like whipping and death that characterize the black place in the Middle Passage, this second iteration of place is maintained by the smart and less recognizable institutional practice of economic dependence that bogs blacks down into debt, forcing them to stay within the limits defined for them by the plantation system. This economic institution is credited not only with holding black bodies hostage to the debt and its attendant restrictions on their choices in life but also with reducing them to placelessness as they are forced to

remain adrift, carried from one place to another by the plantations' mercantile expansionism and its ravenous desire for ever new fertile agricultural lands.

Blacks' second place in the South has also to do with what the narrator describes as the destination awaiting black bodies in their displacement, namely the grave with its overtones of death and annihilation. He describes what awaits them at the end of their journey: "ahead of us looms the grave, the final and simple end." The image of the grave qualifies and intensifies the experience of place as confining and suffocating. It is not invoked as a promise of peace and rest from the torments of a black life which the narrator later calls "slow death" but is rather meant further to emphasize its limitations and bareness. Not only do words like "loom," "final" and "simple end" express the ominous nature of what is to come as a finality that cannot be avoided, but they also intertextually relate to the use of the grave in Wright's fiction as a recurrent symbol of blacks' confining place. The grave as the physical and symbolic place of a disenfranchised population comes together with other similar narrow spaces inhabited by black people to form what Baker calls the black hole. What is common between all these narrow spaces of immobility is indicated by the hole as "that place of knotted pain and scant hope that is the first, imprisoning birth-place of the Afro-American" (90). The bitter irony about the hole lies in its being black bare life's place of birth, the place that shapes the subject's life of deprivation and its place after death. In Wright's fiction, the hole is all that the black subject has as an experience of space: it marks his beginning, determines his lifetime and seals his end. It is as a site of hegemony and social death where the black community has consented to the sub-human status reserved to it by white order. This explains why almost all his major protagonists who resist their dual subjection by white and black social restrictions have to rise to consciousness through the ordeal of the hole. They have to go through the experience of place as prison and a grave policed by the

threat of death and castration in order to break with their passivity and acquiescence to the dominant system. The experience of the hole in this regard is a painful and terrifying initiation into the knowledge of the conditions of black subjection, conditions that are brought to the conscious minds of the protagonists before they reject them and undertake their negation. The passage into the hole and the encounter of actual death that regulates it are rites these characters have to undergo on their journey to consciousness and the negation of the hegemony that constrains black community to passivity and to life in the hole.

The first-person narrator of *Voices* concludes his temporally linear but spatially fragmented narrative of blacks' placelessness by an account of their experience of segregated geography in the North which constitutes the third type of place, that is, urban place. Controlled and configured by the same forces of subjection that produce the black male as a socially dead bare life, the narrator poignantly describes the thwarted dreams of the black population as they escape the prison of the South and its agrarian system, seeking freedom and prospects of empowerment in Chicago in the North. Best describes the conditions of social death that forced blacks to endure what is known as the Great Migration in terms of the following "emerging impoverished social map":

> One could read casually the relation between declining economic conditions and white terroristic violence, suggesting that the former increased idleness and irritability and led, ultimately, to the latter. These conditions mark an 'emerging' social map, because it is through them that new relations between the economic, the sexual, and the racial are constituted. White disenfranchisement (versus Reconstruction 'protection' of civil rights) places black bodies in a new relation to the economic (antiblack advancement), the literate (antiblack literacy) and, of course, the sexual (antimiscegenation). (114)

This social map draws the contours of black place in the wake of emancipation and the Great Depression eras that unleash the black beast mythology and its attendant white anxieties about black socio-political empowerment. Out of this map there emerge new geographies and spaces following the influx of blacks' migration from the South to the North, and their escape from the agrarian system of the first which was ran by "Lords of the Land" to the urban industrial sphere of the second managed by "Bosses of the Building." Combined with the shifting geographies and the economic transition of black migration is a temporal passage from the pre-modern to the modern world symbolized by Chicago. Bill V. Mullen puts the spatial and temporal shifts in the following optimistic assertion of access to modernity "Wright [in *Voices*] literally imagines the consequences of the African American migration north as a physical shift from pre-modern to modern spatiality, with the African American working class as its 'epicenter'" (8).

This optimistic Marxist teleology of the North as a land of promise for blacks is caught by *Voices'* narrator who paints the message coming from the North in images that heal the scars of living in the South:

> the Bosses of the Buildings send men with fair words down from the North, telling us how much money we can make digging in the mines, smelting ore, laying rails, and killing hogs. They tell us that we will live in brick buildings, that we will vote, that we will be able to send our children to school for nine months of the year, that if we get into trouble we will not be lynched, and that we will not have to grin, doff our hats, bend our knees, slap our thighs, dance, and laugh when we see a white face. We listen, and it sounds like a religion. (86-7)

What is at stake in this long list of incentives for migration is nothing less than the possibility of a rebirth in the promised land of the North and a chance at stepping out from the hole of social death into economic, political and cultural agency. The first set

of liberating images of blacks having a voice in all spheres of human life, starting from the domestic space of "brick buildings" to the workplace and political participation in public life contrasts dramatically with the second series of dehumanizing images of dissembling and survival-minded blacks. And while the first images draw geographies of hope where blacks are endowed with their place in all spheres of life as agents in their being, Farah Jasmine Griffin provides an opposite inventory of the forces that *Voices* blames for stripping blacks of subjectivity in the South:

> More often than not they appear as the objects of history, as victims who are always acted upon. This is especially true of the Southern section where issues of economic exploitation are highlighted over the imminent threat of violence. The "we" of this section, back people, especially black men, find themselves in a web of relations that deny them humanity or historical agency. (32)

Indeed the South is condemned both as a place of white supremacy and violence and as a place of black submission and lack of historical agency. While separation from it is associated with entry into modernity and freedom, "a return to the South is a retreat into a dark and ugly history," (165) as Griffin puts it. The characters who flee the South under the threat of death or those who die because of it are all in revolt against the South as a place of non-identity defined to them by the white system and the black folk culture that accepts it and tries to accommodate to it. Whether in *Voices* where blacks migrate in masses or in *Black Boy* where the narrator and his family run away from poverty and racial subjection or in *Native* where the main character, Bigger Thomas, is already a migrant settled in the North, the South features as a place of black social death that chains black male subjects to a pre-modern culture of accommodation, barring them from access to modernity embodied in the technological urban spaces of the North. In these narratives, the equation between temporality and space is so strong that characters'

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chances of gaining agency are conditioned by moving out from southern geography and ditching the black pre-modern culture of dependence it breeds. Even in the North, as these narratives explore, few blacks are able to make this complete break with southern pre-modern black culture and enjoy the rights of modernity while the masses of blacks remain entrapped in social death in Northern cities because they carry and sustain their uncritical southern mentality with them.

In the third section of *Voices* that describes black life in the city in the North, the narrator asserts that the journey his "hungry" people undertake from the South to "great factories going up in the cities" in the North holds a promise of new birth and a "hope and dream of a new life." He makes amply clear that what the northern industrial urban centers have in store for them is nothing short of the freedom to choose a life that has long been denied to them by the masters of the agrarian South: "We went innocently, longing and hoping for a life that the Lords of the Land would not let us live. Our hearts were high as we moved northward to the cities" (98). Yet as the title of this segment of the documentary text suggests ("Death on the City Pavements"), the immigrants' dreams of a new start in life are thwarted by the urban world just as they were by the agrarian systems of the South. In a mood of bewilderment and misunderstanding, the narrator pictures the city as just another grave and another hole where blacks are met with death rather than life. He says: "and how were we to know that, the moment we landless millions of the land–we men who were struggling to be born–set our awkward feet upon the pavements of the city, life would begin to exact of us a heavy toll?" (93). The city is Chicago which holds an emblematic significance for the black diaspora streaming up North and fleeing the South in a bid to achieve freedom and dignity. It is imagined first as a land of hope, a city on the hill and an urban environment that is capable of liberating blacks of their pre-modern folk culture. It also functions as a modern geography that

transcends the limits of race and heals the fissures and scars of the experience of racial antagonism in the South. Yet this grandiose narrative of access to modernity as the site of liberation and racial unity in the city is soon eclipsed as blacks start to struggle with the confining life of their new northern urban and industrial setting. Mullen explains that Chicago offered no prospects of economic justice and opportunity for black immigrants: "The endpoint for his own [quest] as well as thousands of black migrants from the South in the first half of the century, Chicago was for Wright a sign of differential, or uneven development under capitalism" (4). Chicago, in this modern and industrial light, is not very much different from the bondage of the agrarian land of cotton in the South. It is a space of continued racial exclusion from property and wealth under a new system of exploitation, namely capitalism. This sense of the city as another hole in blacks' historical story of displacement and dispersal is expressed by Wright himself when he views it as a place of contradictions and "extremes" instead of being a place of social and racial harmony. He says in "How 'Bigger' Was Born":

> There was the fabulous city in which Bigger lived, an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! (*Native Son* xxvi)

Voices explores blacks' encounter with the new hostile urban environment from the point of view of the immigrant. Excluded by the city and let down by its system, blacks do not emerge in their new environment as urban dwellers who enjoy a sense of home and security but as immigrants whose relation to their environment is tense, conflicting and marked by dislocation and fragmentation. The first-person plural "we" of the text presents an account of black immigrants' first confrontation with Chicago and

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the alienating effects it has on their psyche. Rather than the physical violence and lynching which defined the place of black subjects in the South, arrival in Chicago is seen in light of its disorienting and alienating effects on the psychological structure of the immigrant. The narrator is unequivocally keen on stressing that black diaspora in the North is not solely about geographical displacement due to violence against the black body but also involves mental dislocation that prevents immigrants from being at home in the city: "coming north for a Negro sharecropper involves more strangeness than going to another country. It is the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness" (99). This "strangeness" is all too evident in the immigrants' first experience of the urban space when, instead of being at home with it they are reduced to exile and the status of strangers. This relationship unfolds in terms of a series of events underscoring the new arrivals' misunderstanding of the new world and highlighting, therefore, their pariah position within it. Once in the city, black immigrants are confronted with an environment they cannot comprehend, a strange world which speaks a language they cannot understand. Confused, alienated and disoriented they discover how far they are unprepared for the urban space that stands for modernity because of their southern ways and culture. Unfamiliarity with the new environment reflects the marginal subject-position of the immigrants as well as the dislocating effects of urban space on their psyche. The narrator underscores blacks' fear and confusion when they first arrive in Chicago and how they fail to read the signs of the new world as they are cast again in the position of the outsider by the subtleties of its modern character. The first instance of this collective experience of estrangement is underlined in the newcomers' feeling of bafflement at racial relations in the city. Used to their southern folk culture of black acquiescence to white power, the immigrants feel uncertain and suspicious about the racial mixing that the new public space of the city forces upon them:

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"We see white men and women get on the train, dressed in expensive new clothes. We look at them guardedly and wonder will they bother us. Will they ask us to stand up while they sit down? Will they tell us to go to the back of the coach?" (99). The psychological effect resulting from this first encounter with northern urban space is the result of the immigrants' failure to shake off their southern place of subordination under Jim Crow laws and engage with the new world of the city on its own terms. A sentence later from this initial feeling of mistrust of free racial relations, the narrator goes on to show that the immigrants' dislocation in the city is because they hold on to their familiar southern ways through the lenses of which they (mis)read the urban setting: "we look around the train and we do not see the old familiar signs: FOR COLORED and FOR WHITE. The train speeds north and we cannot sleep. Our heads sink in a doze, and then we sit bolt-upright, prodded by the thought that we must watch these strange surroundings" (99). Griffin establishes this link between black immigrants' pre-modern folk culture and their exclusion from the civilization crystalized by the industrial spaces of the city:

> Insecurity, fear, and loneliness–these are traits Wright shares with the characters he creates . . . the single most dominant theme in all of Wright's migration narratives … [is]: the inability of the majority of black people to understand and enter "civilization." Their alienation from themselves and all the forces that surround them is only intensified in the North. (71)

The newcomers to the city are, thus, inhibited from being ushered into its modern age because they remain bogged down in their southern culture of social death. They keep the traits and folk habits that make impossible their transition from what Hazel Rowley calls "semifeudal conditions in the rural South to the steel and stone grind of modern industrial capitalism" (52). The narrator of *Voices* himself captures this gulf between black immigrants and modernity as due to the persistence of a state of innocence

and naivety that renders black people incapable of coping with the complexity of life in the city. He, once more, maps out the psychological impact that this distance from civilization brings to bear on them, underscoring their suspicion and fear of mistreatment at the hands of city dwellers: "Timidly, we get off the train. We hug our suitcases, fearful of pickpockets, looking with unrestrained curiosity at the great big brick buildings. We are very reserved, for we have been warned not to act 'green,' that the city people can spot a 'sucker' a mile away" (99).

The reluctance and disorientation that grip black people as they embark upon their city life is a sign of a collective experience of dispersal and disjunction that emphasize the decenteredness and fragmentation of black subjects. In a typical postmodern loss of grounding and referentiality, urban space subjects black outsiders to uncertainty and denies them the necessary anchor to connect with the reality represented in their environment. The confusion and lack of understanding do not only refer to traditional alienation but also to a disjunctive condition in which black subjective fragmentation comes about as a widening gulf between immigrant outsiders and the possibility of gaining meaning. What is at stake here is nothing less than the absence of the possibility of consciousness and knowledge without which they lose their autonomy and unity as thinking subjects and are relegated instead to the status of decentered entities. Expressions of loss of the meaning of life and its attendant self-splitting in this experience of migration are indicated in the immigrants' relation to their urban environment as an absolute alterity that constantly slips away from their attempts at understanding and making sense of it. The result of this condition of disjunction and uncertainty is a subjective fragmentation which defines blacks as permanent outsiders and deprives them of the status of thinking and rational subjects. Such experience is crystallized in the term "green" which denotes a condition of lack of depth and a state of ignorance due to black

people's disconnection from urban reality and the distance that separates them from ascending to knowledge and autonomy.

Another aspect of migrants' experience of fragmentation as loss of meaning finds expression in the inability of language to bridge the gap of communication between people in their inter-subjective exchanges. Of the many challenges they face on their arrival in the city, black people are afflicted with a rupture of linguistic expression which in turn destabilizes any possibility for them to be grounded as whole, centered and unitary subjects. And since all relations to the real pass through language, black newcomers find themselves estranged from their environment due to the breakup of the linguistic chain of communication. In spite of their adamant search for meaning, the deprivation of and exclusion from language and speech are both testimonies to their political disenfranchisement and the ever-widening chasm between them and the reality of the people and the world around them. The absence of subjective coherency that marks this early phase of blacks' life in the city emanates from a linguistic gap that renders communication between people and communication with the components of their objective world impossible.

The breaking of the chain of signification occasioned by the condition of migrancy derives again from a change in time and space since it has to do with displacement from the South to the North and an associated temporal transition from traditional folk culture to modernity and civilization. In *Voices*, spatial and temporal displacement and the state of estrangement and lack of understanding that issue from it and bar immigrants from being at home with city life takes the form of a linguistic rupture between "The slow Southern drawl" and "clipped Yankee phrases." Black people who have been used to the slow pace of the speech of the rural south are now put off by the quick and fragmented language of people in the North. Language in the feudal South

was both a site of subjection and resistance. The slaveholders dispersed their slaves to deny them the political agency and consciousness that come with language, preventing those who speak the same tribal language from living together and forcing them to live with other slaves who speak different tribal languages. The aim behind this strategy of subjection through fragmentation of language and community dispersal is to keep Africans apart and ward off rebellion against the masters. They "shackled one slave to another slave of an alien tribe" in a bid to deny them kinship and social relations but also to lock them in utter silence and speechlessness. This dispossession of language created an existential paradox afflicting the life of the slaves: "Our eyes would look wistfully into the face of a fellow-victim of slavery, but we could say no word to him. Though we could hear, we were deaf; though we could speak, we were dumb!" (40).

The city's effects go beyond the confusion, dislocation and fragmentation that its urban environment inflicts on the psyche of the black diasporic subject. For alongside these destabilizing and self-splitting impacts of an unfamiliar modern life, the city structures and forms the newcomers' subjectivity as subaltern and marginal through an aggressive deployment of space that is twofold: it first excludes the immigrants upon arrival through a mechanical deployment of physical geography that deepens their sense of isolation and emphasizes their fragility in the context of the new modern world. Second and after they settle down, the city incarcerates black people in a spatial logic that produces geographical maps of segregation, confining them to political and economic exclusion characteristic of their social death. Commenting on these twin effects of the city on black subjects, Carol E. Henderson notes that black people's relation to city space as incarceration attests to their physical and spiritual deprivation under the practice of white law: "This practice concretizes the pathological nature of penalization as the enclosed, segmented space of the cell produces an alternative city whose

inhabitants are reminded day after day of their internal as well as their physical exile" ('Writing' 17).

With regard to the first aspect of spatial deployment, the city looms before the scared and confused immigrants as an alien geography, cold and mechanical. In their first encounter with it, they are estranged by its sheer physical power, which assaults and penetrates their psyches through industrial images that exclude any possible human affinity with space, presenting the city as machine. The association between the physical aspects of the city and the machine weds space to time, capturing the ordeal of black immigrants who are trapped and excluded by modernity and its impersonal and mechanical character. Coming from a southern rural background of inter-subjective and communal experience, black newcomers are first and foremost struck by the overwhelming geography of the city, represented by its alienating industrial space and buildings. Unlike in the South where death is used by the slave masters to discipline black people, in the city power becomes more elusive, sophisticated and less visible. No more directed against the black body, power affects the mind and "consciousness" and has, therefore, a more dramatic effect in subjecting as well as forming black people. Interestingly, this power is deployed through encounters that highlight not only the centrality of space to the fate of the immigrant outsider but also its aggressive role in controlling and shaping his identity and response to his environment. In this first encounter, the narrator tells how the outer geography which he describes as "flat" and "gray" is a major force that is both "depressing" and annihilating. More than anything else in the city, it is the physical map and the buildings that affect his psyche and throw his hopes of a rebirth in the North into jeopardy. This process of discipline and psychological subjection through spatial power is further emphasized through a repetitive use of imageries capturing the industrial character of the city and its lack of inter-

subjective and communal experience. Images like "black coal," "gray smoke" and "flashes of steam" denote the industrial and mechanical nature of the city and the inhuman power it has over its residents, especially over new-coming immigrants. These images depict two kinds of geography: an outer geography represented in the mechanical power of the city and an inner geography that has to do with the immigrant's psychological transformation under the effects of this new spatial encounter. The connection between these two geographies indicated by the narrator's constant focus on the way urban space alters and affects his consciousness illustrates the power of the city over immigrants and how it forms them as outsiders and deprives them of the security and privileges of belonging. Griffin asserts that this relation between space and psyche is indicative of the city's intricate and complex power: "The effect on the psyche is an indication of the complexity of Northern power. The psyche is the realm where power is enforced" (52). The contours of the black subject's place as defined by northern geography are not sustained by the use of physical violence but by the deployment of a subtle spatial power that maps out and controls the subject's psyche, producing him as pariah and outsider.

The second aspect of how urban space forms black dwellers in northern cities lies in the creation of segregated residences, setting physical and legal boundaries which maintain and lock black people in marked and enclosed space. These spaces of segregation are essential to the structuring and subjection of black people for two main reasons. First they create physical limitations that constrain the mobility of blacks and increase their sense of outer and inner incarceration. And second, the laws that enforce geographical segregation function to create an under-class of black citizens deprived of rights and privileges because they are denied citizenship. GerShun Avilez argues that denial of black citizenship is at the heart of segregation policies: "given the centrality of

segregation to restrictive practices affecting citizenship, the relationship of African Americans to places of residence and to domestic space in general is indicative of their relationship to legal structures" (135).

Segregation laws set in motion geographical configurations which reinforce unequal perceptions of the races where blacks are seen as inferior subjects whose spatial confinement indicates their exclusion from the citizenship and the entitlements it confers. This interconnectedness between the laws creating and regulating spatial segregation and denial of civic rights to black people dictates the social and spatial map of black immigrants in *Voices*. After the confusion and alienation of arrival, blacks' first conscious realization centers upon the fact of segregation and the new place it imposes on them. Having been astounded by whites' indifference towards them and the racial mixing in the new urban environment, black people quickly come to know that "the Bosses of the Buildings are not at all *indifferent*. They are deeply concerned about us, but in a new way" (100; emphasis in original). The "new way" is more subtle and constraining because it does not rely on brute force but on setting geographical and psychological boundaries that consign blacks to segregated residences and shut them off from the American Dream and the opportunities to improve their living conditions. A result and an extension of spatial segregation, the psychological boundary functions to keep the black community away from sharing the same dreams of success offered by the city and sustains their social death. The narrator is keen on pointing out the social map of blacks 'exclusion even before he presents his detailed account of their physical place under segregation: "We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance that words cannot bridge" (100). The wall that rises between black immigrants and the rest of the inhabitants of the city defines those who have access to citizenship and the rights that flow from it and those who are not considered as full

citizens on the basis of color and race. Such a perception of the black community as inferior and not fit for citizenship is enacted and maintained through spatial policies that confine them to segregated areas of the city and perpetuate their social death of poverty, helplessness and lack of agency.

Geographical segregation, the marginal place of black people, first emerges as a result of a market logic which forces the immigrants to live in the poor part of the city and keeps them away from the decent housing where whites live. In this light, blacks' segregated residence is portrayed to be both an effect and an enactment of spatial dynamics that are endemic to market law and capitalism. The narrator cites a litany of reasons that drive blacks to inhabit these spaces where they are physically shut off from the rest of the city and symbolically denied material opportunities to improve their living condition and move out into proper residences in the city. He asserts that black immigrants are pushed away from decent residences in the city and constrained to live in segregated areas because they cannot afford to rent somewhere else as housing costs are soaring and also because there is a shortage of available houses due to a slowdown in construction work at wartime. Unlike in *Native* where segregation is enforced by laws banning blacks from crossing to the white neighborhood uninvited, in *Voices* the barrier is rather economic and financial. It has to do with capitalism and its housing policies which relegate blacks to poor neighborhoods and deny them job opportunities that will enable them to afford living in decent parts of the city. Under this market logic, the American Dream and its underpinning rights of citizenship are articulated in black people's dream of crossing the financial divide and enjoying the world of wealth, affluence and privileges which lies in the white part of the city. Surmounting disenfranchisement and accessing citizenship are thus seen in terms of a spatial and financial transition and crossing that blacks are prevented from undertaking, stripping

them of the prospects of shedding their place of segregation and social death and integrating themselves into the mainstream world of opportunity where whites live and where wealth and power are enjoyed. JanMohamed views segregated geography as expressive of a power imbalance that results in the complete negation of black people and the empowerment of whites. He contends that the discursive and institutional prohibitions which set up and control the racial barrier enables slave societies to produce black subjects as:

> beings who had no *de facto* and … no *de jure* access to the civil and political apparatuses of … society. Because these humans were defined as property, the social, political, and legal rights of slaves barely exceeded those of farm animals: juridically, they lived in a state of almost total powerlessness, under massive institutional prohibitions that mediated all their social relations. ("Sexuality" 97-98)

The place of the socially dead subject is, therefore, drawn and maintained through a collision between space and institutions that geographically locks blacks in and reduces them to a state of powerlessness and lack of agency due to their deprivation of the rights of citizenship. Set firmly in place by market housing policy, the barrier of residential segregation racializes and produces them as subaltern others whose marginal status of deprivation stands in contrast to the centrality and prosperity of whites. Not only are black immigrants treated as a property but they are also denied the possibility of setting themselves free by the market dynamics and its spatial configurations.

Because the spatio-economic boundary constructs black immigrants as sub-human and inferior others it undermines the perception of where they live by presenting it as valueless. Resulting from a deficiency in market conditions related to a general shortage in housing and shrinking of construction activities, blacks' place is shown to be

lacking in value. The area where they live is located "beyond the business belt" and pictured in terms of the deadly toll that the industrial zone has on it. This segregated area is not seen as a place of value where blacks can enjoy the twin security and privacy of home and family; but rather as an extension of the industrial area that generates death through pollution and squalid conditions of living: "The only district we can live in is the area just beyond the business belt, a transition area where a sooty conglomeration of factories and mills belches smoke that stains our clothes and lungs" (101). The way the boundary renders black place valueless is manifest in its relation to the industry which is the symbol of the American Dream of prosperity and modernity. While white space relates to the industrial area in terms of the opportunities it opens up to them as citizens who have access to civic rights, the black neighborhood is cast as a dumping ground for industrial waste and pollution and a site of poverty that breeds only sickness and decay. The absence of value attached to black place is also indicated in the description "transition area" which takes up the theme of blacks' dilemma under the southern agrarian system as one of placelessness. The unstable structures of black people's cabins and shacks which attest to their being out of place in the South continue to define their experience in the modern industrial North. This state of temporariness and transience which underscores black people's placelessness is compounded by the absence of any distinction between private and public space when it comes to blacks' relation to their new segregated residence. Robert F. Reid-Pharr questions the very possibility of domestic life when, under the law of the market, the forces of public space invade and determine the private space of home and family: "One might argue, in fact, since the idea of the domestic is intimately tied to bourgeois articulations of an essential difference between public and private, that the marketplace, an important, if not the important, location for the production of the bourgeois, always encroaches upon domestic life" (66).

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The industrial area which crystallizes the spirit of the city and its capitalist system regulates the black residential area in two ways: first by stripping it of value and making it uninhabitable as the "smoke" and "soot" of the factories poison life and thus further seal it off from the rest of the city. Second, it obliterates the family structures and kinship necessary for individual fulfillment and maturity by blurring the boundary between the public and the private spaces, converting the latter into a marketplace for exploitation of black people. Throughout the documentary, the realities of segregation link the degradation of physical space to the degeneration of the human life it houses as the absence of value attached to black residential areas forms and produces black bodies as inefficient both in terms of their physical and moral structures. The narrator emphasizes the denigrating effects of the market and the industrial sector on black people's place which is repeatedly seen to be transient and decaying: "The tenements we live in are old; they are rarely repaired or replaced. On most of our buildings are signs: THIS PROPERTY IS FOR SALE. Any day we can be told to move, that our home is to be torn down to make way for a new factory or a new mill" (102).

This statement encompasses all the components that form the black subject as a property and define his place as that of social death. He is not only deprived of the right to own his own house but also denied authority over the dilapidating place he rents. The sign showing that the building is on sale reminds black people of the encroaching forces of the market and functions as another prohibition similar to the racial signs of segregation in the South which bar them from access to white spaces. It thus stands as a testimony to blacks' placelessness, reminding them that they are likely to lose their tenements at any time and be set adrift out of place due to capitalism's aggressive and exploitative deployment of space in the form of industrial expansion and market greed. Houses in this segregated area are not seen as permanent domestic spaces which nurture

human life and experience but rather as old and rotting structures awaiting destruction to meet the requirements of the forces of capitalism that are driven by profit. The creation of valueless black place through capitalism's production of segregated spaces also has racializing effects on black people, not only by structuring their bodies as weak, dirty and unhealthy but also by denying them the rights of citizenship. The narrator tells how white immigrants settle in these tenements along with blacks when they first arrive but, unlike them, soon find a way out to live in the other parts of the city. The industrial area in this light is both blacks' physical prison and the ghetto that keeps them away from sharing the American Dream. The narrator highlights how space produces the black subject as a subaltern and marginal character not given the chance to share the same opportunity offered to other immigrants:

> So, under the black mourning pall of smoke from the stacks of American industry, our observing Negro eyes watch a thousand rivulets of blood melt, fuse, blend, and flow in a common stream of human unity as it merges with the great American tide. But we never mix with that stream; we are not allowed to. For years we watch the timid faces of poor white peasants–Turks, Czechs, Croats, Finns, and Greeks–pass through this curtain of smoke and emerge with the sensitive features of modern men. But our faces do not change. Our cheek-bones remain as unaltered as the stony countenance of the Sphinx. (102)

This passage outlines the hurdles that impede the march of black men towards modernity and away from the dehumanizing traditional and folk life of the South. This march is adamantly portrayed in terms of a new birth through embracing the liberating force of industry which allows access to the American Dream of opportunity and citizenship. This temporal transformation and rebirth is always linked and articulated in relation to a spatial shift from poverty and the place of social death to decent urban

neighborhoods. The temporal march pictured through the hopes of blacks harnessing industrial skills and jobs is seen as the key to their spatial transition from their ghettos of deprivation to white spaces of privilege and wealth. Black manhood and agency in this regard are repeatedly defended on the grounds of a spatial journey to white parts of the city viewed as a place of citizenship and power. The paradox, though, is that it is industry and white residential space that conspire and collude to thwart this historical march and cut short this spatial journey by a reverse segregation strategy intended to keep blacks out of time and place in their ghettos of social death. The segregation boundary, while allowing white immigrants with peasant backgrounds like blacks to "melt," "fuse" and "blend" with the "great American tide" of opportunity, locks black immigrants in social, economic and spatial degradation and impedes their access to the benefits of American modernity.

The spatial bar that the narrator calls the "curtain of smoke" is a restless signifier with excesses of meaning that are all related to the pariah status of black people in segregated urban ghettos. It structures black domestic space as a valueless and death-infested geography unfit for human life. In so doing, it also structures and promotes perceptions of blacks who live in it as inferior and different others not human enough to join main-stream life in the white neighborhoods and who have, therefore, to be locked away in their social death. As such, this signifier also works to confine black people to immobility, keeping them in their enclosed space and forcing them to live a life of incarceration in the black belt part of the town. It also denies them social mobility by stripping them of the possibility of having good industrial jobs, owning property outside the "transition" area and sharing the civic rights of citizenship as conferred by the American Dream. The narrator describes how the boundary of segregation limits blacks' spatial and social mobility while it allows white immigrants to move from the industrial

area to white neighborhoods, transitioning from poverty and exclusion to the benefits of citizenship:

> From this transition area we watch many of the immigrants move on to the rooming-house district which almost always borders the transition area of the big industrial city; later many of them move from the rooming-house area into the apartment-house district . . . Of a morning, years later, we pick up the Chicago *Daily Tribune* . . . , and we see that some former neighbors of ours . . . are now living in the suburban areas, having swum upstream through the American waters of opportunity into the professional classes. (102)

Against this upward movement of white immigrants into the privileges of mainstream American life and the ease with which they spatially move from less thriving neighborhoods to more affluent ones stand black people incarcerated in the transition area and shut off from the civic rights that lie beyond the boundary of segregation: "We remain to live in the clinging soot just beyond the factory areas, behind the railroad tracks, near the river banks, under the viaducts, by the steel and iron mills, on the edges of the coal and lumber yards. We live in crowded, barn-like rooms, in old rotting buildings where once dwelt rich native whites of a century ago" (103). The boundary not only limits black mobility and opportunity but also functions as a surveillance tool ensuring their imprisonment within social death and the degradation of their domestic spaces. Lack of movement is carceral because black people are forced to stay in the segregated residential areas and banned from living outside them. Like a large prison compelling blacks to live in a general atmosphere of incarceration, these areas are described as "locked-in quarters" and "marked-off areas of our lives." The panoptical surveillance mechanisms range from market forces to the court and the mob; all of them act on the basis of a predominant discursive perception of blackness that legitimizes the

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enforcement of the boundary as a policing tool of control. The first of these discursive practices has to do with the racial, financial and spatial bar as an arbiter of difference. The imposition of boundaries establishes a link between the degradation of black domestic spaces and black bodies, unleashing a process of differentiation which casts black people as different and therefore unwanted: "Because we are black, because our love of life gives us many children, because we do not have quiet ways of doing things, because the outdoor boisterousness of the plantation still clings to us, because we move slowly and speak slowly, white people say that we are destructive and therefore do not want us in their neighborhoods" (103). The setting up of walls of incarceration produces a different black neighborhood, where enclosed and segmented spaces of material degradation form their inhabitants and mark them as morally inferior and need to be kept away from the society. The kitchenette, the one-room apartment which the Bosses of the Buildings buy cheaply from white property owners and sell at a high price to black immigrants, is emblematic of the penal system developed and maintained by the market morally, financially and physically to produce blacks as failed citizens and criminals. Narrow and crowded, it represents through the way it shapes the bodies and spirits of its black inhabitants how institutions of oppression racialize their Others through spatial configurations that emasculate and lock them out into exclusion. The kitchenette does not only position the black subject as a property to be exploited by market law but serves to dissolve its moral structure and produce it as inefficient. The narrator makes the kitchenette a metaphor for all the forces that construct the black subject as other and confine him to his place of social death:

> The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.

The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies. (106)

The new site of black subjection, the kitchenette epitomizes all the institutions ranging from the police, the legal system, the market and the extrajudicial mob that reduce blacks to a life of imprisonment, structure them as criminals and a danger to society. For the dehumanizing life in the kitchenette serves as a pathological tool penalizing blacks and further legitimizing the need for more surveillance to keep them away. Described as a jail, the kitchenette crystallizes the methods of urban power and how they penetrate, form and shape the black subject. In addition to its policing and disciplining effects, the cell-like kitchenette as a physical space of literal death not only stands for black confinement and lack of mobility but also constructs its tenants and throws them into a life of social death where the individual as well as the family crumbles and dissolves and where helplessness replaces agency and the struggle for change:

The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands, and even children behind to shift as best they can.

The kitchenette creates thousands of one-room homes where our black mothers sit, deserted, with their children about their knees. (109)

The narrator presents a long litany of the devastating effects of the kitchenette on the black dwellers therein, drawing the connection between the laws organizing spatial segregation and the laws determining citizenship and exposing how the production of segregated areas of death and illness produce socially dead black subjects who are cast outside mainstream American life and denied the promise of modernity. He explains that the kitchenette is an incubator of crime among black people, a source of "tension" and

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"restlessness" and a place that gives "birth to never-ending quarrels of recrimination, accusation, and vindictiveness, producing warped personalities" (108). Its power is subtle and affects all blacks, taking away the sense of life and hope from adults and making them inefficient and resigned. It also affects black boys and girls alike, plunging the first into criminality and the second into adultery. As such, the kitchenette is created and maintained by the forces of the market and other state and civil institutions in the form of a large prison that inflicts both physical and moral death on the black community and enables its control.

These various institutions preserve geographical boundaries through the deployment of discursive strategies that construct blackness in terms of difference, linking between the dilapidation of their domestic residence and their moral depravity, thus promoting perceptions of them as a danger to white society and its well-being. The barrier of segregation in the context of this institutionalized process of Othering becomes an arbiter of difference, protecting white valuable neighborhoods against black valueless spaces and stopping the blacks who are seen as dangerous from living among whites. Institutions like the mob, the court and the market establish and keep the boundary because they want to perpetuate the valuelessness of black residential areas and mark black people accordingly as valueless too, just as they seek, conversely, to preserve whiteness as a value. The white mob acts as an extralegal social force that deploys violence in order to deter blacks from expanding into white neighborhoods and bring down the value of white property. Its violent arbitration of the boundary aims to impose limitations on the mobility of blacks and keep them in their place but also to maintain white space as the place of value and rights. The boundary is not only a reminder of black valuelessness but of white value. Frantz Fanon captures this intimate relation between whiteness, value and rights: "In the colonies the economic substructure is also the

superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (*The Wretched* 30-1). According to this understanding of whiteness as value, the mob monitors in order to keep the Manichean world of the city intact. Blacks are denigrated both at the level of representation and material rights while whites are presented as the norm and the center whose rights should be preserved:

> Especially do we feel fear when we meet the gangs of white boys who have been taught–at home and at school–that we black folk are making their parents lose their homes and life's savings because we have moved into their neighborhoods.
>
> They say our presence in their neighborhoods lowers the value of their property. (103)

Other institutions like schools and courts are mobilized to safeguard this Manichean order by preserving the value-laden boundary between black and white neighborhoods. And while the education system is devised in such a way as to have the "educational appropriations of our black children … curtailed," the court backs documents written by whites and called covenants in which they agree and pledge "not to sell their property to us blacks under any circumstances" (113). The market through its housing policies makes sure that the border keeps black people out of white neighborhoods as the domain of value because it is only by confining them to the status of property that the Bosses of the Buildings stand to increase their gains. If crossing the spatial bar means blacks' entry into modernity as citizens and subjects, the market enforces its policies to keep them cramped in the kitchenette for profit: "The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavements, at a profit" (111). In addition to spatial confinement of blacks through housing policies, the market and the industrial sector also deny them the jobs and the

skills that effect their transition from the southern life of servitude to the modern life of skilled and professional labor:

> But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. It is when we are handling picks rather than mops, it is when we are swinging hammers rather than brooms, it is when we are pushing levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization. (117)

These geographies of hope and of black males' ascent towards agency and manhood are projected regularly as aspirations to be achieved after but never as realities to be lived because black people are held back by their own folk culture which accommodates itself to the white order and even acts as its agent. This culture which maintains blacks' subordinate place is explored in the following section within the confines of both black family and the wider black community. Having broken down the disorienting and confining effects of black man's physical place, this section will examine his symbolic place as an uprooted outsider within black culture's emphasis on racial conformity and communal homogeneity.

Black Culture: Subjecting Blacks to Social Death

Wright's fiction relentlessly explores the forces that map the place of the black male subject as the place of non-identity, unveiling the strategies that lock it under the conditions of social death and bar it from humanity. It shows that this place, delineated in terms of spatial placelessness and political exclusion, endures thanks to the black family's complicity with white power and its function as an agent that normalizes subjection and holds black males prisoners to their physical and moral confinement. Domestic black family life and the disciplining constrictions it places on black male individuals are seen as an extension of the overall attempt by white society to keep black male subjects in their place as boys and deprive them of developing their potential as mature human beings. Both immediate and extended family in this light act as an arm to white hegemony, reflecting the proxy role that the larger black culture plays to produce black subjects who are compliant to white supremacy, sacrificing their autonomy, personal initiative and development to be able to survive even at the risk of their own social death. Best blames the tendency of the black family to siphon off black males' aspiration to individuality and their attempts at developing their full potential as human beings on the culture of death that the black community is subjected to under the dominant hegemony: "Family law is the perverse and ineffective order arising from an economically and juridically sanctioned condition of black placelessness" (115). Itself an outcome of the racist subjection of the black community, family life "covers for a complicitous, conformist acquiescence in black communities caused by racism and segregation" (115). The black family's penchant for acquiescence and acceptance of the status quo and the demands for conformity it imposes on black males are indicative of a state of complete surrender to white hegemony and a willful embrace of its dictates. The rigorous and at times violent imposition of rule and discipline on black male subjects by

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the family reflects an unconscious and thus more sinister attempt to keep them within the confines of social death and under white hegemony which shapes black familial structure and experience. JanMohamed argues that the negation of black males' will to be independent and autonomous is indicative of the hegemonic formations undertaken and orchestrated by the black family on behalf of the white dominant system to lock them in the place of social marginality and death that it occupies under white supremacy. The family's demand for conformity thus subjects black males to the same structures of social death and hegemony that produce the black family and determine relations between its members. JanMohamed says:

> One can theorize, probably quite accurately, that death-bound subjects, like all other ideologically produced subjects, will have a strong tendency to perpetuate their status according to the logic whereby they are ideologically obliged to reproduce the relations of production that produced them in the first place. (*Death* 140)

Since the place of the black family is defined by social death and its members are produced along the lines of the dominant hegemony, it becomes, therefore, understandable that requests for conformity from black males belie attempts to produce them as socially dead subjects and confine them to the experience of marginality for which the black family stands. In shaping black masculinity in this specular way, the black family, which for Wright stands for the black community as a whole, puts survival and accommodation to the dominant order before dignity and access to agency and subjectivity, giving precedence to acquiescence over rebellion. In so doing, the black family sacrifices black males' individuality, self-fulfillment and maturity that come only by rebelling against the boy-status imposed by Jim Crow society in order to assure its safety in a hostile environment where the threat of death and lynching regulate black

people's lives. But the paradox is that the choice of safety from physical death through a preference for survival and adjustment turns out to be at the high cost of giving black males over to social death where their masculinity is bracketed, humanity denied and agency negated. Yoshinobu Hakutani links the black family's subjection of its male members to white racism and its crippling impact on black people and their life: "It is true that he [Wright] is critical of the black community itself in the South, but it is not true that he places the blame on the black community itself. His intention is to show that a racist system produced a way of life that was forced on black people" (*Richard* 125). The black family suppresses the black male subject's will to agency and identity in two ways that are complementary and mutually reinforcing. First, by mediating the hegemonic interpellations of Jim Crow's system and, thus, forcing black masculinity to cave in to its demands and renounce its claims to identity and dignity. Second, black domestic and private life is itself a site of social death that has been mapped, molded and produced by the white order; and as such brings up its black boys according to its unconscious acceptance of the white Law and its prevailing tendency toward accommodation. Yet, in both instances, the black family which epitomizes the entire black society and its folk culture, joins the dominant hegemony in producing black male identity in terms of compliant black boys whose development toward agency and maturity is arrested because of their being locked in this place of permanent childhood and dependence.

In *Black Boy* the familial formation of the narrator and main character Richard is carried out through a Manichean relationship of antagonism between the family which pressures him into submission to its authority and the child's resistant and independent spirit. This order unleashes a set of binary oppositions which pits the child against his family, conformity against independence, folk culture against modern critical and

rational thinking and social death against absolute and uncompromising freedom. The chain of binaries that flows from the Manichean world of the family is diverse and best captured by Richard's two major afflictions imposed by his family and the black community: physical and intellectual hungers. These two handicaps deployed by the family are so effective and vital to his formation as a black boy that he describes them as part of his own physical and psychological build. These two afflictions mold him and penetrate his physical and psychological structure, threatening to bring it down and subsequently reduce him to the helpless status of the bare life occupied by his family. The importance of this dual pressure to Richard's formation by the family and his resistance to its authority are also made explicit in the structure and plot development of the autobiography itself, which is organized around the two titles of its main sections: "*Black Boy*" as a title for the first section and "*American Hunger*" as a title for the second. This structure pinpoints the link between hunger and the formation of Richard as black boy.

The hunger that Richard is exposed to takes different forms that all have to do with his family's attempt to make him conform to and act as an arm of the white system. There are on the one hand the forms of physical hunger which aim to discipline and control Richard's body; these include starvation, poverty and domestic violence and family break-up. There are on the other hand the forms of intellectual hunger which include the family's use of religion and folk tradition to stifle and curb his literary and intellectual aspirations and his quest for independence and individuality. The two aspects of hunger are interrelated and interchangeably deployed by the family to coerce and force him to adjust to the life of physical and moral confinement characteristic of the socially dead subject. These forms speak of the familial demands on him, demands that mediate the family's own subjection by white supremacy. Kenneth Kinnamon explains how the

family acts as an agent of white hegemony by imposing on Richard these forms of hunger to which it is subjugated by the racist order:

> Thus the poverty of his childhood and youth resulted from discriminatory employment practices compounded by inadequate education, itself a result of the separate but unequal schools for blacks in Mississippi and Arkansas. The disruption of Wright's family was a typical, if extreme, example of a widespread social pattern related to racial prejudice, poverty, and ignorance among blacks. (*The Emergence18*)

These pressures inflicted upon the black community by the white system and mediated by Richard's family to break his independence of spirit and produce him as a compliant black boy are dramatically articulated in the opening scene of the autobiography. The narrative begins with an act of arson that brings to the forefront the internal tensions and conflicts that mark the domestic life of Richard's family and determine his antagonistic relations to it. The buildup to the moment when he sets fire to his family's house and its aftermath articulate two aspects of social death: the disintegration of the family and his parents' will to restrain and control his individuality. Just as slavery endured at the expense of black kinship, dispersing black families and stripping individuals of the communal experience necessary for them to develop as whole subjects, lack of solid and profound kin relations in Richard's family denies him the social protection and emotional anchor necessary for his own development. Lack of nurture through familial bonds is reflected in the family's attempt to impose discipline inside the house, control Richard's behavior and restrain his rebellious spirit. Expressed through the family's deployment of violence, both aspects of social death affect the boy's body and mind, fueling his physical and intellectual hunger. The use of violence, in the form of beatings, and the deployment of literal and symbolic death, aim to exercise the

family's authority over his body, exacerbating his suffering and physical hunger. They also aim to force the law of the family on him, break his spirit and push him to renounce his intellectual hunger for independence and freedom. The scene opens with the tension and fretfulness of the four-year-old boy who is suffocated by the domestic environment of his family. He is portrayed as torn between his feeling of boredom and yearning to run outside and play and his fear to infringe upon the familial restrictions and prohibitions which force him to be quiet because his grandmother, Granny, is ill. His conflict arises, therefore, from fear of the family Law which aims to determine his behavior and define his place within its private space in terms of conformity and acquiescence and his own dreams "of running and playing and shouting" and his desire to look "yearningly out into the empty street" (*Later Works* 5). This last set of energies which stresses mobility, pleasure and freedom in the outside world is pitted against familial prohibitions that imprison the boy in the confinement of domestic space and oppress his natural desire. This dynamic of personal hunger for mobility and understanding of the external world is equated with masculinity and constantly shown to be conducive to agency; while restrictions to the bare life of the family and its interior domestic space are associated with the emasculating forces that deny Richard prospects of maturity and independence. Resistance and submission to the family law are, thus, cast in a gendered prism where conformity to the family's demands of acceptance of the status quo is described as emasculating and feminizing whereas the will to negate them and to hunger for mobility is negotiated and sought after as the ultimate and only viable form of masculine resistance.

This gendered view of the boy's place in the family is manifested also in the fact that his family members are mostly feminine figures who compete to discipline him one way or the other and the few men who play a role in his life like his father and uncle are

emasculated by the dominant hegemony and relate to him in the same way as do the women who populate his family world. This is why the first two characters to emerge in this first scene are his mother, Ella, and grandmother Granny, both of whom inspire fear in the little boy in order to break his will to challenge authority. It is the fear of Granny which keeps him in his place and prevents him from violating the prohibition not to play: "the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid" (5). The psychological formation of Richard through fear is intended to emasculate him and to push him to renounce his rebellious plans to act as he pleases. This is very much the case since the women's deployment of fear and coercion is to produce him as a black boy who accepts the family's social death of deprivation and acquiescence, a life regulated and sustained by white society's use of both actual death and social death. This explains how Richard's fear of Granny allows her to establish her authority over him and to ensure his compliance to her teachings: "In the next room Granny lay ill and under the day and night care of a doctor and I knew that I would be punished if I did not obey" (5). The same thing applies to his mother, who uses verbal abuse together with physical violence in order to instill fear in him and make him abide by the rules governing family conduct: "All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise" (5). Richard's mother plays a double proxy role in her violent formation of him. She acts as an agent who establishes the authority of both his father and grandmother over him and is an arm to the white racism which confines him to social death. So, in the same way she performs the wishes of the grandmother when she reprimands and orders him to be quiet, Richard's mother violently whips him on several occasions to make him respect his father's authority and refrain from challenging his place as an inferior subject under white order. Sherley Anne Williams argues that old

black women's power in Wright's fiction is always denounced on the grounds that it colludes with the dominant society in denying black male subjects mobility: "these religious strong women are portrayed as ineffectual in the face of the poverty and racism of their lives and as unacknowledged allies of the society in keeping black men in their place" (73-4).

The tensions and punishments which mark Richard's antagonistic relation to his family form a two-way street, for just as his parents and relatives inflict admonitions and violence to produce him as bare life, Richard hits back blindly with violent and at times suicidal acts of retribution to negate their attempts and preserve his individuality. His first act of retaliation is to set the fluffy white curtains of the house aflame, causing fire to spread through the house and burn it down. He says that he scorched them because he is forbidden to touch them and also because he "is resentful of being neglected" (5). Both reasons relate to restrictions imposed by his grandmother but also to his mother's abandonment of him, preferring to care for the sick old lady and play the role of her agent. Reacting to the assaults suffered in his domestic environment, he performs a number of symbolic deaths against the figures responsible for his emasculation: his grandmother, his mother and his father. Lurking below the burning house, he speculates about the fate of his family members. His imagination, which spurs him to the act of arson, pictures his grandmother dead and engulfed in flames: "I saw the image of my grandmother lying helplessly upon her bed and there were yellow flames in her black hair" (7). This symbolic murder is coupled with unseating his father as the ultimate figure of authority when he sets the house which stands for his power ablaze. Horace A. Porter points out that the accidental incident has the twin effect of liberating Richard from the oppression of both father and grandmother: "Perhaps even at that early age he was trying to free himself from the tyranny of his father's house in which his fanatically religious

grandmother ruled" (317). The burning of a black domestic place of subjection takes also a macabre turn when Richard is severely beaten by his mother and starts hallucinating about how she symbolically relates to him. In his imagination, the mother's milk of sustenance and nurture turns into a poisonous fluid that threatens to drown him:

> Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I would see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid. (9)

Ella's near-death punishment of Richard presents another instance of the pervasive exchange of death and violence within the environment of the family, highlighting a lack of kinship bonds and disruption of family unity. The physical suffering and pain that she inflicts on Richard by severely whipping him is intended to teach him a lesson for setting the house on fire. It thus aims to make him adjust to the conditions of conformity and social death by curbing his wild imagination and personality. Yet Ella's act does not only enforce white hegemony on her son by teaching him the hard way how to keep his place but also reestablishes the authority of the family over him. She in fact deploys violence against him because he unconsciously attempts to wipe out the house as a symbol of the black place of subservience. Porter articulates this idea, asserting that "When Wright sets his father's house aflame, he also makes an eloquent statement against the world the Southern slaveholders had made" (317). Ella acts as a double agent, harshly punishing Richard to make him respect his status as a black boy without individuality or independence of spirit and regret having tried to disavow the authority of the family when he burns the house down. No wonder then that her harsh punishment spurs him symbolically to kill her when he imagines her nurturing

milk to be a poison, associating her with the other members of the family who use violence and death to discipline him into social death.

In addition to killing his grandmother symbolically and committing a patricide and matricide against his parents, Richard is also obliged in another incident to threaten to use violence in the face of oppressive family members intent on negating his selfhood and subjectivity by compelling him to accept family decorum and good behavior. His Uncle Tom, whose name signifies the stereotypical image of black men as compliant boys, for no reason other than his wish to teach him "a lesson in how to live with people" (152) and to "break … [his] spirit" (153), engages in an altercation with Richard that could have turned bloody had he not finally backed down. Tom decides to give him "the whipping some man ought to have given [him] long ago" for what he considers to be an improper and impudent answer by Richard when Tom asks him about time. Reflecting on this threat, Richard says: "now a strange uncle who felt that I was impolite was going to teach me to act as I had seen the backward black boys act on the plantations, was going to teach me to grin, hang my head, and mumble apologetically when I was spoken to" (151). The altercation ends in Tom's defeat when Richard stands up to him, threatening to cut him with a pair of razor blades in his possession. What is at stake in this violent confrontation is Tom's willingness to beat and use violence against the boy in order to teach him to adjust to the family's norms of accommodation and to behave like other black boys do on white-owned plantations, revealing how Richard's formation by the family is in tandem with black boys' hegemonic structuring by the dominant white system. Richard's determination to defend his body against the whipping is in line with his constant refusal to give in to death threats which regulate the lives of other blacks and keep them in their place of subordination. His readiness to meet his uncle's violent threats represents a more general pattern that structures the whole narrative, in which society is

adamant about using different forms of social death like beating, poverty and family fragmentation to impose physical hunger on Richard in order to stifle his intellectual hunger and aspiration to agency. The point here is that bodily discipline through these types of physical hunger is intended to siphon off his intellectual and personal hunger for subjectivity and manhood and make him dissemble and "grin" like the other black boys who put accommodation and survival ahead of confrontation and selfhood. This is why Tom's next step after he tries and fails to use violence against Richard is to order his daughter not to talk to or associate with him, denying him healthy bonding with members of his extended family and deepening the negative impact of family disintegration on him. Violence and disruption of family ties are weapons at Tom's hands to use to exacerbate Richard's physical hunger. JanMohamed contends that the incident means "Richard's social death within the extended family takes the form of his excommunication, which, by pushing him further to the margins of human society, marks him out as 'bare life'" (*Death* 159).

Richard has also to undergo a host of similar incidents where he is given the self-negating choice of accommodating to the rules of submission imposed by the domestic structure or face violence and rejection. He is ostracized by both Aunt Addie and Granny for refusing to act in their lead and meet their idea of good and proper conduct. Aunt Addie decides never to talk to him after he objects to her teaching methods, fights with her and brandishes a knife in her face; so does Granny when he insists, against her religious convictions, to work on Saturdays.

Yet it is in his relation to his most immediate family, his mother and father, that Richard's attitude to the outside world is clearly shown to be the result of his masculine confrontation with the feminizing effects of black folk culture brought to bear on him by his family. His mother, to whom he shows great sympathy and love throughout the

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narrative, is the only one who deploys violence the most to teach him the pedagogy of submission. But what is peculiar about her role is that the whipping she administers to him always serves the reestablishment of someone else's authority, highlighting her double-agent status. As in the opening scene when she acts on two occasions as the arm of Granny–ordering Richard not to disturb his grandmother and whipping him out of consciousness for setting her house ablaze–Ella intervenes in the following scene to reestablish the authority of Richard's father. The episode is another instance of parricide that sees the boy literally and deliberately taking his father's word to kill a stray kitten which bothers him and prevents him from sleeping. Killing the cat, Richard executes a conscious act of parricide by exactly doing what his father asks him to do even though he does not mean it in reality. As the father cannot risk contradicting himself and punish his son for executing his literal order, Richard feels victorious and triumphant for defying his word and getting away with it. But his triumph is short-lived because his mother, as he explains, is "more imaginative, [and] retaliated with an assault upon my sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life" (14). The joy which Richard derives from the parricidal displacement of his father's moral authority is quickly replaced by the crushing "moral horror" which the mother instills in his fragile moral structure. Before making him bury the kitten and pray in repentance and remorse for his symbolic act of parricide, the mother inflicts on him a psychological punishment, no less devastating in its effects on his self-formation than the first physical punishment she gives him after the burning down of the family's house. She first lectures him about the value of life, persuading him that it is morally wrong to lynch the cat. When night falls, she orders him to make a decent burial for the kitten after cutting it down from the tree. With the boy's body and psyche completely frozen by fear and guilt, Ella continues to initiate him into this symbolic act of disavowing his deed by ordering him to bury the

cat and ask for divine forgiveness. Alone in the dark and terrified, the boy's rebellious spirit is utterly undone by the fear that his mother's "disembodied voice" (14) instills in him. He thus succumbs to her will and reinstates the order of authority he has negated when he killed the kitten, repeating twice the prayer "Dear God, our Father, forgive me, for I knew not what I was doing" (15). After annulling the meaning of his symbolic lynching of his father and asking for forgiveness, the boy's cycle of submission becomes complete as he avows the importance of life and survival over defiance and selfhood. The prayer goes on, "And spare my poor life, even though I did not spare the life of the kitten" (15). The self-negating impact of this ritual of submission is so great on the boy that he goes into a near-death experience while performing his mother's will to life and survival. He explains: "I opened my mouth but no words came. My mind was frozen with horror. I pictured myself gasping for breath and dying in my sleep" (15). The point is that the boy's initiation into social death through the mother's insistence on survival and submission is at the expense of his own life as a free and independent subject. The closing words of his mother capture this experience as she triumphantly admires Richard's schooling: "Well, I suppose you've learned your lesson" (15).

While most of the maternal violence in *Black Boy* is deployed to initiate Richard in the culture of social death through encounters with members of his family and the wider black community, in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Ella uses punishment and beatings to discipline him into submission to whites. In this autobiography, family violence against Richard does not only aim to ensure his respect for the values of survival and accommodation that govern his place in the domestic life inside the house but also to control his behavior in the outside world of white hegemony. Although she teaches him at an early stage in *Black Boy* that he must defend himself against black boys in the neighborhood, Ella, in this text, which is a series of sketches about the pedagogy of

survival in the South, subjects Richard to merciless beating for fighting with white boys. As an agent to the white order, she deploys violence to keep the boundaries of his place as a bare life sub-human intact, while denying him the right to use violence to stand up against the white boys and defend his dignity and self-respect. What is striking about the mother's monopoly of violence is that, like all blacks who succumb to white hegemony, she gives up her right to use violence against white power and directs it instead against her child to make him renounce his claims to identity and subjectivity and subscribe to a life of subservience and acquiescence to the structures of white power. Her use of violence is meant to be a disciplinary act warning the boy not to use what is an exclusively white privilege, namely the right to use violence against black people in order to keep them in their place of marginality and subordination. The episode in which this maternal coercion colludes with the racist order to keep the boy in his place begins when Richard and his black friends find themselves caught in a fight with white boys who pound them with a barrage of bottles. When Richard, who is cut by one of the bottles, comes back home seeking comfort and care from his mother he is met with violence more devastating that anything the local white gang could have inflicted on him. She mercilessly beats him in order to curb his independent will to defend himself and to teach him never to use violence against whites. Because she knows that Richard's willingness to hit back against the white boys marks a dangerous breach of blacks' place, she "grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me germs of Jim Crow wisdom" (*Early Works* 226). The aim of the whipping is to produce a black body completely mapped out by white hegemony and defined by the pedagogy of Jim Crow society. The boy describes the lesson his mother wants to drive home to him: "I was never, never, under any conditions,

to fight *white* folks again." What he gets in return for renouncing his right to counter whites' violence is a bare life status which allows him to live only in so far as his life is stripped of meaning and value: "I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn't kill me" (226). The mother's attempt to protect Richard and her insistence on his survival uncannily breaks his will to resist the hegemonic structure of Jim Crow society and binds him more to its demands and interpellations.

Like Ella, the first appearance of Richard's father in *Black Boy* places him at the epicenter of the family's circuit of violence and oppression. He is the only family member who is able to dig out his fear-stricken son from underneath the family's burning house. In so doing, he puts an end to Richard's unconscious suicidal attempt to bring his social death in the family to a close by killing himself in the grave-like refuge he finds in the basement. Having made up his mind "not to leave … [his] place of safety" (7), he suddenly caught sight of his father who "yanked … [his] leg and … [he] crawled at the chimney" (8). As is the case with the mother who denies him the use of violence to defend himself, his father thwarts his plans to die in what he calls his place of safety and forces him back into social death as represented by the crowd of black people who gather at the site. In both incidents, father and mother act to ensure the boy's survival while he strives to negate it on the grounds that the life given to him by his parents binds him to the disenfranchising Jim Crow code. In this light, the parents, by uncannily giving precedence to accommodation and survival over identity, offer their son death-in-life, a trade he tries to annul by committing suicide and putting an end to the life of submission they want to enforce on him. So after capturing him and handing him over to his mother for punishment, the father subscribes to the death exchange that marks relations between family members and anticipates his subsequent desertion of his family, deepening the family's disintegration and hastening its descent into the abyss of deprivation and

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poverty. Both father and son are locked in a mutual exchange of violence that each uses for totally different ends. The father dispenses violence in alliance with Jim Crow society and in order to socialize his son to live by its dictates, while the son deploys it to allow himself mobility and freedom from the confinement of his denigrating place under that same regime.

This mutual violence takes bone and flesh when the four-member family moves out to Memphis and lives away from the extended family in a typical black kitchenette. It is here that Richard gets to know his father and starts to draw parallels between him and the nadir of his deprivation. The significance of the Memphis episode is that it ties the boy's knowledge of his father to his worsening experience of social death, epitomized by the spatial confinement of their one-bedroom tenement and the abject poverty they have to endure. Richard is unequivocally clear about the association between his life of despondence in the kitchenette and his knowledge of his father: "It was in this tenement that the personality of my father first came fully into the orbit of my concern" (11). This knowledge paints a picture of a failed father and family provider who is ill-paid and unable to keep a job, working in Memphis as "night porter," then as a laborer and later a sharecropper. Drawn in images of poverty and deprivation, he is also depicted as morally unfit for the role of father because of his temper, greed and unsympathetic attitude towards his family members. In Richard's terms, he is "the lawgiver in our family" whose presence fills him with fear and kills the laughter on his face. The rest of the negative epithets that he uses to describe his father present him as a creature of appetite, condemning him for his selfish unrestraint and his excessive animal-like love of food. In spite of blood ties, the boy sees his father as a stranger with whom he enjoys no sense of communication or psychological bonding: "He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote" (12). Robert Stepto asserts that Richard's knowledge of his

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father underscores his subversive intention to do away with all that he represents: "Wright's persona rejects all that his father signifies . . . the son considers him the first of several elder kinsmen who are 'warnings,' not 'examples'" (233). There is little wonder, then, that the boy receives the news of his father's desertion of the family in this episode of their life in Memphis with joy and happiness. For him, the father's departure spells the end of authority and oppression and ushers in a life of freedom in the house: "it was true that my father had not come home to sleep for many days now and I could make as much noise as I wanted. Though I had not known why he was absent, I had been glad that he was not there to shout his restrictions at me" (16-7). Yet as a subject formed by social death, Richard's moments of freedom are short-lived because very soon he has to deal with the father's desertion of the family and what it means for his survival. The father's departure plunges him further into poverty and despondence, intensifying his resentment toward him and deepening his own experience of powerlessness now that he is left to fend for himself. It traps him into conditions of social death in two ways: first by exposing him to physical starvation and second by shattering the family structure and the little sense of emotional security that it has given him up to this point. The boy describes how rapidly he is devastated by regular attacks of hunger following his father's desertion and how he comes to associate him with this new physical enemy: "As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness" (17).

So far physical hunger as an epitome of his experience of social death inside the family has been limited to regular whipping, restrictions and violent threats, yet with no income after his father has left, Richard's hunger permeates his body and conscience, arresting him completely in the realm of social death. The autobiography focuses from this point onward on how this hunger forms his life inside his family, determines his

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relation to the outside world and limits his learning opportunities. His entire life, his energies and ambitions are channeled to achieve one goal: escaping hunger and the image of the father associated with it. In analyzing the father's role as mediator of white hegemony, JanMohamed argues that the hunger he inflicts on Richard's life is strategically deployed by Jim Crow society to hold black people down in poverty and reduce them to social death: "By constantly holding the black / slave on the verge of death through starvation, Jim Crow society could exploit and syphon off the entire production of his 'life,' including his labor, as surplus value. Starvation thus became the most efficacious means of confining the black within the realm of social death" ("Negating" 110). A symbol of his father's failure as a moral exemplar and family provider, hunger forms Richard's body, becoming a scourge that limits his mobility and incarcerates him inside the house. He describes its toll on his physical growth, saying that it causes him to lose weight, consumes his energy and thinking and causes him to faint several times. Not only does it undermine him physically and arrests his maturity by shutting him off from the outside world, but it also determines the fate of his family, twists his social relations and affects his learning. The loss of the father besets the now three-member family with starvation, exposes them to slum life and induces cracks in kinship relations. His mother, under the strain of dire need, has to work as a cook in whites' kitchens in order to be able to feed them with the scraps she brings home from white food tables. But when she gets ill, she takes her two sons to an orphanage so destitute that Richard has to run away from it. The relentless pressure of hunger and want forces the three to be on the move most of the time, travelling from one city to another, seeking shelter with relatives some times and left to make ends meet on their own at others. This state of placelessness, lived through hunger and family disintegration, sees them share a house with a prostitute as they get more and more absorbed into the vortex

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of social death. As they move from one place to the next, they get progressively entangled in the life of cheaper quarters and neighborhoods. And when the mother has a stroke, the two children, Richard and his brother, are split up between relatives, going their separate ways. The family never reunites under a roof of its own after this time, marking the nadir of social death where kinship is broken and individuals are denied social wholeness.

The absence of the father does not only form Richard physically, displace and fragment his family, but also affects his learning and intellectual development. The fact that Richard's formal education ceases after graduation from ninth grade indicates the extent to which the horror of hunger and abject poverty exact their toll on him. Extreme poverty puts the family out of place and keeps it on the move, therefore, interrupting Richard's formal schooling and denying him the chance to complete one full school year until he is twelve. Yet even when he attends school, hunger prevents him from focusing on the lessons and sometimes he simply cannot stay awake because he has to work part-time to feed himself and his family. His education is also interrupted on many occasions because he does not have money to buy books or clothes to go to school.

A quarter of a century later, when he sees him for the first time since their last meeting in Memphis which ends in the father handing him a nickel, Richard meets his father again on his way back from Mexico to America. In Natchez, deep in the South, Richard stops to make his final symbolic burial of his father and the southern black culture of resignation and survival he crystalizes. This cold and pitiless act of burial is effected in spatial and temporal terms that reflect how far the son has come in terms of personal achievement thanks to his stubborn rebellion and how deeply mired is the father in the culture of southern social death. A traveler and a successful writer who breaks the cycle of social death imposed on him in the South and heads North, where he cultivates

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his individuality and freedom, Richard stresses the distance between where his will has taken him and his spiritless father, whose failure is expressed in the spatial terms of traveling down South from Memphis to Natchez. The difference between father and son is not only articulated in light of the different spatial journeys each takes but also finds expression in their opposed relation to temporality. While Richard makes it into modernity, his father remains imprisoned in prehistory where his life is governed by the nature and the alternation of the seasons:

> I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body. (*Later Works* 35)

The temporal and spatial distancing between himself and his father is also set in motion through the condemnation of the latter's life as unfit for humans. As a socially dead subject, the father does not only lose his parental status but also his humanity. Locked in the past, his life in the South is denounced through the deployment of diction like "imprisoned," "fastened" and "chained," words which all seal his death as a human being and portray him as a trapped animal defined by earthly urges. The reason for his submission to such an inferior and sub-human status is not far to seek since it has to do with his failure to be a man and his resignation to the life of the black boy who fails in the city and ends up accepting his bare life:

> [He] was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city–that same city which had lifted me in its burning

arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing. (*Later Works* 35)

The distinction drawn between the two is clearly indicated by the transformative force of the city which symbolizes modernity in the narrative and which arrests the father in immobility and failure, sending him back into peasant life, while it grants mobility and its associated empowering quality of "knowing" to Richard. The gulf between the man and his son is also emphasized through the disparaging description of the father's ignorant and animal-like life and the ascent of the son to intellectual authorship, sophistication and self-consciousness. Richard describes how he pities him for his degrading and self-diminishing bare life: "As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope … I forgave him and pitied him as my eyes looked past him to the unpainted wooden shack" (*Later Works* 35). The place of the father as a socially dead subject comes about in the form of the flimsy "shack" which epitomizes blacks' dehumanization and marginalization in the South. This picture of utter helplessness denotes the extent to which both father and son have become strangers from each other. Yet the complete and final separation from the example of the father takes place a few sentences earlier when he denies kinship with him:

> my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality. (*Later Works* 34-5)

By so mercilessly killing his father, Richard succeeds also in dealing a deadly blow to the black culture of social death he represents. As Stepto argues, Richard makes a personal association between his father and the black culture at large:

Every failing with which Negro America is charged is, at base, a failure he has witnessed within his family circle; each phrase employing the word 'our'–our tenderness, our joy, our traditions, our memories, and especially our despair, our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy–is fundamentally in reference to his relations with his kin, his father in particular. (251)

What Stepto has in mind is Richard's sweeping statement about the barrenness of black culture in which he sets forth a litany of disparaging epithets, showing how scathingly and vehemently he has fought his way out of its grip. For Richard, dispensing with the crippling effects of his father is equated with transcending and ditching the poverty of black culture. He says:

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. (*Later Works* 37)

Black culture, like his father, is weighed against Richard's knowledge, literacy and critical consciousness and then condemned on the basis that it is too poor to cultivate and nurture human life. The toll on black subjects is put by Herbert Leibowitz this way: "The vehemence of Wright's disparagement of black culture for not nourishing the passional and intellectual lives of its children can perhaps be traced to his father's conduct" (334).

The third and last pressure that Richard's environment deploys to constrain and deny his accession to manhood and independence revolves around the key question of literacy. Both the immediate and extended family and the larger black community

conspire to suppress what he calls his intellectual hunger and his aspiration to achieve self-awareness and freedom through education. In so doing, they enact a ritual of initiation whereby the boy is taught to read and heed the signs of social death that bar blacks from education and the tools to negotiate citizenship and agency. They do not only mold his personality to fit in with the black culture of acquiescence and resignation to the status quo but also act on behalf of white society, which denigrates black people as mere bodies and refuses to acknowledge their intellectual worth as equal human beings. Lindon Barrett contends that literacy subverts the subject's position within the white order of the Enlightenment, which values intellect over the body: "African Americans who are forced to live illiterate lives, who are forcibly identified with the limited sphere of the body, are in as manifest a fashion as possible seemingly restricted to being the objects of thought and never its subjects" (419). The exclusion of Richard from the experience of literacy denotes a will to confine him to the body and perpetuate his existence as a socially dead subject. Dana Nelson Salvino shares the same contention that banning black people from education constitutes "a very real enslaving weapon against blacks: legislated into illiteracy, they were held chattel by the power of words in the form of laws legalizing their bondage and tracts confirming their inherent inferiority to whites" (147). Yet it is this injunction against his right to knowledge and access to selfhood that drives him vehemently to fight his environment in order to gain his chance to learn and set himself free from his own people's limiting acceptance of white hegemonic structures. The fight for literacy which turns violent on many occasions is underpinned by an understanding that education is the only possible way towards freedom and dignity. Mikko Tuhkanen stresses that Richard's quest for literacy follows in the footsteps of a black literary tradition which holds that access to knowledge is only possible by fighting and undoing the white symbolic order even if it means the subject's death: "I suggest that

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he [Richard] does this [challenging the white order] by continuing the legacy of African American culture where the experience of the literary allows a radical possibility to reconfigure the symbolic realm, articulated in the subject's willing choice of (symbolic) death" (153). Richard's learning situations take place both inside the family and outside in the black community, testifying to the violence, both physical and moral, he has to endure to access knowledge and develop critical thinking that enables him to undo the self-negating effects of both black and white cultures. It is at his grandparents' house that he first discovers his intellectual hunger, which comes upon him in the form of mesmerizing love for the literary world and the boundless opportunities it presents. When the young schoolteacher, Ella, who boards with the Wilson family in Jackson, introduces him one day to the world of fiction, he immediately falls under the spell of the liberating vistas it opens for him. As she relates to him the story of *Bluebird and His Seven Wives*, he reflects upon the eye-opening effect of this piece of imaginative art:

> As her words fell upon my new ears, I endowed them with a reality that welled up from somewhere within me . . . The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow . . . My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me. (*Later Works* 38-9)

At the heart of this visionary and ecstatic state of being is the important role attached to literacy, which makes possible the salvation of the boy's mind and spirit. Not only does fiction loosen the tight grip of the confining life of his own family but it transports him to a world of emotional gratification, intellectual elevation and freedom. Yet he is soon reminded of the reality of his Jackson household when his grandmother, Granny, intrudes upon his enchanted state: "When she was about to finish, when my

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interest was keenest, when I was lost to the world around me, Granny stepped briskly onto the porch" (39). The abrupt and unexpected emergence of his ardently religious grandmother upon the scene marks the eruption of the family's tyranny in the imaginative world of freedom made possible by Ella's narrating voice. It dramatizes the fundamental conflict determining Richard's relation to his family and black community: his insistence to ascend to freedom through knowledge and literacy and their oppressive rejection of his consciousness in favor of submission and survival. Granny's immediate reaction is to evoke her religious catechism, condemning him to hell: "you're going to burn in hell" (39). The literary piece itself is not spared the wrath of his grandmother who associates the story with the devil's work: "I want none of that Devil stuff in my house!" (39). The episode ends in further excommunicating the boy from the family circle and forcing the schoolteacher to leave the house. Although her harsh punishment fails to achieve its goal as Richard's interest in stories remains unabated and he promises that he "would buy all the novels there were and read them" (39), Granny's religious fervor also remains intact, underlining that her world is diametrically opposed to his. Leibowitz puts this tense relationship in these terms:

> Granny's house was the worst possible place for a nervous, dreamy boy. She dominated the household with unchallenged authority, the matriarch as Medusa. A fanatic Adventist whose cosmology was ruled by a jealous, punitive God, devils ready to work their evil, and an imminent apocalypse, which would sweep sinners into hell, she judged her wayward grandson's deeds with an absolute righteousness. (338)

Such is the world-view of Granny who runs her family with strict religiosity that exacts conformity from all household members. This view inevitably sets her on a collision course with Richard whose rebellious character and literary ambitions run

counter to her will to impose discipline on him. Later she burns the books that he is to bring home and destroys his radio because she is against the music it broadcasts.

Although the most influential authority figure in the Wilson house, Granny is not the only relative who discourages and impedes the boy's ascent to literacy and the assuaging of his literary hunger. Aunt Addie also enrolls him in a school she has just opened after coming back from Huntsville where she used to teach at the Seventh-Day Adventist Religious School. Very soon it becomes evident that Richard does not feel at home with his aunt's classes because of her teaching methods, which resemble the oppressive catechism of his grandmother. Violent antagonism keeps brewing between them until they come to blows with each other, prompting Richard to threaten her with a kitchen knife if she does not step back. The result of this frightening and violent educational experience is more exclusion of the boy as Aunt Addie takes it upon herself never to speak to him again. Stepto makes the link between the oppressive family structures and Richard's frustrating learning situations: "Wright's persona is so embattled in his school experiences partly because, until he enters the Jim Hill School at the age of twelve, most of his schooling occurs at home or in classrooms that are formidable extensions of that horrific and inhibiting domestic world" (243). As a part of his quest for identity and independence, Richard's insistence on learning also involves exploring words, grasping and having a command of their meaning as well as tapping into their liberating potential. Words for him have, according to Leibowitz, "magical properties, in particular the power of conferring identity and erasing the stigma of inferiority" (331).

At home, testing the meaning of words inflicts upon him a series of punishments and incurs the anger of the oppressive family triangle: his mother, father and grandmother. In the kitten-lynching scene, his deliberate misinterpretation of the father's

Word unleashes the latter's anger and spurs his mother to expose him to the horror of having to bury the cat alone in the dead of the night. He acknowledges that the fear he experiences renders him speechless and in a total physical and psychological paralysis. In another domestic incident, his obscene manipulation of words sparks the consternation and ire of his grandmother when he asks her, while she is bathing him, to kiss his behind. Offended by his remark, Granny strikes him with the towel before the entire family joins her in trying to capture and punish him. Richard first runs from his mother who holds a towel ready to strike him while she chases him outside the house and into the street. Upon his coming back to the house Granny is again upon him, hitting him on his head. She then sends his brother to call Grandpa who leads the family's offensive to capture and whip him as he lurks underneath the bed, refusing to come out. Similar incidents abound in the narrative and they reveal how words hold a promise that his family strives to deny: "I tortured my mother into telling me the meaning of every strange word I saw, not because the word itself had any value, but because it was the gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land" (40). Words open horizons of self-consciousness and skepticism towards black folk culture which the boy embraces in order to assert his identity and masculinity. This is why his learning about words' potential threatens the very structure of the black family which rests on compliant religiosity, represented by females, especially mothers "whose exhortations to believe act as a hindrance to his [Wright's] young protagonists' full understanding of manhood, human dignity, and race pride. As a result, Wright's literary meditations on the black church act as signposts to his own struggle for transcendence, even as they underscore the material angst and fragmentation of his characters" (Whitted 122). Granny's repeated attempts at proselytizing and her violent and authoritarian way of enforcing her religious code on Richard stand for the general black culture's religiosity which blinds black people to terrestrial challenges and

channels their energies toward the otherworldly, legitimizing their acceptance of and adjustment to the status quo instead of resisting it. It is in this sense that as a gendered archetype of black submission, Granny comes to epitomize black culture's debilitating effects on black masculinity: "She is Wright's emasculating prototype of surrender in both secular and religious forms. Furthermore, her old age, as a former slave, anchors her image in spaces and times past" (Whitted 127). According to Richard's view of black life, words like "surrender," "slave" and "past" are expressive of black people's imprisonment in a pre-modern era and, therefore, act as foils to his ascent to modernity and critical thinking through literacy. They belong to a diverse linguistic register that denigrates the black community, accusing it of ignorance, superstition and selfishness and blaming it for arresting its children's development to maturity and subjectivity. Hakutani argues that Richard's rejection of the church rests on his belief in the depravity of black culture: "Depicting a religious institution in such terms suggests not only his sincere disbelief in original sin, but also a sense of bleakness, shallowness, and pettiness he found in his community" (*Richard* 119).

But religion is not the only aspect of black culture that plagues the boy's life and stands in the way of his achieving freedom and individuality through literacy. It is coupled with and reinforced by what Richard views as a black tribal mentality which consists of black people's adherence to an immutable and static tradition which represents the reservoir of denigrating behavior and survival-minded values they developed under the coercive system of white racism. This tribal tradition values conformity and uniformity among members of the group to the detriment of individuality, independence and access to manhood. Richard notices this group thinking which is prevalent in the black community on one of his rounds to the plantations in the South, working as an assistant to an illiterate black insurance salesman: "I saw a bare,

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bleak pool of black life and I hated it; the people were alike, their homes were alike, and their farms were alike" (*Later Works* 131). It comes, therefore, as no surprise that he associates the object of his hatred, blacks' seamlessly barren life, with the ardent religious faith and authority of black female figures whose acquiescence is a hindrance to self-assertion and resistance associated with masculinity. Richard underlines this link between black tribal mentality and religious women as oppressors of black men: "We young men had been trapped by the community, the tribe in which we lived and of which we were a part. The tribe, for its own safety, was asking us to be at one with it" (*Later Works* 147). The denial of difference and insistence on sameness are two important aspects of the tribal mode of identification and they reflect and mirror the white order's metaphysical concept of identity as anchored in shared values, predicated and hinged upon rejection of the Other. The same dynamic of the familiar versus the alien and the self against the other underpinning whiteness is restated by Richard as the pitfalls besetting the church's demand for allegiance and tribal loyalty:

> This business of saving souls had no ethics; every human relationship was shamelessly exploited. In essence, the tribe was asking us whether we shared its feelings; if we refused to join the church, it was equivalent to saying no, to placing ourselves in the position of moral monsters. (*Later Works* 147)

Religious tribal thinking, epitomized by the feminine figure, holds another specular relationship to the hegemonic structures of Jim Crow society forming and policing the black community. It is not only that tribal identification mimics whiteness on theoretical grounds but also that it reproduces its hegemonic influence in lived experience. In *Voices*, the narrator contemplates blacks' dissemblance and lack of character in the presence of whites and concludes that the latter's racist order "created new types of behavior and new patterns of psychological reaction, welding us together

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into a separate unity with common characteristics of our own" (41). Since he blames the black community's social death on this tribal form of identity and its connections to the dominant white hegemony, Richard opts for the position of the outsider and the renegade who defends marginality both as a raison d'être and worldview, a state of being and a condition for knowledge and awareness. This is why all his learning situations inside the family are portrayed in terms of a disastrous clash of wills between the family tribe and the boy's refusal to have his individuality sidelined in favor of crippling closed structures of belonging. These learning situations always end in Richard highlighting his loneliness, isolation and up-rootedness.

Tribalism also defines his learning situations in the outside world, both in public spaces and at school. The first time Richard's learning is judged by the black community's public eye is when he comes back from his first day at school "eager to display all I had learned … since morning." He is keen to qualify what he has learned as "daring knowledge" (*Later Works* 26), which he says he does not get from books; and it is about "four-letter words" describing sexual intercourse that he learns from older students at school. The public display of learning takes place when he goes from one widow to the next in the neighborhood writing these words in large soap letters. A woman catches him and tells his mother about his public circulation of his newly-gained knowledge, earning him severe punishment from his mother who forces him to go out in the night and erase the writing using a pail of water. The collective reaction of the black community is significant because it illustrates the group and tribe mentality that censures the boy's first public words. He describes how they hold the same view and attitude with regards to his writing: "Neighbors gathered, giggling, muttering words of pity and astonishment, asking my mother how on earth I could have learned so much so quickly" (26). What this incident tells about the boy's literary ambitions is that the black

community is not only a force of subjugation with which he has to contend to gain freedom but also that it promotes a parochial and self-centered worldview he has to debunk and transcend by adopting the outsider perspective of skepticism and critical thinking. The censorship imposed by the neighborhood on his first learned words at school as well as on his first public display of them testifies to the personal and intellectual strife with the black community he has to endure in his ascent to literacy and agency. He explains the challenges that his environment presents to him:

> In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (*Later Works* 162)

The first sign that the desired state of intellect and being is possible occurs with his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre." The importance of this story does not lie in its artistic value but in that it represents his first step along the hard and long road toward achieving independence in mind and being from the confining tribal culture of his black community. Unlike his obscene words, the story is accepted once he introduces it to the outside environment. He shows it to the editor of the local newspaper, *The Southern Register*, who agrees to publish it immediately. Yet Richard's triumph and joy over the recognition of his talent is short-lived for the black community's reception of his imaginative work comes about as a mix of violent verbal backlash, fear, misunderstanding and disparagement. He receives no encouragement either from domestic or public spaces. His grandmother dismisses it as "the Devil's work," while

Uncle Tom criticizes it as having "no point." His mother expresses fear that people will think he is "weak-minded" and that he will have no chance to land a job because of his writing. Aunt Addie, from her side, deems it sinful because of the use of the word "hell" and blames the whole thing on his being astray and without moral guidance. The story's reception by the outside world of the black community is not any warmer than that of his family: his teachers reject the story while his schoolmates wonder why he has to write stories at all, with the consequence that "a distance, a suspiciousness came between us" (159). The collective tribal opposition to literacy and works of art fails however to take away from the mesmerizing effect of the literary on Richard. Although he states that he is cast aside as if he "had committed a crime," the reaction of the black community enlightens him about what action to take in order to achieve his freedom and deepens his insight about the oppressive dynamics of southern society. At the end of this episode he decides to head North to create a space of freedom and also comes to the conclusion that:

> I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo. (161)

In addition to Richard's awareness of his own formation by the institutions of white hegemony, this passage is important because of the links it draws between this realization and the black community's deprivation of knowledge and education. His coming to consciousness about white institutions' complicitous role in denying blacks

access to literacy explains how his community's tribal opposition to his own learning is indicative of their subjection by white law and system. The limitations placed by white institutions on blacks' literacy contextualize and prepare for the third and last incident in Richard's resistance to attempts by his black environment to deny him independence of will and choice. This incident takes place at school and revolves around the graduation scene where he has to assert himself against all members of the black community and weigh his individual choice against their tribal choice. Yet before he delivers his valedictorian speech to the baffled and disappointed audience he has a meeting with the principal of the Jim Hill School. During their conversation, it becomes clear that what is at stake is nothing less than a struggle over speech as voice and power that the principal wants to suppress and the boy is keen to preserve. The valedictorian who is selected to write and deliver a speech in front of the public has to choose between reading a speech prepared by the principal, winning the approval of school management and community or reading a speech of his own and not graduating. Faced with this "matter of principle," Richard chooses to deliver his speech in spite of the principal's threats that he will not graduate or have a job at school after. When the news of the clash spreads around the school, his classmates rush to reprimand him for his stance: "Richard, you're a fool. You're throwing away every chance you've got. If they had known the kind of fool boy you are, they would never have made you valedictorian" (170). Yet it is exactly this survival-minded attitude his classmates adopt at the expense of their personal choice that prompts him to go ahead with his speech, regardless of the fact that it will cause him to be rejected by all sides. Richard delivers his graduation speech and makes the following statement which reflects his disregard and negation of black tribal mentality as a hindrance to his individuality and freedom:

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Immediately, even before I left the platform, I tried to shunt all memory of the event from me. A few of my classmates managed to shake my hand as I pushed toward the door, seeking the street. Somebody invited me to a party and I did not accept. I did not want to see any of them again. I walked home, saying to myself: The hell with it! (*Later Works* 171)

The defiant tone that concludes his graduation ordeal marks an emerging consciousness located at the margin of a closed system of tribal being and thinking, a consciousness that thrives on negating black culture as another form of bondage and slavery. It is interesting that Richard's achievement of "see[ing]" and "saying" materializes at the very moment he decides to "walk" away from "home," and from family and community. The "shunt[ing]" and refusal of offers to socialize are, in this regard, expressions of alienation and isolation from community and kin but also of a conscious subject-positioning as an outsider whose singularity cannot be reduced by the parochial interpellations of nationalistic or tribal modes of identification. Thus located on the border of black racial experience and chased away by white hegemony, Richard, like most of black male characters in Wright's fiction, ends up embracing his own position of marginality as the place where he feels most at home and where he can negotiate his subjectivity and redefine his relation to both white and black cultural and social totalities. What this position of fragmentation and marginality has to offer to the black man will be the subject of the next chapter which will examine strategies of intervention and modes of resistance that Wright galvanizes from his location on the borderline to achieve agency and mobility across the racial divide.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARGINALITY AND AGENCY

Mimicry and Black Face

Wright's refusal to go down the path of nationalism and endow his black male subjects with racial consciousness to counter white hegemony underpins his critical skepticism of the availability of an easy and ready-to-hand exit from the closed structure of dominant white culture. Wary of whiteness' humanistic self-centred mode of identification which can conceive of identity only in terms of racial fixity and cultural purity, his vehement denigration of black culture is guided by a critical will not to repeat the totalizing structures of whiteness by opting for a similar black nationalist identity that rests on the glorification of the same and the familiar while rejecting the Other and the different. This chapter will try to identify how he turns away from seeking strategic modes of resistance that would grant his black male subjects access to agency through an outside alternative that in attempting to overcome the existent hegemony ends up repeating and reproducing it. It argues that he negotiates sites of resistance and explores opening ups for agency from within the white humanistic totality itself, countering its crippling effects on black subjects through hybridity and mimicry.

Wright's favoring of the two tropes of hybridity and mimicry is part of his critique of Enlightenment-based approaches to identity which view the closed structure of mimetic identification as totalities and try to unsettle them from an outside critical position. The problem with these approaches is that, in seeking to come up with an outside alternative to their object of critique, end up repeating its structures and totalities which they set out to dismantle. Hybridity and mimicry, on the contrary, show that racial

structures never succeed in totally controlling racial relationships and that they can be destabilized from within. They reveal what Robert Young says about Derrida's impossible totalities which "never succeed in producing a perfect structure of inclusions and exclusions, with the result that the unassimilable elements determine (and disallow) any totality which seeks to constitute itself as a totality by excluding them" (137). Hybridity and mimicry, in this light, tear open the essentialist and mimetic pretence on the basis of which dominant white hegemony preserves itself as a totality of shared values and identity predicated on the disavowal of its excluded and marginalized different others. They do so by performing another act of deconstruction which inscribes the black other in terms of its subject-position instead of reviving it as a form of pristine subaltern consciousness unaffected by the dominant white system.

Both hybridity and mimicry open the way for redrawing the theoretical premises of racial identification and the power relations underpinning them by questioning the hegemonic white totality while warding off any humanistic invocation or return of a substitute blackness based on racial exceptionalism. The emphasis on hybridity anchors black agency within the white system not as an alternative racial consciousness but as a subject position that calls it into question and keeps its positivist assumptions in suspense. This is similar to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subalternity which refuses the transformation of the marginal and subaltern into essentialism and stresses its position as a moment of crisis in the dominant historiography:

> The arena of the subaltern's persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian. The historian must persist in his efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativised into logic. (207)

The tropes of hybridity and mimicry affect the theoretical and political intervention necessary for the subaltern to speak, again in the words of Spivak, not from some site outside the hegemony or beyond it but by positioning the marginal subject in the space of in-between, on the racial limit and bar organizing and dividing blackness and whiteness along the lines of originary, stable and authentic identity. In the racial world of Wright's fiction, it is the color-line that manages, maintains and essentializes blackness and whiteness and preserves the privileges and hierarchies which enable white supremacy to thrive on the denigration of black difference. Hybridity does not substitute one identity for another or trade one essentialism for another but works to disrupt the geographical, epistemological and political deployment of racial identities on both sides of the racial divide. By positioning subjectivity on the boundary and limit, hybridity as a form of heterogeneous mixing, according to Samira Kawash, is what:

> appears as the limit, the rupture, the constitutive outside of identity. In this limit relation to identity, hybridity is not narrativizable, not subject to representation or positivist description. Heterogeneity or hybridity is the difference that interrupts the relation of same and different, a *different* different that does not relate to the order of the same. Hybridity does not conform to any law or follow any rule. Hybridity is rather what penetrates the certainties of narrative and the mimetic premise of representation, what sets knowledge scrambling to shore up its fragile assurances of certainty. (22)

Wright deploys the blackface or the minstrel mask as an African American hybrid cultural form that seeks to use the master's tools against him. First used by white entertainers, the blackface mask was intended to serve and propagate anti-black stereotypes by focusing on and exaggerating the physical features of black people. Viewing it from a mercantile perspective, Eric Lott stresses white performers'

commodification of the already negative image of the black subject through the minstrel show: "the minstrel show indeed seems a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that, in inventing and ridiculing the slow-witted but irrepressible 'plantation darky' and the foppish 'northern dandy negro,' conveniently rationalized racial oppression" (15). This racist brand of blackface was first developed in the 1840s and 1850s to counter black people's growing demands for equality, economic and political empowerment (Tuhkanen 34). White performers cultivated blackface as a central element in their theatrical performances and comic shows to entertain white audiences with stereotypical representations of black people. Yet as it is always the case with discursive practices where misrepresentation of difference is staged and congealed, blackface, according to Nathan Irvin Huggins, is also about an identity crisis that grips whiteness itself, since it speaks to whites' fears about the loss of their civilization just as it ostensibly preaches black savagery and lack of refinement. Huggins argues that white performers brought into the open the deep-seated fears of anarchy, irrationality and lack of discipline that threaten whites' civilization; and in so doing mocked and contained them. These fears meant, he contends, that "The blackface minstrel provided a surrogate whose character combined the grotesque manners that would be offensive to civilized taste" (255).

The racially denigrating effect of blackface on black subjectivity is also echoed by Mikko Tuhkanen who contends that a good number of scholarly works on blackface show the extent to which it "functions as a reflecting surface in which the image of the white audiences is projected according to social, political, and psychological exigencies– and at a considerable expense to African Americans" (36). When black performers took to the stage of racial representations they creolized and hybridized the mask, manipulating the reservoir of negative images that constituted white stereotypical knowledge about them and legitimized white supremacy and power. Wearing the mask,

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black minstrels were able through the strategies of acting, dissembling, duplication and parody to bring the dominant historiography to a moment of crisis and suspend its truth claims. Through play and performance, black entertainers acted from behind the veil of stereotypical representation to challenge its assumptions from within and to return the white gaze that racialized them. The hybrid nature of blackface strategic intervention in the dominant hegemony resides in the mixed character of the challenge it mounts to the crippling racial effects of the stereotype. For black performers do not lay claim to some pure and imaginary alternative to be mobilized against white stereotypical representation but stage a performance predicated on the stereotype itself. They wear the blackface mask and in so doing their strategies of intervention are always already corrupted and inhabited by the mask of the racial stereotype. Tuhkanen stresses the liberating act of this process of creolization and hybridization that black minstrelsy brings to the white stereotype:

> Minstrel theorists suggest that black performers took the tradition to a new direction, creolized it for ends that were not foreseeable from the vantage point of blackface history. We can thus suggest that, although blackface has always been considered as a dehumanizing, distorting mask imposed on African and colonized subjects, this mask, when actively deployed, can also denote the racially marked subject's becoming inaccessible to the culture otherwise bent on determining him or her. (37)

Tuhkanen's emphasis on creolization, cross-breeding and mixing as key hybrid features of blackface performance unveils the liberating potential of black minstrelsy in two ways. First, the black minstrel's duplicitous performance that mimics and subverts the negative and racist import of the mask destabilizes the myths of origin and cultural purity necessary for the sustainability of an identity articulated in terms of the fixity and certainty of the racial category. Second, the duality and doubleness that result from

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blackface as a trope of imitation and mixing produce black subjects who are split between both white and black worlds, subjects who reside on the dividing line as a site of contestation.

These black performers who have lost claim to originary and authentic forms of identity and have to see themselves through the white mask they wear are hybrid subjects in the manner of W. E. B. Du Bois' double-consciousness. Du Bois' concept challenges the fixity and essentialism of the color-line by introducing the idea of the veil which holds that black subjects live two selves and a double-consciousness where they have to dissemble and act to meet the demands of the white stereotype and accommodate the white gaze while preserving their own consciousness as blacks. As a performer, the black subject has to see himself through the eyes of the white master in order to survive and hide his black self behind his veil and mask of acquiescence. Du Bois explains his theory of double-consciousness as a hybrid splitting of subjectivity:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,–an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (17)

This statement pictures a black subjectivity that is both ripped apart and held together by double-consciousness and the demands to wear the veil of survival to respond to the outside world while preserving one's interiority. As an enabling double-vision and

a challenging double-division, Du Boisian tropes of double-consciousness and the veil map a black hybrid form of identity that is endowed, according to Lewis R. Gordon, "with a consciousness of pure exteriority in the face of lived experience of inferiority" (*Existentia* 31). As an awareness of identity as a bifurcated subject position where blacks have to operate as both African and Americans, Du Bois presents the black subject as a mimic man who leads a life of make-believe and performance, putting on the veil of the stereotype that denigrates him while mocking it and manipulating it to his own ends. Bernard W. Bell makes this point about the "two-ness" of black subjectivity, stressing its empowering hybrid and ambivalent character: "As double vision, it is an ambivalent, laughing-to-keep-from-crying perspective toward life as expressed in the use of irony and parody in African American folklore and formal art" ('Voices' 137).

In *Native Son*, blackface minstrelsy is deployed by the main character, Bigger Thomas, to intervene politically and at the level of representation in the dominant white discourse that defines him as an inferior human being and dispossesses him of his political and civil rights. It comes in the wake of a series of incidents and scenes that underscore his entrapment and confinement in the white order. These scenes involve the humiliating life of his family in a one-room kitchenette, the hanging of the poster of the attorney Buckley, whose menacing gaze reminds Bigger of his limited choices under white law and the high-flying and speedy plane which unleashes his fury about his lack of mobility and freedom under the geographical and social map of a segregated city that forces him to live at its margins. These three scenes represent the three pillars of white power from which Bigger is excluded: his family life stands for his exclusion from white affluence and economic opportunity, Buckley's gaze crystalizes white law and the speedy plane speaks for white freedom and power.

After these early scenes which dramatize his subjection, Bigger and his friend Gus engage in a play that mocks whites' ways and manners, subverting through blackface performance the stereotypical images cultivated by white society to shut them off from citizenship and agency. Even though the two black comrades play white instead of black roles, their blackface performance lies in their refined acting skills which enable them to hide from the white gaze and authority thanks to their knowledge of white ways and manners. Based on the trickster's tactics of deception, cheating and dissemblance, the two black boys' blackface minstrelsy aims to showcase their deep understanding of white people's mindset as well as their command of pretension and acting skills to manipulate it to their advantage. In this scene, Bigger surprises his friend by suggesting: "let's play 'white.'" After a moment of hesitation, Gus joins Bigger in a role playing activity in which they recreate the symbols of white power, ironically laughing at the army, finance and politics. As they trade roles, the two black comrades imitate a powerful army general called J. P. Morgans, talk about the market and pretend to be the president and secretary of state. Putting on the veil of the black minstrel by assuming the roles of white symbols of power, the two boys' perform acts of mimicry that aim to parody this triangle of power which sustains the structures governing American society. Kenneth Kinnamon captures this point when he stresses the significance of the boys' acting and performance to the white systems of which they are victims: "The youths are themselves nonpolitical, but the white activities Wright has them imitate are precisely those which he and other communists viewed as typical of the American capitalist system: warfare, high finance, and political racism" ('Native' 121).

"Playing white," Bigger and Gus are shown to give military orders, discuss financial investments and take care of matters of rule and government. Wearing the white veil, the two black boys imitate white manners and mimic their attitudes, creating

mobility and action which are denied to them by the conditions of poverty and subjection in the black side of the town. Their performance enacted in terms of their resemblance to and difference from white people does not only grant them political access to spheres of privilege and power exclusive to whites but also positions them as hybrid and in-between subjects who inhabit the borderline, which is marked by racial mixing and contamination, and against which whiteness and blackness define themselves as essentialist and pure modes of identification. This similarity and difference, the "not quite / not white" mimic subject-position engendered by the mobilization of the white veil, unleashes an ambivalence that cannot be assimilated or incorporated by the mimetic positivity of whiteness and blackness. This ambivalence, which originates in the mark of the Other in white supremacist representation, pictures Bigger and his friend Gus as a slippage, an excess and a difference located on the racial dividing line, threatening the purity and fixity of blackness, but especially whiteness, which determines and defines racial relations across the racial border.

By performing white roles, Bigger and Gus emerge as black subjects with white masks and threaten the stability of racial identities which divide the city in terms of white and black. Homi K. Bhabha credits this mimicry with the ability to unsettle the dominant discourse, being both an articulation of sameness and identity but also of difference and fear: "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (86). In this light, Bigger's and Gus' mimicking gestures and their taking on the roles of whites threaten and disrupt the dominant white discourse and its supporting white supremacy because they challenge its stereotypical construction of the other. As mimic men, the two black minstrels' imitation of white roles appeals to whites' desire for identity and sameness by projecting an image of blackness that is familiar, being defined in terms of the common stereotypical representation of the black Other. Yet as different, "not quite / not white" hybrids, they

present a distortion of the white self-image, a grotesque representation of white identity, ways and manners which they impose on blacks. Only partially similar, the two boys' minstrel imitation and mimicry mount a challenge to white representation and the power that results from it.

The return of the other to the discourse as an unassimilated difference disappoints, disrupts and suspends whites' will to represent and produce black subjects along the lines of identity and sameness. Bhabha asserts that colonial discourse inevitably produces mimic and hybrid subjects who, although partially similar, are still different and menacing to white representation, knowledge and power. The site of hybridity and difference with its characteristic ambivalence is the site where resistance becomes possible and the other as an excess and a menace emerges to unseat white knowledge and power. Bhabha makes clear this relation between the ambivalence of hybridity, the fact that the Other is never completely defined in terms of sameness but remains a different and menacing excess to white representation, and the eruption of the Other into discourse as a presence and an agent of resistance. He says that hybridity is "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority–its rules of recognition" (114).

Indeed, the suppressed knowledge and power of Bigger and his friend emerge right at the site of hybridity where they disrupt the confinement of racial representation that essentialises them as black boys and thus denigrates them as incapable of rational thinking, let alone a command of the intricacies of power, finance and government. The two minstrel performers, situated on the borderline between whiteness and blackness, make proof of their smartness and knowledge of the inner workings of the white world and its ways only when they step into the realm of hybridity and mimicry, putting on

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white masks and acting like whites while preserving their black selfhood. Mobilizing his veil, which the narrator also refers to on many occasions as "curtain" and "wall," Bigger's play-acting also mocks and parodies whiteness as a social and cultural construction which is far from being fixed or having an essence. Bhabha stresses that mimicry is a repetition without an essence, and Bigger, in repeating and replicating white manners and codes, intimates that subjectivity is about culturally assigned roles that he can access once he changes his position from black to white. Playing white in this regard means that there are no authentic or originary subjects but performers whose identity is determined by the performative positions and roles assigned to them by culture. By eclipsing racial identity as defined by the positivist logic and segregating politics of the color-line, Bigger's blackface's creolizing and mixing effects permit him to ditch the role of the black boy assigned to him by white society and usher him towards a position of power and authority as he strips the representations of whiteness of their supremacist essentialist import.

In addition to challenging the essentialist distribution of identity on the racially divided map of the city through hybrid mixing and doubling of identity and mimic ambivalence where the Other returns as an unassimilated and unaccounted-for threat, Bigger's deployment of blackface minstrelsy finds also roots in what John M. Reilly describes as the master trope of African American folk culture, namely what he calls Signifyin(g). A mode of figuration that qualifies strategies of concealment and dissemblance used by blacks to cheat and dupe their white masters, Signifyin(g) is, as he puts it:

> An example of creative politics that draws upon a store of knowledge about the ways of white folks to achieve ends that custom and prevalent racial assumptions deem improper. Those ends may be material, but inevitably they also have a great

deal to do with the integrity of the signifying speaker, who by the subversive tactic of manipulating the stereotype achieves a clandestine subjectivity, the right to be a free human agent. (42-3)

When the two black comrades "play white," they signify by using their knowledge of the white order to manipulate it and to dissemble and conceal their true intentions. This strategy of Signifyin(g) which is at the heart of Bigger's deployment of blackface to intervene in the rigid power configurations of the color-line and move into hybridity and agency is evident in the two boys' acting in line with what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the Signifying Monkey, or trickster. According to Gates, trickery is a social behavior which subjugated blacks developed to move safely in and out of the white world. It consists in black people tapping into their familiarity with white ways, especially whites' supremacist attitudes which expect them to be obedient and lacking in intellect, to act in conformity with whites' expectations while serving their own ends. This form of trickery is based on manipulating whites' stereotypes and expectations to find mobility and achieve agency through secret acts of cheating, duping and dissemblance.

If trickery is a strategy of subversion enacted on the level of power relations involved in social encounters between whites and blacks, the Signifying Monkey is a similar strategy that targets the subversion of white discursive representations, i.e. signification. Based on Signifyin(g), which Gates describes as the discourse of the other which enables blacks to empty the dominant discourse of its stereotypical meaning and refill it with "their own concepts" (46), the Signifying Monkey denotes the black marginal figure who deploys different stylistic, formal and expressive strategies to dislodge the racist and negative image of black people in dominant white discourse and imbue it with a new meaning of his own. Gates spells out some of the various stylistic

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techniques used by the Signifying Monkey to empty, disrupt and create fissures in white discourse's mode of signifying to achieve mobility and freedom:

> The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act. (52)

Bigger's and Gus' deployment of blackface when they "play white" draws upon all the stylistic modes of resistance used by the Signifying Monkey. Their acting follows a process of doubling in which the white roles represented are brought in sharp contrast to the black voices representing them in the same way that the white positions of privilege and power are emphasized and ridiculed against the other-status of both young black performers whose poverty and dispossession are present in the background throughout the scene. The two actors' blackface performance is centered around the trope of "indirection," or "repetition," where the reader-spectator who knows the true identity of the performers behind the veil can laugh with them at exaggerated roles being acted. "Indirection" which lies in this grotesque and humorous disparity between the identity behind the veil and the identity represented, between the duality of white power and black marginality, is what unleashes the other deconstructive and subversive tactic of signifyin(g), i.e. "inversion" or "reversal." When Bigger and Gus deploy "indirection" to perform white and to signify on whites' attitudes, their aim is to effect an "inversion" of the dominant discourse, emptying it of its claims to racial fixity and its attendant disavowal of racial difference. This act of deconstruction or "inversion" is conducted also through ridicule and humor as the narrator describes the two black boys being gripped by a frenzy of laughter every time they proceed to acting one of whites' symbols

of power. Unseating white discourse through "inversion" is not only brought about by stressing the two actors' ability to ditch their black identity and inhabit the liminal space of hybridity and, thus, achieve mobility in the white world thanks to the veil, but also by their success in demonstrating the cultural nature of identity, which instead of being an essence is revealed to be about subject-roles defined by the cultural system.

Signifyin(g) in the two boys' blackface performance which is enacted through simulated phone calls does not only come about through the tropes and figures of "inversion," "repetition," "indirection" and "reversal" alone but also through other formal revisions that mimic and displace white ways and gestures. These formal revisions are carried out by making recourse to the figures of parody and pastiche, with the deployment of humor in both instances as a vehicle of criticism and satire. In their phone exchange, both black tricksters parody white manners by presenting an exaggerated yet faithful imitation which conforms to their characteristics without introducing any elements from outside to revise and subvert their impact on them in particular and the black community on the whole. In this form of parody, criticism of white power is done from within through repeating it and then subverting it. The two boys, however, create through periodic outbreaks of laughter and amusement at white manners and their craft in imitating them, an outside atmosphere which develops like a parallel text to their white script. This atmosphere is rendered as a pastiche which caricatures white attitudes not from within but from without. It is thanks to the hilarious ambiance created by the innocent yet cutting humor of Bigger and Gus that the reader figures out the process of distorting and unsettling the white establishment undertaken in the performance.

At the heart of the blackface minstrelsy and Signifyin(g) that Bigger and Gus engage in is the will and the desire to eclipse the dominant definitional framework that

white society deploys to mark them as inferior and therefore not human enough to own their lives and participate in private and public life as full-fledged subjects. Related to this drive is also the quest to liberate black subjects from the dominant hegemony and narrative and endow them with a new perspective on their reality that opens a space for freedom and subjectivity not on the grounds of Enlightenment's self-centred and difference-disavowing worldview but rather on the basis of indeterminacy, contingency and hybridity. Championing the black subject's change of perspective on the basis of anti-humanist tenets denies them the possibility of claiming a mimetic alternative that supplants the white order only to reproduce and repeat its parameters, given that every alternative imposes its own values and definition of human experience based on identity and sameness. The new perspective that black male subjects achieve through performance and acting is one negotiated from inside the reigning system, revealing the spots where this system harbors blindness to otherness and difference. The agency that comes along with the newly acquired perspective derives from and rests on granting black subjects the power to see their true place and values by exposing the blind and stereotypical white perspective which confines them to a denigrating and debilitating place of second-class citizenship because of their race and color. In *Native,* Bigger starts to own his life and access agency when he succeeds in temporarily shifting his perspective from trying to cope with the effects on him of the white definitional framework to exploiting its blindness to achieve his freedom and identity. His new perspective emerges when he realizes that he can use white stereotypical conceptions that confine him to his body and immobilize him in visibility to deceive and manipulate the white order, employing the master's tools against him.

As a racialized subject, Bigger's subjectivity is negated by the dominant white perspective which fixes him in visibility by seeing him in the exclusive terms of his body.

After accidentally murdering Mary, he learns to vacate his place of subjection in the white order and liberate himself from the prison of his corporeal visibility by fooling whites, acting like they want and expect him to while using and manipulating their blindness to his advantage. Because the white perspective does not allow whites to see Bigger as worthy of any human value or credit him with any depth beyond his color and body, they fail to identify him as the killer, as someone who has the courage and the mental skills to kill the daughter of the wealthiest and most influential man in the city, making it easy for him to exploit their blindness and fool them to do as he wants. The murder of Mary represents this dramatic shift in Bigger's relation to white hegemony and his place in it. Its empowering effects are clear in his ability to lure and attract the white gaze which has so far congealed him in his place of physical visibility in order to use its stereotypical blindness to hide and conceal his acts and his true identity as a subject who can trick and take advantage of the white system to achieve his mobility and self-respect. Playing and acting like a fool, like a body without human depth, as the white gaze pictures him, Bigger learns that by hiding himself and his murder he can gain a new perspective and a new power over white society's will to keep him prisoner to corporeal visibility and non-identity. Putting on the mask of the white stereotypical perspective and, thus, acting like a foolish black boy, Bigger succeeds in absenting himself from his place under the white gaze, employing his body as the veil, the wall or the curtain which shields him from the white order and opens for him spaces of action and subjectivity that are impossible otherwise.

Before the murder, Bigger uses his body as a defensive curtain to survive in the hostile white world of segregation and to cope with the shame and devastating despair that ensues from it. Elizabeth Schultz describes the pervasive use of the metaphor of the wall in relation to Bigger's plight and how he protectively uses it to keep away from

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violating white law, survive its effects and maintain his place under it: "The wall–or the curtain–in *Native Son* . . . is white society shoved near Bigger, beyond which he is forbidden to go; a metaphor permeating *Native Son*, it is also the impenetrable defensive mechanism which white society causes Bigger to create in order to protect himself from all feelings–except hatred and rage" (644). The veil in this light is Bigger's means to hide himself from the pressures of racism and from the burden of a family that crushes his manhood by its acquiescence to the reigning hegemony. The narrator underscores the significance of the wall-curtain mechanism for Bigger's ability to keep his shame at failing to provide for his poor family buried in his unconscious. For if he allows his sense of shame and powerlessness to enter his consciousness he will fail to keep his place, commit violence and transgress the law: "So he held toward them [members of his family] an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain . . . He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (13-4).

When used as a defensive mechanism, the veil becomes only a hiding strategy that helps Bigger forget about his place as a racialized subject in order for him to survive the unbearable effects of oppression and racism. In the presence of white people, Bigger also conceals himself and his fears behind his body which he adroitly and protectively deploys to meet the white stereotypical image of him by acting like they expect him to. During his job interview with Mr. Dalton in his mansion, Bigger acts clumsily, using his body to mask any display of will that his demeanor might betray and cause him to lose the job offer. He knows that whites' perspective expects him to behave and hold his body in a posture that shows his allegedly inherent weakness and willingness to serve his superior white masters. He, therefore, engages in acting this expected black compliant

character and meek-looking posture in order to get the job and win the favor of his prospective employer:

> He had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence. . . He laid the cap down, noticing that Mr. Dalton was watching him closely. Maybe he was not acting right? (50)

This key scene which marks Bigger's first confused steps in the Daltons' household puts into prominence the strategy of acting and blackface, enabling the black subject to mobilize his "twoness" and to deploy his divided and split self to survive the unpredictability of an all-too-powerful and controlling white society. The acting as a defensive measure of blackface performance entails that Bigger has to conceal his true self and feelings and use his body as a mask that displays and inscribes whites' stereotypical inscriptions and fantasies. In order for the play and acting to ensure Bigger's safety he has to engage in a process of doubleness and duplication where his body acts whites' perspective and view of him as mere transparent, accessible and visible corporeality while his genuine identity is kept hidden behind this mask or curtain. The more he masters this performance and its attendant doubleness the more his concealment and hiding are complete and therefore the more he is likely to be safe.

Bigger's blackface performance shifts, following the accidental murder of Mary, from acting to hide and protect himself from the white gaze and the self-negating effects of poverty and segregation laws to an empowering mechanism which he deploys to achieve mobility, subjectivity and to control the white world. This transition occurs when he discovers that the white stereotypical perspective in its focus on his body and

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corporeal visibility becomes too blind to think that he is behind the murder. This change of perspective encourages him to use his body as a mask not to avoid and muffle the effect of the white gaze which holds him in his place of visibility but rather to lure it by acting the role it wants to see and presenting it with the image it desires. Because he comes to the realization that the white gaze is blind to his true self and the murder he has committed he decides to play with it, fool and manipulate it to get away with his murder. In so doing, he fades away from the field of the white gaze, concealing himself and his actions and achieving a secrecy thanks to which he can get in and out of the white world and manipulate its blindness to his advantage. Lale Demiturk highlights the importance of this change of perspective to Bigger's relation to the white order, arguing that by murdering Mary he shatters the white negative perception and image of him:

> Although it is an accident, Mary's murder has given Bigger a chance to reverse the power relationship between Mary and himself: for the first time he has been able to destroy the dominant image of the whites. No longer will Mary be able to manipulate his powerless image. By burning her corpse in the furnace to hide his crime, he can triumph over the white myth of black as totally powerless to act without white manipulation. Bigger finds power n white blindness to the individuality of a black person, in the whites' stereotypical images of blacks. That Bigger has done something that the whites do not know about provides him with a sense of superiority over them. ('Mastering' 268)

Demiturk contends that the murder of whites' symbol of beauty and purity, Mary, is a wilful act on the part of Bigger to ditch the white definitional perspective and claim his identity and freedom. Yet what is significant in this dramatic moment in Bigger's access to agency is that it is not done through direct and violent confrontation but through exploiting the aporias of the white order, precisely whites' blindness to his individuality

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and character. By choosing to hide behind his body as a mask, Bigger realizes that he can fool whites, see better than them and orient their actions and thoughts away from identifying him as the murderer. The narrator draws parallels between Bigger's murder and his success in achieving a world of his own, a discrete and hidden life that whites cannot lay claim to: "The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself" (101). The pride and sense of empowerment that Bigger feels following the murder are feelings that are unleashed by his destroying whites' blind perspective which is sustained by stereotypical representations and false perceptions but also by the double life that he leads after that, a life of performance in which he grows to see better than whites and learns to vacate his racialised place of visibility, vanishing from the white gaze behind his corporeal veil.

This strategy of doubling, central to blackface performance, is deployed by Bigger right at the crucial moment of his accidentally stifling Mary to death. As he stands in darkness by Mary's bedside, he is suddenly terrified by Mrs. Dalton, her mother, approaching the door. Fully aware that if the old blind woman discovers him in her drunken daughter's bedroom she will accuse him of raping her and get him killed, Bigger uses a pillow to suffocate Mary to death. In so doing he is not averting the literal gaze of Mrs. Dalton, whom he calls a "white blur," but rather her stereotypical perspective which condemns to death any black male subject caught with a white woman in a situation similar to his. Terrified and panicked, Bigger kills Mary in order to escape exposure by her mother's perspective which would see him as a black beast trying to rape and kill her daughter. Escaping his place of animal bestiality and carnal lust under the white perspective, Bigger kills Mary and engages in a process of duplication, performance and

signifyin(g) where he uses the white stereotypical image of his body as a cover to disappear from the white gaze and vacate his racialized place of inferiority under its rigid and disempowering perspective. He begins to mimic Mrs. Dalton's movements as she uses her tactile instead of visual skills to find her way in the dark room and make sure that her daughter is in bed. To hide away from discovery and, thus, obstruct her perspective which would condemn him as a rapist if she finds him in the room, Bigger starts to double her moves and acts like she does, backing away as she advances. The narrator describes this doubling strategy which uses repetition as a signifyin(g) trope to subvert and block the white gaze and perspective from fixing him in his place of sexual bestiality: "With each of her movements toward the bed, his body made a movement to match hers, away from her, his feet not lifting themselves from the floor, but sliding softly and silently over the smooth deep rug" (85). His "sliding softly and silently" also copies and replicates her "moving toward him" (85). For Bigger, doubling and mimicking Mrs. Dalton's movements opens spaces of agency and action because it empowers him to arrest the white perspective and disappear completely from its grip, releasing himself from the prison of visibility in which he is fixed by the white gaze. A form of acting, doubling also means indulging whites with what they yearn to see, namely the stereotypical image they insist blacks must conform to, while creating a life of secrecy and concealment to manipulate their blindness to his character and individuality.

Mobilizing his visibility and accessibility to the white gaze and perspective, Bigger sets himself free from his racialised place of subjection by doubling whites, acting like they want him to while creating a secret life of his own in which he can plan to fool the white order and carve out his own space of agency and action. This blackface doubling involves him in a relation of hybridity and mimicry to the white order in which his "double-consciousness" and "twoness," his two lives of visibility and invisibility,

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grant him a double vision of being both in and out of the white perspective. Like all hybrid and mimic subjects, he is party to the white world through a relationship of specularity in which he holds his stereotypical image and mask for whites to see. Yet his absolute difference remains irreducible and inaccessible to this world, giving him the chance to manipulate it from his invisible subject-position. Commenting on the liberating effect of Mary's murder on Bigger, Schultz underscores this dual nature of his hybrid self: "Following Mary's murder, as he contrives his plans for a ransom note, and as he finds himself confronting white police and journalists, he persists in acting the role of the docile servant; at this point, however, his feelings of impotency are privately transformed into feelings of powerful pride" (655). The narrator highlights the importance of this doubling to Bigger's emergent self and to his hybrid subjectivity as predicated on the split between the mask of his color and face recognized by whites and his own self-recognition which thrives behind the mask in his invisible life of agency and action. A day after the murder, Bigger rides a streetcar to the Daltons' house when he suddenly sees the reflection of his own face in the "sweaty" mirror of the car, realising his new subject-position as straddling the two spheres of visibility and invisibility which dominate his life. He, the narrator says, "looked anxiously at the dim reflection of his black face in the sweaty windowpane. Would any of the white faces all about him think that he had killed a rich white girl? . . . He smiled a little feeling a tingling sensation enveloping his body. He saw it all very sharply and simply" (108). Implied in this experience of identity as splitting is that the murder inspires Bigger to step back and see himself as Other, looking at his image as seen and defined by white looks, while taking pride in his new hidden self which is shielded by his new place outside the white gaze. To Bigger, it is his doubling strategy that makes this new subject-position work to his

advantage: "act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted" (108).

Having liberated himself from the white definitional frame of reference and redefined his position vis-à-vis the white order in light of his new split and hybrid self, Bigger proceeds to mobilize his curtain, exploiting the dominant system's blindness to that which does not adhere to its modes of seeing and knowing. After the murder and as he sits by the breakfast table with his family, Bigger realizes that he has a new insight and fresh perspective on life which is the result of his concealment and his being beyond the ability of others to see him. With a heightened sense of excitement and pride, he finds out that the murder, which he associates with eclipsing and obstructing the white gaze and perspective, has given him a second sight and placed a wall between him and people, a wall from behind which he can see without being seen. His new view and awareness of life is clear when he looks at the appalling living conditions of his family and feels like he sees them for the first time: "He looked round the room seeing it for the first time. There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places . . ." (100). Bigger's new awareness and knowledge of his family life does not stop at their material conditions of living, being cramped in a one-room apartment without privacy, but extends to include their blind vision of life itself. His new discreet life and perspective allow him to see his family in a new light, as people of habit who cannot see anything beyond their familiar optic or recognise any anomalies that do not correspond to their custom-dominated ways of seeing:

> He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded. He felt that they wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way

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of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit. They did not want to see what others were doing if that doing did not feed their own desires. (102)

Bigger's abnormal act of killing Mary sets him outside the perspective of his family which is conditioned by the dominant social optic which holds that a black boy like him cannot dare or plan to kill the daughter of the wealthy Daltons. Having committed this unexpected act, he realizes that he can do whatever he wants because people are blind to that which occurs outside their perspectives, which govern how they see and understand life around them: "All one had to do was to be bold, do something nobody thought of" (102). After the killing of Mary, the symbol of the white stereotypical worldview about black male subjectivity, Bigger creates a wall of secrecy and invisibility between him and society. This wall attests to society's blindness to his deed as much as it testifies to his new double vision which enables him to see without being seen. The narrator states explicitly this function of the wall or the curtain as having to do with his insight versus society's blindness:

> Here he was sitting with them and they did not know that he had murdered a white girl and cut her head off and burnt her body. . . He could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time. . . He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed. And he had done something which even he had not thought possible. (101)

Earlier, he uses similar language to describe how his murder and the new life of concealment set him apart from his friends, creating a wall which makes society blind to his new self and world while it confers upon him the privilege of seeing and knowing:

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"Gus and G.H. and Jack seemed far away to Bigger now, in another life, and all because he had been in Dalton's house for a few hours and had killed a white girl" (100). He also wonders how he has not discovered up until now that his brother shares in the same blind perspective: "Buddy, too, was blind" (103). White people, whose perceptions and image of him have confined him to a place of visibility where his body and its tensions become emblematic of his arrest by the white gaze, emerge in his new perspective and in light of his murder as blind people:

> What he had done last night had proved that Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one. . . Mrs. Dalton had not known that Mary was dead while she had stood over the bed in that room last night . . . And Mrs. Dalton had not known that he was in the room with her; it would have been the last thing she would have thought of. He was black and would not have figured in her thoughts on such an occasion. Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind... (102)

The blindness of the white perspective to Bigger's individuality and its failure to see him in any light other than the stereotypical perception of him as a metaphysical image of a different other is amply clear in how white people react to him. To the police, he is the "Negro rapist and murderer" (230); to detective Britten "a boy" and a "nigger" (154); to the reporters of the murder "a dumb cluck" (200); to the white mob a "black ape" (253); and to the newspapers, a "Negro rapist and Killer" (240). The Daltons paternalize their relation to Bigger, treating him not as a mature independent subject but rather as a boy who needs their help and guidance to understand his place in life. Mr. Dalton proves to be blind when he draws a line beneath Britten's investigative questions, affirming that Bigger is "here to try to get a new slant on things" (154). His blindness derives from his unwillingness to credit Bigger with the ability to develop his own

intellect and form his own views about his life on his own. He looks at Bigger and what he sees is a boy not a man, becoming himself blind to Bigger's true self and what he can do. The same negative perceptions account for Mrs. Dalton's blindness and her limited perspective in her relation to Bigger. Although she is literally blind, her husband underscores her knowledge of black people, revealing that, according to the white perspective, black people are accessible, readable and transparent. He says that "she has a very deep interest in colored people" (49). But the limits of her knowledge and interest in black people become apparent when she pledges to give Bigger a chance to take up reading classes like his predecessor, Green, whose name indicates his compliant and transparent boy-status. Tuhkanen notes that the Daltons' blindness to the difference between Green and Bigger is due to their losing sight of the latter's ability to read the limits of the white perspective and to use it to his ends: "The name of Bigger's predecessor in the Dalton household is, of course, Green. This suggests that Bigger is, perhaps, Red and that the Daltons, in their color blindness . . . cannot see that their servant Green has been substituted for a Re(a)d one" (139). Tuhkanen refers to the dangers that whites associate with black people's literacy, arguing that accusations of reading inculpate Bigger as red and communist. Neither Green nor Red, Bigger's ability to read the white order and manipulate it to hide his secret life proves that he has liberated himself from his place of confinement and that he cannot be defined anymore in either the insurrectionary image of the black subject who joins the Reds or the compliant boy who keeps his place in the white system. His reading also exposes white people's blindness to his new place of agency, failing to see him in terms other than the stereotypical clichés of the threatening rebel or the reassuring boy.

A masterful reader who has repositioned his place in relation to the white system thanks to his change of perspective, Bigger sets out to use his veil of invisibility to trick

and dupe whites further, rendering them more and more blind to his crime. He is well aware of his change of perspective and how his ability to see, as opposed to their blindness, recasts and redefines the relations of power that used to hold him to the white order. As Bigger manipulates his interrogators, the narrator says: "They wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it . . . In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him? He could tell them anything he wanted and what could they do about it?" (149). Acting like an idiot black boy, Bigger mobilizes his mimic and hybrid subjectivity to ward off the white gaze and exploit its blindness in order to play white people as he wishes. The success of his game rests on how adroitly he controls and masters his new position of hybridity and mimicry: for he has to act black like white people want him to while preserving his interiority and the discrete life of dignity he has gained following the murder. How far he is able to go ahead with his blackface game and performance depends on his ability to maintain this borderline position of hybridity and mimicry and to walk the tightrope of his two selves, one based on his mask and role-playing and another hidden from the white perspective.

Inside the Daltons' house, symbol of white power, Bigger's game of hybridity and mimicry empowers him to shift his position from the hyper-visibility which marked him as a racialised subject the first time he comes to the family to a position of invisibility and agency. Contrary to his feeling of confinement, tension and shame as he is exposed to the panoptical effects of the white gaze, after the murder Bigger hides himself completely from the picture created by the white perspective, achieves mobility and starts to exercise control and surveillance over the residents and the visitors of the house. This transformation is highlighted in two incidents in the narrative where Bigger plays a dual game, which consists in acting like an idiot and accessible black boy while hiding his crime from his would-be accusers. This strategy enables him to escape white people's

unsuspecting eyes and manipulate their blindness to his role-playing and acting. In addition to her inability to detect Bigger's presence in the murder scene of Mary's bedroom, Mrs. Dalton, who is shown on many occasions to know her house very well and can find her way in it, begins to lose her knowledge of the house and the ability to see in it. Contrary to Bigger, who gains mobility after the murder, Mrs. Dalton becomes a prisoner in her house as she loses mobility and ease of movement. After the disappearance of Mary, she meets Bigger to ask him about her daughter. After she leaves, Bigger is excited to notice that his acting has confounded Mrs. Dalton's black-and-white perception of the interior of her mansion to the extent that she cannot find her way in it. In spite of her literal blindness, she has been able to move freely around in the house and even to spot Bigger in his place thanks to the prevalence of his perspective which rests on binary oppositions of young and old, rich and poor and master and slave. Yet after Bigger murders Mary and mobilizes his blackface role-playing, Mrs. Dalton's binary and hierarchical world crumbles and her perspective goes blind, sending her into the prison of immobility in which Bigger was incarcerated under the white gaze:

> She turned away and he shut the door; he stood listening to the soft whisper of her shoes die away down the hall, then on the stairs. He pictured her groping her way, her hands touching the walls. She must know this house like a book, he thought. He trembled with excitement. She was white and he was black; she was rich and he was poor; she was old and he was young; she was the boss and he was the worker. He was safe; yes. (122)

This key statement outlines the dynamics of sight and blindness and their relation to the racial power configurations inside the Daltons' mansion. Because the blind old lady's perspective and knowledge are based on the litany of binaries listed in the passage above, she could not tell Bigger's place in the picture of her vision, i.e. his role in the

disappearance of her daughter. Bigger's borderline subject-position, crystalized in his game of visibility and invisiblity, puts him beyond her looks and ensures his safety. This shift in perspective which sees Bigger gaining sight while his employers become blind also triggers another shift in the power relations between both sides. As in other incidents, Bigger's sight allows him not only to return the white gaze but also to exercise surveillance from his unseen position of power over the Daltons and their visitors. He monitors her movements as she leaves the room, listening to her steps and picturing how she struggles to find her way in the house. After he has been victim of white surveillance, Bigger's ability to see reverses his place, putting him in the position of the observer who subjects whites to his gaze, controls their moves and keeps himself safe from detection by manipulating others behind his hiding veil.

A second incident is when Mr. Dalton receives the kidnap letter that Bigger has written and left at the door for Peggy, the maid, to collect. He enters the kitchen with the note in his hand to find Bigger and Peggy there. What is remarkable in this encounter is the change in looking relations between Bigger and his employers and what they have to do with who controls the situation in the house and who does not. Mr. Dalton, whose gaze has been a symbol of his power over Bigger, is now described as unseeing: "Mr. Dalton looked round the entire kitchen, not at anything in particular, but just round the entire kitchen of four walls, his eyes wide and unseeing" (177). Mr. Dalton is blind in two ways: he fails to notice Bigger's presence in the room just as he is blind to his manipulation, believing that the ransom note is genuine and that his daughter is being kidnapped for money. Yet it is Bigger's disappearance from the looks of his boss that grants him the power to play him around and shape events to his advantage. Bigger's absence from the field of vision and visibility is the condition for his agency and mobility within the white world. Contrary to Bigger, who grows to control the situation inside the

house, Mr. Dalton's blindness makes him weak, seeking the help of his servant Peggy: "He looked back at Peggy; it was as if he had thrown himself upon her mercy; was waiting for her to say some word that would take the horror away" (177). This shift in looking and power relations between Bigger and the white people opens spaces of mobility for him inside the house and transforms his position from being victim to white surveillance to becoming the one who supervises and monitors life in the Daltons' mansion. Now that he is the one who sees and holds others under his gaze, Bigger starts to use the space of the house that has incarcerated and immobilized him to spy on its residents and monitor what they say and do.

The house becomes a space of freedom and action after it used to be a site of Bigger's confinement and immobility as a marked and racialized subject. With no one in the house aware of his role in Mary's disappearance and the ransom note that he writes asking for money for her release, Bigger turns the house into a large prison over which he exercises panoptical surveillance to keep its residents blind to his presence and to his role in the murder. Keen to know what Mr. Dalton would do after he receives the kidnap letter, Bigger engages in spying on him to read his next move and decide what to do next. What this listening and spying amounts to is that the Daltons and their white visitors, very much like Bigger before the murder, have become readable, accessible and transparent to his gaze and subject to his power and manipulation. Curious to know if Mr. Dalton would call the police or not, he "strained to listen, but no sounds came. He went to the door and took a few steps into the hallway. There were still no sounds. He looked about to make sure that no one was watching him, then crept on tiptoe down the hall" (178). After this manoeuvre and camouflage to keep his moves hidden in order to be in control, Bigger gets what he wants: "He heard voices. Mr. Dalton was talking to someone. He crept further; yes, he could hear" (178). Mr. Dalton is calling his detective,

Britten, to tell him about the ransom letter; and Bigger knows very well what such a development means to him and what he has to do to face it: "That meant that when Britten came back he would be questioned again, *yes right away I'll be waiting*" (178; emphasis in original).

The signifying tactics which show he is in control of the story of the murder and how white people think about it are repeatedly deployed by Bigger from the time he kills Mary to the discovery of his role in the murder in the second Book of the novel entitled "Flight." It is remarkable that Bigger is well aware that his rise to power represented in his ability to spy on whites derives from his manipulation of the stereotype that reduces him to physical visibility, taking advantage of white people's blindness to his character to hide his actions and have full control of his life and choices. He contemplates this relationship, noting that, "The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. But they would never think that he had done it; not a meek black boy like him" (179). His awareness that his freedom of action stems from his ability to mobilize his body as cover and manipulate the stereotype which renders whites blind to his true identity is repeated several times as a force that spurs him to take more daring actions that defy white order. He, for example, cites his being black as a cover which protects his plans to write the ransom note from being discovered by whites. Trying to convince his girlfriend, Bessie, to join in his plot to get money from the Daltons, he tells her that the wealthy family will think that it is the communists who write the letter. He assures her, "They won't think we did. They don't think *we* got enough guts to do it. They think niggers is too scared…" (139; emphasis in original). In a similar incident, Bigger makes it clear that his manipulation of whites and, thus his control of the storyline about the murder, is conditioned by his ability to stay beyond their looks: "He could handle this thing. It was

going his way. They were not suspecting him and he would be able to tell the moments their minds turned in his direction" (145).

Using his body and the physical visibility to which the white gaze holds him as a cover, Bigger manages to subject the Daltons' house to his surveillance and to return the white gaze by monitoring the actions of his rivals to keep them readable and accessible to his sight. Such is the case when he, for instance, eavesdrops at Britten's questioning Peggy about whether Bigger's statement about Mary's disappearance is true. Of all the white people he meets at the Daltons, Bigger is most worried about the family's detective, who seems to question his acting and suspects that he may not be telling the truth. In order to avert detection by Britten, Bigger starts spying on him from his room, listening to his questioning of Peggy: "Does he seem intelligent? Does he seem to be *acting*?" (180; emphasis in original). During the interview, Britten is more interested in drawing the profile of Bigger, asking questions intended to determine whether he is a meek and predictable black boy who keeps his place under the white gaze or a black subject who uses acting to deceive whites and hide his true intentions. Before drawing any conclusion about the truth or falsity of Bigger's story, Britten is keen to ask if he is a "yes mam"– and–"no mam" kind of black boy. When Peggy assures him that he always speaks like that, he inquires about the possibility that Bigger is acting it all out: "does he seem to be trying to appear like he's more ignorant than he *really* is?" (180; emphasis in original). Britten presents the housemaid with a litany of adjectives in order to figure out who Bigger is and whether he is smart and using blackface to deceive and cheat white people or just a compliant black boy who is confined to his place of physical visibility under the white order. Bigger follows the interview while hiding in his closet in his room above, learning more about Britten's plans and making the house his domain of control where white people are readable and accessible to him. These eavesdropping tactics not only

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give him the upper hand and allow him to read white people's minds but most importantly reveal that by using his body as a cover for hiding, Bigger can achieve mobility inside the house and subject its blind residents to his gaze.

In addition to spying and acting, Bigger deploys a variety of other blackface tactics designed to mislead white people from discovering his role in the murder and displacing him from his place of secrecy. These tactics involve lying, manipulation and blaming other whites for the murder. Reilly describes these manoeuvres as "genuine instruments of defense and authentic expressions of his life's importance," asserting that they are linked to his achievement of freedom of action and personal will: "Bigger takes the first premeditated action of his life against the white world by concocting alibis, false charges, and a conspiracy to extract ransom form the Daltons. These putative stories are perverse contrivances of signifying" (54-5). Bigger's lying and false accusations as instances of Signifyin(g) enable him to play the fool and idiot and to control the crime situation just as they are weapons in his hands to defend and protect his newly gained life of secrecy. He has to signify on his white rivals, invent false stories and justifications and attempt extortion in order to keep his mask on, leading a double life in which he is a fool in white eyes and a free subject in his own. Examples of these Signifyin(g) manoeuvres involve his success in cheating the Daltons and Britten that it is Jan, Mary's boyfriend, who is behind her disappearance. Blaming Jan for the murder shows the extent to which Bigger is familiar with white ways and perspectives and his willingness to play with them to take advantage of the situation. He knows perfectly well that Britten and the Daltons do not credit him with any mental capability or personal will to plan the disappearance of Mary and that accusing the communist activist, Jan, makes much more sense to the wealthy and powerful white family. Playing with their blindness to his presence and their tendency to ignore his character, Bigger successfully manipulates their

eagerness to believe that a communist plot is likely to explain the fate of their daughter. The same white disposition to seek some deep meaning beyond Bigger's action makes it easy for him to pick Jan for a suspect for his murder. When told that Bigger accuses him of masterminding Mary's disappearance, Jan chooses to ignore Bigger's motivations to lie, wondering if this is not a trick made by the governing establishment to set him up, "What're you making this boy lie for?" When he turns to address Bigger, he still cannot see that Bigger has an interest in lying, "Say, Bigger, what're they doing to you" (158). Both sides, the Daltons and Jan, fail to notice Bigger's role in the situation at hand, making it easy for him to exploit their indifference to his character and play them off against each other.

The same tactics of Signifyin(g) abound in this second section of the novel and involve Bigger's changing his storyline repeatedly to address the unfolding development of the murder story and outsmart his opponents. The narrator insists on Bigger's need to lie to keep his story coherent and convincing, "Yes, he could dress the story" (135) or "Quickly, he recast the story in his mind" (122). These manoeuvres allow Bigger to hold on against white society–with its media, police and detectives–and to create a personal space for himself that is anchored in his double life of visibility and invisibility. Having slipped away from the white gaze and perspective, Bigger manages to carve a hybrid place for himself the contours of which are defined in terms of his acting in conformity with the stereotypical definition of him as a fool while discretely controlling his life and the white world which does not recognise him as fully human.

Bigger, whose hybrid subject position means that he cannot enjoy a safe and final exit from white hegemony, discovers that blackface does not protect him from exposure and eventual humiliation and execution. As an ambivalent trope, blackface positions Bigger as a subaltern subject whose perspective and consciousness are constantly

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negotiated on the fine line between the stereotypical mask and the different subject he is. In the same ambivalent way, it does not shield him totally from exposure by the society which on many occasions threatens to tear apart his cover and disrupt his play. Instances of this uncertainty of blackface performance are many and they go back to the first day following the murder when he starts covering up for his crime. After eating breakfast with his family, Bigger asks his mother for money even though he has Mary's purse full of money already in his pocket. His idea is to keep his crime hidden and to "cover his tracks carefully" (103). But as he leaves the one-bedroom flat, his sense of security, which stems from his being hidden from others' looks, is deeply shattered when his younger brother, Buddy, hands him "a roll of bills," asking if he is in trouble. Losing control over the mask, Bigger's previous nervousness, physical tension and fear come back again to haunt him. He is described as talking in a "frightened whisper," as "thunder-struck" and with a "body as taut as that of an animal about to leap" (105). His ability to mobilize the curtain for concealment and for anticipating other people's views is also challenged by Britten's tough interrogation which takes him by surprise, leading his fears to resurge: "He knew now that Britten was trying to find out if he were a Communist. It was something he had not counted on, ever. He stood up, trembling. He had not thought that thing could cut two ways" (152). The unpredictability of blackface performance denotes Bigger's hybrid position which is not set within an essentialist frame of identification guarded against difference and the challenges it presents to the same and the familiar. For Bigger "had not thought that anyone would dare think that he, a black Negro, would be Jan's partner" (153); and yet his habits of thinking which define the world in his image and from which he draws comfort and security are suspended by the eruption of the other, predicating his life on contingency and his plans on emergency. The ambivalence and double-edged nature of the veil and blackface performance show

that Bigger's claims of being secure in his position are delusional. His repeated sense of elation and pride in his new place as conferring upon him an alternative perspective and sight to counter the system that persecutes him is revealed to be temporary and is challenged by the fact that his performance can backfire at any time, bringing him back to the fear and shame that characterise his place of confinement as a racialized subject before the murder. As a subaltern subject, Bigger's blackface allows him to keep the dominant white order in tension and to suspend its modes of representation and power just as it denies him any substitute essentialist position outside its reach.

Choosing speechlessness as a sign of his subaltern status and refusing to share his story, Bigger in the run up to his prosecution and during the court proceedings is regularly referred to as incapable of speech and language to represent himself and make his case before the jury. At one point, the narrator says that "his words came out flat and dull" (358) and at other times he "trie[s] to move his tongue" (320) but fails. This explains why Max, the communist, takes upon himself the task of representing Bigger and laying out his version of the story, a version that the establishment wants to occlude and silence. Yet, Bigger's chosen voicelessness at the court is far removed from his lack of linguistic expression that marked his life before the murder and his discovery of blackface as a weapon of resistance. Exposed and deprived of his performance manoeuvres at the court, Bigger prefers to keep silent because he has learned from his blackface minstrelsy that the subaltern subject-position depends on refusing to give in to alternative truths and representations that seek to impose their own version of human experience. Maurice O. Wallace asserts that Bigger's lack of language when faced with the white gaze at the court has a lot to do with his new subaltern subject-position and less to do with any lack of will or consciousness on his part "Bigger's silence in Book Three specifically may actually subvert the scopic regime, being hardly an abject state, but the preferred

muteness of a subaltern hero who most certainly can speak, but … tactically refuses to" (45). The choice not speak as an act of will on the part of Bigger and not an outcome of his confinement is made clear in the last scene in the novel at the prison facility where he shows that he can bond with other humans who are different from him and assume the full import of his act of murder: "what I killed for, I *am*" (391-2; emphasis in original).

It is significant that Bigger's speechlessness which is coupled with his acquisition of perspective and agency, comes about as he awaits death in his solitary confinement. It is a poststructuralist loss of speech in which agency is haunted by death and social bonding is juxtaposed against solitary imprisonment, foregrounding the anti-essential ambivalence of Bigger's subject-position. The following section examines further this state of speechlessness and ambivalence as Wright experiments with existentialist themes and methods to dethrone the dominant system of values only to eclipse them in favour of the silence of poststructuralist marginality.

Going Behind the Mask and Back Again: The Existentialist Alternative

The veil as a mask that enables black male subjects to achieve mobility in the white world through acts of performance figures in Wright's novella "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1961) both as a narrative device that determines the story's structure and a thematic leitmotif that shapes the main character's acquisition of perspective. This section maps out Daniels' escape from society aboveground to take refuge in a sewer cave underground, highlighting that his journey creates a geographical duality that shapes the narrative's structure as well as his own subject-position as a borderline fugitive. It deploys the veil trope to elucidate how Daniels (the novella's main protagonist) uses creolizing strategies of intervention like dissemblance, performance and play to avoid being sucked in by either side of this dual structure and to carve out his own place of in-betweeness and hybridity.

A central contention of this section is also that Wright draws on existentialist themes to qualify the descent of Daniels into the underground world as an attempt to transgress and negate the established norms of racial identification in the society aboveground and achieve agency by extricating himself from its shackles. Implied in this existentialist move is that Daniels' wanderings in the deep recesses of the sewer represent a quest to go beyond cultural values and social systems in order to attain a precultural consciousness freed from human ideologies and traditions. Yet, although he relies heavily on existentialism to chart the course of Daniels, Wright does not settle for a teleological and freedom-driven negation of social values to achieve voice nor does he embrace a break with social totalities as an act conducive to the cognisant and constituting subject, as in existentialism. Rather, he uses existentialism as a general context to frame his protagonist's rebellion against society even though he keeps questioning it throughout the narrative by deploying the tropes of the veil and

Signify(ing) as well as by emphasizing his black subject's speechlessness. To explain Daniels' bid to define himself in a new light, this section uses a number of critics whose exploration of the existentialist import of the novella helps frame the analysis of his quest to freedom but does not determine it. Like Wright's use of existentialism, this section builds on these critics' interest in the existentialist significance of the novella to make the case for Daniels' flight from society as a quest for freedom while it foregrounds the deployment of the veil as a strategy of resistance and a form of hybrid identification to complicate existentialism's claim of agency through adversarial and binary consciousness.

The centrality of the veil to Daniels' personal quest for voice and freedom is clear from the beginning of his journey when he jumps into a sewer manhole, escaping his police pursuers who want to capture him for a crime he does not commit. With his plunge underground, Daniels engages in an experience of hybridization in which he remains preoccupied with the culture of the aboveground world which incriminates him just as he is intrigued by the liberating potential of the underground life which gives him the freedom to explore his own conditions. Divided between the two worlds, his journey to self-consciousness is made possible thanks to his disappearance behind the veil of his sewer sanctuary which disguises him from discovery by the forces of aboveground, allowing him to see the values of society in a new light. In this way, the sewer functions as a hideout which shields him from physical harm at the hands of the police, and grants him the possibility to have a fresh look, a look behind the veil, at the forces that determine his identity as a black man living in a white world that uses the cultural system of guilt and fear to control, discipline and manipulate him. The underground cave becomes, in this regard, the place where Daniels can mobilize the veil and undertake performance and trickery to deceive whites and escape the dictates of the world of civilization above.

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It also puts him on a rewarding journey of self-redefinition in which he sets out to explore different ways of looking at and seeing his formation as guilty criminal by the forces of society. Articulated in terms of the subject cleavage and "twoness" characteristic of blackface performers, Daniels' veil splits his subjectivity between a fugitive criminal pursued by the police above and an intellectual explorer who redefines the cultural paradigm that defines him as inferior. Michel Fabre casts Daniels' entire undertaking in terms of the trope of the curtain or the wall:

> The terrestrial universe and the world underground are in fact posed like two sides of the same reality, separated by the thickness of a wall, a partition, or even a clouded window. We cannot suppose for an instant that the fugitive will be able to recognize his universe independently of the other, nor that the everyday world will escape his searching look. (*The World* 99)

The novella opens with a reversal of fortune indicative of the precarious life of the black male subject in a white society intent on keeping him in his place. Daniels has just received his wages and is on his way home when the police arrest him and torture him to make him confess to the alleged crime of killing his employer's white neighbor, Mrs. Peabody. He manages to escape and the story begins with him being chased by the police. He finds refuge in a sewer and starts a three-day journey during which he explores the world underground and returns aboveground to share his new knowledge with society. He meets the three policemen who have tortured him and takes them to his cave, but instead of sharing his vision they shoot him dead. During this journey, Daniels achieves a decentered identity marked by speechlessness and lack of communication with others. When he decides to emerge from his intellectual exile underground, he refuses to speak or to tell his story, choosing to remain silent about his new perspective

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about human life, for any attempt to share it would amount to an imposition of his view as an alternative and an overcoming of the dominant cultural system of the world above.

From the first time it emerges in the narrative, the hole gains significance as a curtain which sets in motion the dynamics of the blackface. This is evident in its being both a hiding-place that ensures Daniels' survival and protects him from the violence of the white order and a rich locus of meaning that enables him to redefine his relation to the aboveground culture. This dual function of the blackface is reflected in the first sentence in the story as the narrator probes the feelings of fear and guilt which tear Daniels apart in this first scene in which he is chased by the police and later when he enters the hole and starts exploring the meaning of his life and the people aboveground who reject him. "I'VE GOT TO HIDE, he told himself," the first sentence in the story and the first glimpse into the inner world of Daniels, elucidates the protagonist's need for cover and mask in order to hide from the brutality of the police who chase him but also from the culture which sees him as a criminal who must be put behind bars.

In this the only scene which describes his life in society before he descends into the underground sewer, Daniels at this stage of his story is depicted as a runaway fugitive and a black beast guilty of killing a white woman. "Crouching" in a "vestibule," Daniels' predicament is symptomatic of the fate of Wright's other black subjects like Bigger, Big Boy or Mann who are usually chased by the police, cornered and denied mobility because of being accused of murders of white people they either committed accidentally or did not commit at all. Deemed guilty by the legal institution and represented by the culture that legitimizes it as a black beast, Daniels spots the manhole cover and immediately realizes the choice at hand: "Either he had to find a place to hide, or he had to surrender." This realization is key to Daniels' both literal and symbolic escape from his merciless pursuers. For the manhole is not only a physical hideout that invites him to safety,

freedom and mobility underneath by protecting him from the brutality of law enforcement but also, in the words of Joseph A. Young, the place where "he discovers underground … the masks and other evasive forms that African Americans devise in a racist context to achieve self-expression, freedom, and self-fulfillment" (71). At the sight of the manhole, Daniels comes to this crucial realization about his life and fate as indicated by the words "hide" and "surrender" which refer to the different demands on his life made by the two forces of the aboveground and the subterranean sewer. At this crucial moment of near-death-or-capture, Daniels comes to understand that he either has to slip inside the hole into the darkness of blackface or suffer both physical destruction of his body and symbolic negation of his identity at the hands of the police and society. To Houston A. Baker, Jr. the "black hole" as a rich place of possibility opens up for the black marginal figure right at the moment when it sheds the false values of white society and realizes that its true image in white culture is a negative one, a zero-image. Baker argues that the novella "signals what might be termed a 'black-hole intentionality' in its very title. When the work's protagonist 'gets the picture', he discovers that he like many thousands gone before is always/already guilty" (*Ideology* 157).

In light of this rite of access to the hole, Daniels comes to the belief that his stay in white society means surrender, given that, as a black subject, he is always seen as guilty by the dominant cultural discourses which confine him to the realm of the black beast mythology or its power apparatus, the police, who hunt him down and deprive him of mobility and freedom. This realization of his place in the above world as "surrender" is key to his fate and his relation to society in another regard. For together with grasping his zero-image in a white-dominated world, Daniels also realizes that traditional adversarial ways of confronting and opposing the dominant system get him nowhere and that they lead eventually to surrendering and capitulating to his opponents. He, instead,

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spots the manhole cover and understands the blackface potential it offers. The hole as hiding-place indicates that to avoid surrender he has to play with the demands of his oppressors and signify from within the logic of white culture to liberate himself both physically and symbolically from the restraints it places on his identity and the challenges it presents for his very survival. To "hide" as opposed to "surrender" denotes that by going underground, Daniels is not only going to liberate himself from the police and white culture but will do so in a way that is not Manichean or adversarial but in line with the play of the blackface entertainer and the signifying trickster who occupy the space of in-between and act on the borderline between the spheres of the self and the Other. Young contends that the hole beckons Daniels toward its deep recesses not as a space free of and uncontaminated by the forces of the world above, a space where he can lead a clear-cut politics of opposition to liberate him by replacing the old order above with a new order in the underground. On the contrary, the space of the hole in the story, Young asserts, is one of play and trickery very much in tune with other blackface spaces of resistance in Wright's fiction: "To survive, Bigger (after breaking free from the environmental determinism of book one of *Native Son*), Wright (as a youth maturing in the South), and Daniels (after descending into the sewer) are all forced into going underground as a 'mode of dissemblance'" (70). When Daniels, in light of this view of the hole, decides to dash from his "crouching" place in the "vestibule" to the darkness of the hole, he does so with the conviction that not to "surrender" means to use the subterranean space below to manipulate, mock and play with the ideologies and discourses of the aboveground culture that defines and condemns him as a black man.

This first leg of Daniels' three-leg journey, the other two being his stay in the cave of his exile from society and his return aboveground, is crucial in other ways. It gives preliminary hints as to the existential theme of guilt that motivates Daniels'

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excursions and wanderings in the sewer and forms the crux of his learning experience about his own identity and how he should relate to the social whole. Wright deploys Daniels on existential terms, involving him in experiences and situations which associate his growing awareness of pain and guilt with his ability to free himself from the shackles of social and cultural values of the world above. Yet, Daniels' existentialist realization that guilt is the essence of Man's existence and the cause of his finitude does not make him a free and coherent subject as prescribed by existentialism. This is because his gradual awareness of guilt is conducted through the processes of splitting and fracture characteristic of blackface which empower him to gain a new perspective about society and his relation to it but position him on the borderline as a hybrid subject. In this first part of the story, Daniels' ordeal is exposed in existential terms as a result of pain and fear. He has been tortured, deprived of sleep and humiliated by the police in order to coerce him to confess to the crime. In addition to suffering physical abuse, he is portrayed in the ruthless chase by the purported guardians of the law as gripped by terrible fear, as he frantically and desperately looks for a place where he can avoid capture. The repeated focus on the sounds and lights of the sirens is meant to give a sense of how Daniels' body and soul are penetrated by fear of the coercive force of the law. A few sentences into the story and his pain is revealed to be related to the sirens. No sooner is he presented as "tired of running and dodging" than the cause of his physical pain and fatigue is spelled out: "A police car swished by through the rain, its siren rising sharply. They're looking for me all over" (19).

Together with his pain comes his "horror," which is caused by the sudden impact of the sirens on him, "The siren seemed to hoot directly above him" (20). The excruciating pain and deep-seated dread are necessary conduits for existentialist self-understanding, given that Man sets his foot on the road to self-discovery only when he

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recognizes his finite nature and starts disrobing his existence of the cultural values of society which denies this state of being by clinging to values of transcendence and by creating standards of good and evil to tell what is right from what is wrong. The importance of pain and dread lies in the fact that they propel individuals to move beyond good and evil in order to attain a pre-cultural consciousness where they strip their existence of the cultural values and live their life as is: as an experience of pain and dread that derive from their feeling of loneliness, lack of reference and meaning in life. This process of recognizing that pain and fear are at the heart of human existence enables Man not only to accept his limited possibilities but also to envisage his freedom as primarily a freedom from culture and its representations of reality. For a figure like Daniels, experience of pain and fear is part of his existentialist plunge inside the whole where he undertakes an adventure inside the bowels of the earth to free himself from the aboveground culture both as a black subject and as a man. Susan Neal Mayberry points to the fact that the pain and fear contracted by Daniels during this first segment of his journey is necessary for him to start bracketing the social values of society that sideline him. The story, she states, starts with "a brief but intense prologue of fear and pain, necessary to throw into question all the old above-ground values" (73). Daniels' way of rationalizing and coming to terms with his pain and fear translates in his quest to understand and reconcile himself with his adamant sense of guilt. To him, the various life-scenes and experiences that he encounters in his underground pilgrimage are occasions to contemplate the centrality of guilt to his life, not as a fugitive convict but as a human being at odds with his environment. This is not the type of guilt that induces his fear when he signs the false confession but rather an existential guilt that comes from embracing fear and pain as well as the awareness that cultural values, religious or secular, distract Man from recognizing the absurdity of his existence and its meaninglessness.

Guilt, in this regard, is about accepting the difficult truth that once Man transcends the cultural and religious definition of the natural phenomena that form his being, he is left alone and without a reference by which to judge what he should do or not do. He is then left with only the freedom to exercise his choice and free will irrespective of the consequences. This understanding of guilt as a perspective on existence that is divorced from human culture and from social values, an existence in which freedom means being alone, is what the underground journey offers Daniels and what he has to grapple with. Fabre notes that this change of perspective that takes place in the sewer comes when Daniels breaks with his own past:

> By going down into the sewer, Daniels was freed from his past. He was a victim, an innocent man who was declared guilty by the police and the law. Down below … he has … a deep feeling of guilt. He feels guilty for existing like any other man, but he is also guilty because he is apart and unable to remain a superman, beyond good and evil. (*The World* 100)

Daniels' attempt to grasp his existential guilt as conducive to his liberation from the shackles of the world above is presented from the beginning of his journey underground as a change in perspective. If he is going to rid himself of the demands of ideologies and cultural values that shape his understanding of life, he has to adopt a different perspective that allows him to see the above in a new light and, subsequently, judge his experience differently. Yet this perspective does not ensure a complete break from social values aboveground, allowing him to claim a whole subjectivity unaffected by the social systems of oppression that victimize him as an existentialist reading of the novella would have it. On the contrary, Daniels' fear and guilt show how much he is split and fractured as a fugitive figure who has to negotiate his place on the boundary between social systems that he rejects and an existentialist freedom represented by sewer that he

does not fully embrace. This process starts once he slips behind the mask of the sewer and engages in a journey in which the perspective of society aboveground is associated with light and blindness, while the subterranean world is associated with darkness and vision. The underground at this stage functions as Daniels' blackface which hides but does not separate him from the society above just as it shapes his perspective in terms of what Wright calls "double vision" (*Later Works* 500). Employing Nietzsche's concept of "frog's perspective," Wright comments on this way of looking from "below upward":

> "Frog Perspectives" … This is a phrase that I've borrowed from Nietzsche to describe someone looking from below upward, a sense of someone who feels himself lower than others. The concept of distance involved here is not physical; it is psychological. It involves a situation in which, for moral or social reasons, a person or a group feels that there is another person or group above it … A certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring himself undergoes constant change. (*Black* 656-57)

The state of ambivalence that marks this upside-down view also determines Daniels' complex relation to the above world of society. By going down the hole, he enters an atemporal space where he starts mobilizing the mask and performs rites which eventually allow him to strip the rational and enlightened world of order and discipline aboveground of its fake values and achieve his identity by defining himself anew. Yet, he remains attached to his peers above as he expresses on several occasions the need to leave his cave and go back to society. This ambivalence is also amply clear in his final decision to return to the society that persecutes him to share with it the vision and the freedom he acquires below. The "frog perspective" as the view of the hybrid and marginal character situated on the boundary between closed systems of identification,

shows Daniels to inhabit a space between aboveground and underground, between rationality and prehistory and between light and darkness. Daniels, who opts for hiding instead of surrendering to the white gaze that aims to arrest him physically and in terms of his image and representation, does not come at the "frog perspective" at once but it is a stage in his rise to consciousness and knowledge as he learns about his guilt and adapts to shedding the hegemonic perspective of society that teaches him to keep his place.

This ascent to self-understanding and identity starts with his descent into the manhole, using it as a veil and a curtain gradually to annul and suspend society's influence on him. As he slides behind the mask of the hole he immediately experiences its empowering rites, which consist in releasing him from the visibility to which the white gaze holds him and which denigrates him as a human being by defining him exclusively in terms of his body and physical appearance. The white gaze also arrests Daniels in visibility in order to control him and make him accessible as an object to its power. When he, therefore, jumps into the darkness of the manhole he becomes invisible to his white pursuers and succeeds in liberating himself from their looks. Like Bigger, whose acting permits him to vacate his stereotypical place of subordination under the white gaze, Daniels' plunge into the darkness of the hole marks the first step along his eventful road to freedom from the white gaze and the aboveground world of light it represents. When he "swung his legs over the opening [of the manhole] and lowered himself into the watery darkness," Daniels becomes immediately invisible to the white gaze of the police who search the area for him. Still unaware of the potential of his new mask of darkness and the transformative impact it is having on his life and fate, he thinks he is lost when the white face of one of the three policemen peers into the hole. Fearing discovery and capture, Daniels is surprised to see that the "white face [which] hovered over the hole" (20) does not see him and that the policeman is worrying about replacing the cover.

What Daniels does not realize at this early stage of his three-day tenure behind the mask of the sewer is that there occurs at his entrance into the hole a reversal of his relation to the society above as his position changes from a fugitive in the world of light and sunshine to the player and performer in the darkness of the underground. His new mask does not only liberate him from his confining place under the white gaze but also blinds the white viewers to his presence. Clad in darkness and poised to see his own reality in a new light and perspective, his invisibility marks the blindness of the white framework and perspective which fail to see this new shift which itself positions Daniels on a new plane of consciousness and places him in a new relation of power to society. The irony involved in this typical blackface moment is that as the black subject gains perspective and power, the white gaze becomes blind and, thus, less in control of him. It is Daniels who, from his place in the depth of the dark sewer, sees the white policeman, while the latter, blinded by the mask, cannot see who is behind it. This dynamic of sight and blindness is reinforced further when the policeman returns the cover to its place, ensuring the safety of Daniels instead of discovering him and proving his own blindness. Blind to Daniels' presence, the policeman's act ironically makes the separation between the two worlds complete, forever losing sight of Daniels as he actually knows him. The narrator describes this gesture from the stand point of Daniels' new status as someone liberated from the pressures of the world above: "The cover clanged into place, muffling the sights and sounds of the upper world" (21). The fact that it is the white policeman, symbol of white power and authority, who puts the cover firmly in its place (thus helping isolate Daniels from the threats coming from aboveground), indicates that white culture can see only the subservient, law-abiding and stereotypical image in which it frames Daniels. Now that Daniels is secured behind the veil, poised to play and redefine the

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values which dominated him above, the white gaze of the policeman loses track of him and fails to keep him under surveillance.

In his subsurface world, Daniels goes on to play his role as a trickster who signifies on the objects and phenomena of the above world which inhabit the sewer. To learn more about his guilt and to develop his perspective he has to free himself completely from the cultural definitions of these social phenomena which cause the above world to be blind. Coming to grips with existential guilt in this regard means exploring the master narratives of society–religious, secular, artistic and mercantile authorities–in order to reveal their sham character and in order for Daniels to accept and embrace the painful reality of his existence as finite and irredeemable. His way to light and perspective, in this sense, takes him to different incidents of death, propels him to make discoveries about church worshippers and movie-house goers and to excavate and tunnel in order to understand the life of guilt underpinning the market system of exploitation above. At the heart of his long and difficult road to developing his own perspective about his guilt is an attempt to chart his exit from the blindness of society and its rationalizations about existence.

The first step towards recognition of guilt and suspension of the ideologies that distort true understanding of existence is to do away with the above-world's means of knowledge, namely sight as a privileged and valued means of understanding that is associated with light and vision. Victimized by the gaze and aware that sight imprisons society in blindness instead of endowing it with true light of knowledge, Daniels begins his journey behind the mask in the darkness of the sewer by signifying on sight, doing away with the power and value of the visual optic. This process of redefining ways of seeing human reality begins even before he descends into the manhole, even though they remain associated with it. Afraid of capture by the police in the vestibule, Daniels spots

the manhole as a site of safety through a veil of misty glass that symbolically stands for the veil and the distorting effects of the white gaze itself. He "squinted through the fogged plate glass" (19) and locates streams of water lifting the cover of the manhole up from its place, beckoning him to the darkness of the underground. When he starts his subsurface pilgrimage, the darkness that engulfs him makes sight irrelevant and inspires him to use and develop other sensory instruments to probe and discover his environment. To Young, this shift from the visual scope highlights Daniels' change of perspective as he gradually extricates himself from the influence of the society above:

> Daniels experiences his bodily space as a matrix for action and realizes what Merleau-Ponty theorizes: that the body (the kinesthetic perspective), not simply the optical perspective, is one of our chief receptors and foundations of perceptual experience … The richness of Daniels' heightened tactile sensation in the darkness contrasts with his impoverished visual perception in the light. (76)

The same shift in perception is observed by Fabre who notes that "In this obscure world, eyes can no longer see, but fingers take on sight" (*The World* 103). Daniels' recourse to sensory means of "seeing" is part and parcel of the rites of the sewer as veil since, in the heart of the underground space, darkness is associated with light and the possibility of knowledge whereas the aboveground is seen as a place of light, guilt and, paradoxically, ignorance. Robin McNallie makes this association when he speaks about Daniels' rise to consciousness and freedom: "Daniels, who is, at the outset, the prisoner of this society in both literal and figurative senses, approaches perfect knowledge of that society and of himself only as he escapes from his sunlight captivity to descend to the darkness of his cave" (79). Transcending the visual optic and its rational disposition to classify, categorize and name is key to Daniels' overall bid to freeze the cultural meaning and symbolic value that society attaches to phenomena and objects distorting their true

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essence and being. This explains why he becomes myopic as he embarks upon all the forays and excursions which take him through the basement of his sewer to forms of social life aboveground, dispensing with sight and using tactile, olfactory, auditory and even kinetic means of perception instead.

These wanderings across the subterranean topography which lead to discoveries about society's blind practices are conducted in the darkness of the underground with Daniels listening, moving, smelling or touching. Right when he descends in the manhole at the outset of his subsurface journey and as he undertakes to explore its dark recesses, he finds a metal pole left behind by a sewer workman which he uses for survival purposes to "sound" the depth of the water and also to find his way in the engulfing darkness. He also uses the pole in his first major encounter with death as a symbol of his and society's guilt when he kills a "huge rat" which challenges him with its "blinking beady eyes and baring tiny fangs" (22). The pole proves a useful substitute to sight in the realm of darkness below, guiding him to the cave where he chooses to stay as he "shove[s]" it "before him" and uses it as a "kind of ladder" (23) to make his way up and down the walls and curves of the sewer. Daniels' other major probings into the different decaying facets of society involve discovering a black religious congregation, a movie-house and business establishment through listening to sounds, voices and songs coming from the various spheres of social blindness. In another major discovery, he follows a nasty odor which turns out to be emanating from an undertaker's establishment to experience death and its associated theme of guilt once again. Daniels also relies a great deal on tactile perceptions to figure out what his environment holds for him and further to explore the illusions of the surface world. Using his fingers, he repeatedly refers to this tactile means of knowing and seeing as "seeing with … fingers" (32). Together with these means of perception, Daniels depends a lot on the kinetic agility of tunneling, digging, scraping

and using rain pipes, screws, hammers and shovels to penetrate the darkness of what he alternately calls "the dark sunshine aboveground" or the "dead sunshine" world (57).

Daniels' suspension of the power of visual perception serves to highlight the two main goals of his stay underground. First, it freezes the cognitive and institutional power of the gaze which frames him in the negative image of the stereotype only to control and brand him as guilty. Secondly and after congealing the aboveground significance of the gaze by reducing it to blindness, these bodily perceptions underline Daniels' ability to develop an existential perspective beyond culture, a way of seeing unaffected by human representation. By coming to knowledge through non-visual means, he transcends the rationality of the above-world which is associated with sight and attains a pre-cultural consciousness about the condition of Man in general. These two goals are interdependent, since by liberating himself from society's modes of knowing, which evade the recognition of existential guilt, holding humans prisoners to blindness, Daniels acquires the right perspective to accept his own existential guilt as the normal order of being and not try to suppress or escape from it through cultural means.

Daniels' deployment of non-scopic perception to blind the white gaze which holds him prisoner to its frame of reference and denies him the chance to see social institutions differently is part of the black minstrel's trickery and manipulative skills. In addition to invention and improvisation implied in these gaze-returning abilities, Daniels uses other modes of evasion and camouflage that are typical of blackface trickery and deception. Based on dissemblance where the black subject puts up a physical appearance acceptable to and recognizable by white society in order to hide his true subversive intentions, invisibility and role-playing are also two other skills used by Daniels in order to intervene culturally and politically in the established order above. When Daniels pretends to be someone else or plays other people's roles, he conducts an important dual

act of subversion: ensuring his survival by slipping away from the panoptic surveillance imposed on him and stepping outside white frameworks of definition to learn about himself and develop his own perspective. Hiding behind appearance and playing roles are key to his accessing a realm of invisibility where he can understand himself and vacate his place under the white order. Relating invisibility to perspective and self-Other mutual (mis)recognition, Ronald Ridenour asserts that Daniels' invisible status has to do with Wright's quest to find meaning in life by achieving identity and self-understanding. He argues that in the story of "Man":

> Wright's didacticism involves invisibility of not just the black man to the white man or of man to man but, significantly, of man to himself. Particularly does Wright, in this lengthy short story, transcend the now common theme of the lack of identity of Negroes to embrace that of the struggle to find meaning and worth for all mankind, that is, to discover truth for one's self and then to communicate this knowledge to one's fellowman. (55)

Ridenour's focus on the existential drive in the story and its relevance to Daniels' quest for self-understanding accounts for his assertion that invisibility is a technique of inversion which enables Daniels not only to achieve identity outside the ideological systems of society but do so as a man and not particularly as a racialized black subject. Taking a different approach, Fabre highlights visibility as a cornerstone device that enables the black man to overcome the constraints that society imposes on him both in terms of representation and the lived experience of exclusion. He says:

> Setting the individual apart allows him to pass judgment in a more detached and perhaps objective manner on whatever he is excluded from. At the same time, it implies a certain invisibility of the individual whose personality is unrecognized. If he is not actually seen, he does not exist. The metaphysical bearing of this

image of the black outsider is thus double. It presupposed superiority in his vision over the common vision, also the agony in his exclusion and the necessity to return. (*The World* 102)

Invisibility as a blackface strategy that involves the black subject tapping into the black folklore culture of acting, role-playing and dissemblance is a theme that J. R. Gounard claims to be at the center of Wright's view of the black condition in general. He contends that "This theme was rapidly exploited by Richard Wright who held that the Black American had always played … hidden roles in a society that rejected him" (382). From his position as an outsider, hidden from the framing eye of the Other, Daniels reverses his relation to society in two remarkable ways. He does this, first, by fading from his position under the white gaze and establishing himself as the unseen seer who has the freedom of mobility to explore, discover and transgress the boundaries that confine him spatially and culturally. Secondly, he takes advantage of his invisibility to act as a spectator in order to expose the sham belief and practices that incarcerate society above, eventually liberating himself from its illusions and embracing his life as an ontological experience of guilt the pain and dread which cannot be assuaged by cultural distractions and hopes. Daniels' mobility underground is brought into sharp contrast with the life of confinement aboveground, in which he features as a fugitive running from the police. In his subterranean adventures, Daniels acts like a voyeur and a trickster, capitalizing on his invisibility to move around in his sewer, probing all its strata and undertaking excursions that lead him to have what Fabre calls "a view of Western civilization from behind the scenes" (*The World* 102). He feels free to roam the different layers of the underground world, unfettered by the legal and social restrictions that brand him as guilty and a threat which must be contained. He discovers a black congregation chanting hymns of transcendence and praying for God to save them from their guilt,

coming to the conclusion that religious faith in otherworldly redemption is an illusion that masks the churchgoers' fear of embracing their guilt instead of denying and trying to evade it. The worshippers' inability to deal with their guilt-ridden existence propels them to grovel, weep and give over their will and freedom to God, hoping that he will redeem them.

In the same fashion that his forays and freedom of mobility lead him to expose the sham character of religious authority, he learns in another excursion that the art establishment is just as fake and removed from reality as the Church. He makes this discovery when he comes across a movie theater in which the viewers are described as asleep and laughing at their own images. Daniels' realization that art provides the moviegoers with entertainment as a means of distraction so that they forget about their guilt does not only strip art of its authority and value but also teaches him a lot about his own guilt and the need to transcend culture to be ontologically at one with the truth of his own existence. Similar adventures that he conducts, as voyeur and explorer, by digging through walls, tunnelling and looking through keyholes, attest to the important link established between invisibility on the one hand and freedom of movement and perspective on the other. Taking him to an undertaker's establishment, a jeweller's, a radio shop and a grocery, Daniels' explorations sees him "peeping, "squinting" and "peering" from beneath into the illusions and sham practices of the different social establishments above, both exercising his freedom of mobility as he draws the maps of his subterranean world and also forming his own subversive and upside-down perspective by drawing a different picture of the social and cultural topography above.

Like Wright's double-vision perspective or "frog perspective," Daniels' unseen place behind the mask allows him to return the gaze by becoming the observer instead of being constantly observed by the panoptic apparatus of surveillance associated with the

aboveground world. Occupying this invisible position of the observer who wields the gaze in order to transgress the social institutions and subvert the cultural norms which arrest his self-understanding and identity, Daniels' spatial and cognitive mapping out of his world results in a *tabula rasa* perspective which strips his existence naked of its cultural clothing and embraces it as value-free ontological order. This trickster's behind-the-veil perspective and its unrepentant acceptance of guilt, pain and dread as natural and given is described by Shirley Meyer as a result of Daniels' transition from observed to observer:

> These incidents [Daniels' discoveries] are significant because the people do not realize they are being observed, and Daniels is seeing them from a unique vantage point, from the level of the unconscious evil and despair which motivate man. (52)

Invisibility, in light of the above, is both a condition of freedom and mobility and a shift of perspective that catapults Daniels beyond culture and into a phenomenological existence unaffected by human definition and representation. This state of being and consciousness is also the result as well as the expression of another mode of minstrelsy and blackface trickery, namely the trickster's role-playing as a technique to deflect the white gaze and achieve both physical and intellectual mobility in and out of the white order. Daniels plays this role through his tenure underground and even when he returns to society above. Yet, although his role-playing shares all the goals that Wright's other characters strive to achieve through this strategy, his doubling and game-playing are unique in the sense that he does not lure the white gaze by giving it the image it desires in order to survive, but rather repels it by alienating it from recognizing his true identity. Characters like Bigger in *Native Son* and Aunt Sue in "Morning Star" (1938) deploy blackface role-playing by projecting the stereotypical image that whites accept and by

acting like they want them to; and in so doing cheat the white gaze into believing in the appearance it wants to see while they proceed to manipulate it to their ends. Daniels, on the other hand, uses the doubling and role-playing to put the white gaze face to face with the difference it fails to recognize.

All the different roles he plays during his stay in the sewers and when he goes back to society are acts asserting and displaying his difference, not hiding it, as with the other characters. Daniels acts these roles to project his new identity as a different Other who succeeds in extricating himself from the restrictions placed on him by society. In spite of the apparent difference in the way these characters deploy blackface role-playing, however, this strategy in both cases has the effect of alienating the white gaze and preventing it from recognizing the black performer. Whether it is carried out in terms of dissemblance, in the case of Bigger and Sue, or defiance, in the case of Daniels, role-playing is a doubling strategy that enables the black subject to intervene in the white order and manipulate it to his ends. It equally exposes the extent to which the white gaze is blind to difference, failing to recognize the Other outside the negative image defined by its stereotypical frame of reference. Daniels' role-playing comes about in three forms which all have to do with his rise to identity and consciousness through dismantling the aboveground narratives that see him as a branded guilty fugitive. These involve a first stage of identification in which Daniels acts various roles to reconfigure the social values that stand in the way of his existential search for identity. Secondly, he engages in a series of instances of mirror-stage identification in which he recognizes and identifies with his self-invented image as opposed to the negative social image that arrests and holds him in visibility as a black body. The third and last form of acting has to do with society's inability to recognize him after he goes underground and begins this process of self-

identification. Unable to recognize difference, society either loses sight of him or mistakes him for someone else.

Tied to his relentless effort to see social values and institutions in a fresh light that restores objects to their natural character by divorcing them from their cultural representations, Daniels' underground explorations peak when he starts playing the role of the thief to seize the treasures of the market establishment before he takes them to his cave and begins to play different roles to clown and signify at them. After initially playing the role of spectator and voyeur to cast the Church and the movie-house into an new light that emphasizes the importance of guilt to human behavior, Daniels goes on to critique the mercantile institution. Playing the thief, he commits a series of robberies that involve stealing a safe, jewels, diamonds and watches from a jewellery establishment. He then proceeds to rob a radio shop before breaking into a market place and a grocery, stealing a cleaver from the first and fruits from the second. Acting like "a clown of commerce," in the words of Baker, Daniels' robbery springs from an existentialist logic which runs counter to the market view of goods and products not as natural objects but as symbolic assets of power and profitability (*Ideology* 168). Daniels' relation to his theft is revealed in his attitude towards money when he throws away in disgust a dime that a white couple hands over to him in the grocery. It is equally manifested in his anger when he sees a white hand stealing money from the safe, asserting that he does not rob the objects for their profitability or mercantile value:

> He grew indignant, as if the money belonged to him. Though *he* had planned to steal the money, he despised and pitied the man. He felt that his stealing the money and the man's stealing were two entirely different things. He wanted to steal the money merely for the sensation involved in getting it, and he had no intention whatever of spending a penny of it. (44-45; emphasis in original)

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In addition to stealing to exercise his free will, the thief takes his loot back to his cave to experiment on it, robbing it of its aboveground value. Towards this end, he engages in performance and role-playing as he pretends to be a businessman, a rich man, an artist, a secretary in an office and a gunfighter. He plays games with these goods which he describes as toys and which, according to Patricia D. Watkins, he aims to "trivialize that is, reduce to the level of toys the artifacts as they are used above ground by the people whose roles he plays" (156). Blackface performance also functions to divert the white gaze and secures Daniels' access to agency in terms of his worldview and actions. Early in his subsurface forays and as he is leaving the movie-theater, Daniels bursts into laughter at society's blindness to his new identity. He meets with an usher who does not recognize him, mistaking him for one of the moviegoers. Surprised that he has become completely unseen and invisible to the gaze of the Other when the usher shows him the way to the men's room, he acts his usual trickster role and accepts to go where the man expects him to go. In a similar incident, Daniels passes unrecognized by the white gaze when he pretends to be a fruit seller in NICK'S FRUITS AND MEATS establishment. Hidden by his role as a sales boy, he sells fruits to an unsuspecting white couple who enter into the grocery unexpectedly.

The same technique of blackface camouflage and hiding takes place when he comes back to society and goes to the police to confess his guilt and share his story with the legal authorities. Curiously enough, the police, who stand for society's surveillance and ability to hold its members visible and under control, fail to recognize him at the beginning when he shows up at their doors to turn himself in. And when the three policemen in charge of his case finally recognize him, they still cannot see the new Daniels who emerges from the underground changed and defiant. What the police authority sees is the black fugitive who is held to be a criminal but the new Daniels

remains utterly beyond their comprehension. Gounard stresses that society's blindness is due to its conventional frame of reference which cannot locate or perceive the transformation that Daniels experiences in his subterranean tenure. The people he encounters, Gounard argues, cannot "imagine for a second that Daniels has created a fantastic world for himself underground. To them, he is only a person permitted to play certain given roles by society" (384). Blackface doubling as a strategic device that empowers Daniels to attain a level of consciousness which society cannot see or recognize is also deployed in a series of mirror-stages where Daniels' self-recognition and his visibility to himself are pitted against his fading from the social field of visibility. These establish Daniels' distance from society and mark his evolving awareness of the cultural illusions which cloud the real face of existence. They highlight his ascent to consciousness as he becomes capable of seeing himself as he is seen by society while attaching a different value and definition to himself. The first of these mirror-stages where he sees himself as an Other takes place at an important moment in his journey towards identity and self-understanding. It occurs at the ends of his discoveries about the aboveground world and as he leaves the market establishment carrying his loot to his cave. He notices his fleeting shadow on the wall, getting for the first time a glimpse of himself as seen by society. A specular image, the silhouette paints him as a ghost who haunts society and adds up to his social representation as a fugitive. Daniels' bid to liberate himself from the shackles of culture culminates with his realization that he has to embrace his marginal status, represented in his physical appearance and guilt. The second instance dramatizes the same dynamic of self-visibility and social blindness as Daniels decides to emerge from behind his hiding-place of the underground cave in order to share his story with society. Immediately before coming across the black church he has discovered in his first excursion underground and before he tries to awaken them

from their religious slumber in the hope that they will accept their guilt like him, he passes by a man's clothing store and catches the reflection of his dishevelled look in the long mirror of its façade. The narrator describes his image in the following terms:

His cheekbones protruded from a hairy black face; his greasy cap was perched askew upon his head and his eyes were red and glassy. His shirt and trousers were caked with mud and hung loosely. His hands were gummed with a black stickiness. He threw back his head and laughed so loudly that passers-by stopped and stared. (66)

This image projected back to him from the mirror summarizes the difference between his perspective and that of society. While he sees in his shabby looks the crystalization of his experience underground, society, epitomized by the fashion store with its emphasis on cleanliness and appearance, mistakes him for a homeless outcast. Unlike Bigger who needs his mirror reflection to hide behind it, Daniels has produced his alternative story and is willing to embrace that which society deems improper and dirty. Reading the scene in light of society's emphasis on cleanliness and rejection of nudity, Baker identifies Daniels with the dirty image which stares back at him from the mirror of the store: "Daniels is 'dirt' appearing in a world that seeks 'purity,' a world that conceals nakedness through commercial manufacture and sale of social 'clothes'" (*Ideology* 170).

Daniels' arrives at this fresh perspective through Signifying, play and performance. During his excursions aboveground he steals objects of a great value to society, takes them to his hideout and signifies on them to alter their meaning and the values conventionally attached to them. He steals diamonds, watches, a radio, a safe, a typewriter, a cleaver. His intention to play with their meaning is amply clear in his expressed will to explore the social value of the dollar bills he has just stolen in the safe

from the real estate office: "He had no desire whatsoever to count the money; it was what it stood for–the various currents of life swirling aboveground–that captivated him" (52). For Daniels, all the stolen objects belong to the same system of values that subjugated him: "They were the serious toys of the men who lived in the dead world of sunshine and rain he had left, the world that had condemned him, branded him guilty" (47). Intent on liberating his loot of its aboveground meaning, Daniels takes it to his hideout, his mask, where he has agency and freedom to signify on its social significance and strip it of the discursive power of representation it wields over him.

Once in the sewer, he engages in playing games with these stolen valuables, freeing them of their conventional signification and, in so doing, transforms his mask / cave into a mimic repetition of the aboveground world. He uses these valuables to construct a new life in the cave, one that, very much like the face behind the veil, imitates and distorts the reality aboveground from which they originate and to which they refer. He casts this process of creation and imitation in terms of blackface acting and dissemblance when he qualifies it as an exercise of controlling and denigrating these social and ideological icons of subjection and hegemony: "it was merely the ritual of performing the thing that appealed to him" (53). The objects of appeal are nothing other than the stolen items after he signifies on them and endows them with a new and different meaning. A Signifyin(g) Monkey and a trickster, Daniels engages in a process of collaging his loot on the walls of his cave, which through signifyin(g)'s two tropes of repeating and reversing, allows him to suspend and, then, empty his stolen objects of their ideological value. This act of collage and Signifying(g) also casts his cave in a new light, picturing it as a mimic repetition of the aboveground world which, like the function of the veil, distorts and destabilises its values and their dominant narratives. He begins the collage by gluing the hundred-dollar bills to the walls of his dirt cave, doing away

with their mercantile value and bestowing a new meaning on them by using them as wallpaper. In the spirit of play and fun, the performer sprinkles his diamonds on the floor, forming them in the shape of a heap. Imagining himself as a rich man, he calculates his steps to smash the heap with his right foot at the right moment.

When he playfully scatters this society's heap of value, he eventually claims agency and asserts his will over the icons of the society that subjugates him as he "felt that he had a glorious victory locked in his heart" (56). After robbing these items of his loot of their meaning he proceeds playfully to redefine the function and symbolic significance of the typewriter as an icon of professional middle class-driven society. An emblem of skilled and professional white subjectivity, the typewriter is quickly turned into an agent of non-identity. When Daniels starts amusing himself with it he begins by typing a sentence which turns out to be his name written in lower case. In his hands, the icon of a white whole and central subjectivity ends up becoming a means of subject-decenteredness, where the protagonist attaches to the much valued symbol of writing and literacy a new understanding of identity that emphasizes its status as minor and marginal. Together with the change in perspective deriving from his typing his name in lower-case letters and without spacing "*freddaniels,*" Daniels goes on to furnish his cave with aboveground items, turning it into a mimic space that both resembles the world of society above and differs from it in that the items that create life inside it acquire a new and altered meaning. He amuses himself by hanging his stolen cleaver, gun, watches and rings from a nail he has driven into the dollar-papered walls. What is striking about this collage is the new perception and representation these items acquire when removed from society and placed behind the mask of the cave. With regards to watches, important and valuable as they are aboveground, their hands tell different times because time is no longer relevant to life inside the cave. And the gun and cleaver, both emblems of power,

violence and authority, take on a new meaning as they are seen from the perspective of the marginal, decentered and minor subject inhabiting the underground world. They begin to signify his new realisation that "life is a fiction, a plot invented by other people who have made his life superfluous" (Lehan 88).

With this new perspective, Daniels achieves in his journey from society to cave a number of important steps that are vital to his access to agency. In his hideout and behind his mask, he evolves from being a law-abiding citizen who lives in a culture that defines its subjects as whole and central and defines him as victim to a black subject who embraces his new subjectivity on the basis of his fragmentation and marginal status. This shift in subject-position and identity allows him to see things differently and redefine the values in the name of which he is persecuted by society as a fugitive criminal. It is only after he undertakes this ritual, where he has to reposition himself in relation to the social whole to get a fresh look on it, that he gains control over his life. Inside the cave, Daniels plays all these sorts of games with his loot to own it symbolically as part of a new life which is marked by a departure from and a suspension of all values and symbolic meanings attached by humans to natural phenomena. Such is the outcome of his journey and the only certainty that he believes in, namely that all values are human and should be done away with: "if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture" (56). What ensues as the endgame of his three-day quest is a complete freezing of human culture and values and a final suspension of humans' power to define natural experience and phenomena.

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CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to map out the duality of terms that make up its main subject of inquiry, namely, the fractured nature of black masculinity in Richard Wright's fiction. Research across this theme has shown the mutual relationship between the experience of fragmented subjectivity among black male characters and the absence of the social and cultural referents that traditionally are credited with providing subjects with consciousness to develop as mature and whole. In Wright's narratives, black masculinity undergoes different forms of fragmentation, ranging from physical dismemberment to moral and personal negation. Largely set within a racist context marked by segregation, Wright's fiction features black male figures who suffer fragmentation through violence against their bodies and their very physical being. Irrespective of whether these black characters struggle against the challenges of racism in the South or the North, they are always haunted by the specter of violence in the form of beatings, lynchings and other kinds of extrajudicial killings. This physical violence, which also involves starving and keeping blacks hungry, is deployed by white power to ensure black males' powerlessness and deprivation of agency. In this way, it functions as a disciplinary strategy that requires the destruction of black male bodies to maintain them under white control and supremacy.

A central contention in this study is that the disfigurement of black male bodies has also to do with the deployment of discursive representation in ways that are no less devastating and debilitating than the effects of physical violence. For if black characters in these novels can challenge the white order's use of violence by accepting death, stripping it of the power to control their lives, they can only play with and manipulate the discursive structures and ideological networks that define them as inferior and subsequently banish them from citizenship and the rights that come along with it. Black

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male subjects claim agency by embracing death, undermining its value as a coercive tool, but never succeed in totally subverting the discursive networks that govern them and circumscribe their marginal place. Instead of ditching these discursive regimes altogether, black characters settle for manipulating the white order through trickery and dissemblance, opting for hybrid subject positions and capitalizing on their cleavage and fragmentation to achieve agency.

In all the novels under analysis, discursive representation confines black males to estrangement and psychic disorientation. Through different discursive practices and ideological myths, the white order promotes a form of misrepresentation that defines black masculinity in terms of absolute difference, producing black males as cultural outsiders and social rebels. In *Native Son,* Bigger Thomas inhabits a world torn between fantasy and desire on the one hand and his constraining and suffocating place under white rule on the other hand. These discordant forces that threaten to rip his life asunder and drive him over the edge of sanity mask a yet more troubled aspect of Bigger's life. His recurrent flights of fantasy in the face of the horrors of his unbearable living conditions are survival strategies to avoid having to recognize and deal with the self-annihilating effects of his cleavage and fragmentation. As an emasculated and helpless black male, he is so deeply marked and formed by white hegemony that he represses the root causes of his predicament into his unconscious, barring them from the realm of his conscious day-to-day life. As a split character formed by the power of Jim Crow society, Bigger must keep the sources of his humiliation and powerlessness locked in his unconscious while entertaining a life of fantasy far removed from the real social interpellations and power questions that weigh heavily on his life and determine his being. Bigger expresses this state of cleavage through his repeated assertions that he lives behind a wall, indicating the he has to live behind a mask to survive. He must first hide his shame and

feeling of emasculation from himself and then hide himself behind a network of desire and fantasy to escape having to deal with his plight.

Such an experience of fragmented subjectivity accounts for Bigger's irrational responses to the world around him and his failure to cultivate healthy social relationships or develop a positive sense of life. His relation to the black community is marked by antagonism and violence, as he hates his family, coerces his friends and exploits and eventually and cold-bloodedly murders his girlfriend. Bigger's attitude toward the white world is no more constructive or meaningful. He expresses wrath at whites even before crossing the racial border to work as chauffeur for the wealthy Daltons. One day on from his stay in the white family's mansion, Bigger murders their daughter, blames the murder on her communist boyfriend and unleashes a relentless manhunt that sees him tried before a court of law and finally jailed pending execution.

Bigger's violent reaction to both black and white communities is indicative of his decentered and split self. He uses violence against all those who mix with him to avoid having to probe and understand the hegemonic forces that cause his shame and lack of agency, forces that he buries deep in his unconscious but which, nonetheless, haunt him and determine his disruptive engagement with the two communities to which he belongs as African American. This fragmented and dual experience, described by W.E.B. Du Bois as double-consciousness and by Wright as Double Vision, sets black male characters apart from their social context and accounts for their association of masculinity with rebellion against both black and white communities and effeminization and emasculation brought about by their acquiescence to them. More sophisticated and self-conscious about his double bind, Richard in *Black Boy* details his journey from the South to the North as a risky and protracted effort to preserve his perspective on life from white and black hegemonic education. Fully aware of the racist pedagogy of Jim Crow

society, which deploys violence to teach him to keep his place as a subhuman, Richard relates an inventory of the events and situations in which he has to outsmart the system in order to escape its crippling effects on his personality and his desire to achieve agency and selfhood. Towards this end, and unlike Bigger, he looks inward to understand his formation by white society, brandishing literacy as his weapon to fight it off. Throughout the autobiography, he struggles with these two drives that account for his self-splitting, namely his need to meet white expectations to survive physically and his adamant attempt to ward off the effects of the white system in order to survive mentally and psychologically. Like Bigger, he also holds uneasy and troubled ties with black folks. Whether it is his family or the wider black community, Richard has to challenge their way of life and being to nurture his independence of spirit and subjectivity. He is thus as much at odds with kinship as he is with white people, the only difference being that he fights with the first but dissembles with the second in order to be able to make it out to the North and have a chance to define himself outside the totalizing pressures of race and culture in the South.

Decentered subjectivity takes different forms and assumes various expressions in the narratives covered by this study. In addition to the above, it can mean literal and symbolic emasculation which figures as an overarching theme in all of the texts considered. The use of lynching by white mobs as an extrajudicial method in the South produces compliant black bodies and deprives black male subjects of action and self-assertion. Generally involving the dismemberment of the entire black body, but most significantly the mutilation of the male organ, lynch scenes abound in Wright's fiction as both a form of historical documentation of racist threats against black masculinity and a literary reflection on the dominant white patriarchal order's refusal to share the privileges of manhood with black subjects. Lynching reinforces the Manichean order

which sustains white supremacy by casting blacks outside the realm of masculinity and limiting this to whites. In this way, it accrues a gendered slant pushing black males into the realm of femininity and away from manhood. Because it targets the black penis and leaves indelible scars on the moral fabric of black males, lynching is seen in these narratives as a form of literal and metaphoric rape against blacks who are seen as females.

More forms of fracture and splitting of black male identity include the key issues of placelessness and disruption of language or breaks in the chain of signification. Both indicate the physical and psychic disorientation of black characters who are not only incarcerated in their pseudo-residential kitchenettes, which stand for their geographical and moral negation, but also thrown out of language and communication by the agrarian environment of the South as well as the urban setting of the North. Placelessness locates blacks outside the urban maps which are drawn by whites and compounded by the breakup of signification which seals their exclusion by imprisoning them in a mental ghetto of incomprehension. In *12 Million Black Voices*, such dynamics of dispersion take a prime importance in narrating the history of black displacement all the way from the Middle Passage, through slavery and post-Emancipation life in the cities. Even though these dynamics are present as defining features of black decentered subjectivity in all Wright's fiction under consideration, it is in this documentary text that they are particularly emphasized as part of an attempt to suspend a dominant white historiography and excavate the pieces of a subaltern narrative based on displacement, placelessness and loss of language.

The second layer of the duality governing the main argument of this thesis has to do with the demise of social and cultural referents that constitute and are constituted by the conventional humanist worldview of subjects as whole and centered. In all the selected works, black male subjectivity is treated both in terms of its fragmentation and

fracture and as a site where the systems of values and regimes of truth upon which white and black communities found their collective modes of identification are contested and complicated. With regards to white society, black male decenteredness is seen in conjunction with the ambivalence and anxiety which mark white identity. By showing how black subjects are produced and racialized by the dominant white hegemony, this study demonstrates the instability and fracture that motivate white identity itself as well as its fear of difference. By the same token, processes of difference-making destabilize white culture's mimetic cognition and its humanist certainties about the self and the Other, showing the wide gap between its truth claims and reality. These processes betray relations of power and knowledge at work in whiteness's worldview, denoting the complicity between its discursive practices and its will to power. This does not only elucidate the extent to which whiteness is a stereotypical knowledge about the black Other but also indicates how this knowledge is deployed to sustain white supremacy and black marginality.

Black male fragmentation also functions in the same way in its relation to the black community. For as much as the tension between black masculine characters and their kindred reveals their feeling of homelessness and psychological malaise, it also foregrounds the mythological character of race and folk culture as stable categories of identification. As with the white community, the fracture of black masculinity attests to the black community's attempt to suppress dissent and its unwillingness to recognize heterogeneity. Driven by a nationalist desire, it defines itself and preserves its racial imaginings by producing black misfits who are pushed to the edge of social experience. According to this mutual process, the black sense of community and racial consciousness are sustained at the site where black masculinity is denied and where its bid for voice and difference are crushed. All the novels analyzed in this study feature black male characters

who are sidelined by their familial and social demands for conformity and subjected to violence or completely excommunicated for their rebellion against the social values defining the black status quo.

The various texts discussed in this thesis are significant for Wright's overall attempt to unveil the covert metaphysics by which whiteness presents itself as a homogeneous and legitimate structure of identification as it constructs black masculine subjecthood through the negative lenses of the stereotype. These texts bring this discrete metaphysics to light by interrogating whiteness's humanist moral values and truth networks through an encounter with the black masculine which draws parallels between its racialization and white identity's desire for power. This study has shown that this approach enables a critical reading of whiteness that disrupts it as a stable category of identification and reveals the fissures and cracks which threaten to tear it asunder. It has demonstrated how whiteness is as much an invention as blackness and that the construction of the black masculine along the lines of the stereotype hides a similar and related construction of white identity in opposite terms.

The textual analysis of this metaphysics, through *Savage Holiday*, "Lawd Today!" and *Native Son*, permits the questioning of whiteness's Manichean order and brings its contradictions and ambivalences into the open. The three narratives reveal in different ways how this metaphysics rests on whiteness's complex relationship to embodiment. They complicate its claims that white identity is unraced and disembodied because it has more to do with the soul than the body. *Savage Holiday*, in particular, explores whiteness's presumed disembodiment through the repressed desires, moral pretentions and sexual fantasies of its embattled protagonist, Erskine Fowler. A middle-class figure and symbol of the American Dream of hard work and success, Fowler is pictured in terms of his avowed professional and religious ethics. Bodiless and

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exclusively defined on the grounds of his intellect and spirituality, he is both a retired man who, thanks to his work values and intelligence, is able to make it to the top of his profession and a religious preacher set on a sacred mission to reform his neighbor, Mabel.

Yet Fowler's suppression of the body as Other and savage haunts him throughout the dramatic turns and twists of the story, casting doubt over his religious worldview and shattering the certainties which form his white identity and account for his social status and professional success. It calls his white credentials into question at the very outset of the novel when he locks himself naked outside his apartment, finding himself trapped in the prison of his body. Hiding in the elevator from the social gaze and keen to avoid being seen without clothes, Fowler goes into a frenzy literally to shield his body from public view just as he has banished it from his own self-conception. Repeatedly described by the narrator as a beast, he enters the world of the narrative completely split between his overembodiment as predator and his messianic white moral errand to reform his war-widow neighbor. As the story unfolds, this fracture between body and soul only gets deeper and more disastrous. So, in spite of his attempt to put a moral and religious veneer on his relation to his past and present, it turns out that the sexual memories of his mother's love affairs and his physical attraction to Mabel are the two forces that constitute the horizon of his life. Embodiment, in this regard, does not only destabilize Fowler's white certainties of a centered self that is unraced and more soul than body but also reveals that his ideology of disembodiment is disastrously hegemonic and controlling. A patriarchal figure *par excellence*, Fowler associates the body with femininity and in seeking to control it ends up destroying it. This is why he commits a symbolic act of matricide and murders Mabel out of his sense of guilt and sexual lust.

In addition to exposing the instability of whiteness as a category by revealing the contradictions at the heart of its claims and certainties about the self, this study is also

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concerned to disclose the discursive strategies and practices it uses to invent the black Other. Destabilizing white identity as a referent, in this sense, involves both pointing to its ambivalent claims about the self and its construction of the Other. This thesis argues that whiteness banishes the body as savage and a locus of irrational impulses from its mode of identification only to attach it to black people and fix them in its negative representation. Focusing on embodiment, this thesis argues that whiteness constructs blackness on the basis of physical appearance and skin color. Such a kind of seeing, both literal and metaphoric, functions in two significant ways that unveil white identity's lack of coherence and its involvement in a production of power antithetical to its truth claims. First, it highlights the interdependence between whiteness and blackness, underscoring the fact that the invention of the Other is underpinned by a latent process whereby the self is also invented. By showing that black embodiment is not natural or given but a result of certain discursive formations, this study also uncovers whiteness's silence on its own expulsion of the body as constitutive of subjectivity. It reveals that the framing of black masculinity in the realm of physical visibility allows whiteness to claim an identity which is not only disembodied and unraced but also natural and given. As much as this dynamic of black hyperembodiment arrests and confines black subjects in the field of visibility by reducing their human value to their skin color it also ensures that white identity passes as an invisible and taken-for-granted norm.

On a second level of difference-making, whiteness racializes blackness by imprisoning and keeping it under its gaze. The processes of looking that stereotypically produce black men as mere bodies and lacking in humanity also betray the uneven distribution of power across the racial divide. They attest to the positions and structures of subjection in which black men are held under the white order and which are maintained to preserve whites' privileges and supremacy. Racialization defines the different ways in

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which white looks lock black males in the racial visibility of skin color, marking them off as different and inferior in order to legitimize their subjugation. Wright's fiction explores these strategies of seeing and looking which establish and sustain the Manichean situation in which dispossessed and powerless black male subjectivity is kept apart from the rights of citizenship and privileges of the American Dream by the omnipotent white patriarchal figure.

Although present in all the narratives covered by this study, the deployment of looking and seeing as tools of control and authority over the black male body is particularly evident in *Native Son*. Bigger is depicted as all-body and deprived of voice and agency. He is framed and arrested by the white gaze right from his first encounter with public space when, just a few pages into the story, he comes across a large poster picturing the attorney, Buckley, pointing his finger at Bigger and engulfing him in his gaze. Later when he crosses the racial border separating white and black neighborhoods to work for the wealthy Daltons, Bigger experiences the imprisoning effect of the white gaze for the second time. After his initial arrest by the gaze of Buckley, the figure of the law, Bigger is yet again imprisoned by the white gaze in the form of economic authority. His short stay at the house entraps him in multiple instances of confinement where he is reminded of his body by white looks. At this stage, Bigger's body becomes a sign of his inferior economic and racial status in relation to the Daltons who stand for the forces of business and capitalism and their exclusion of black people. After murdering Mary, Bigger's enframement becomes literal as the media constructs and circulates his public image as a beast and predator who rapes and kills the symbol of white beauty. This series of arresting frames and confining looks rushes Bigger to his only logical fate under the white regime of visual surveillance when the court of law condemns him as guilty and sentences him to death. Bigger's shame with regard to his body and his constant feeling

of physical unease when he is subjected to whites' looks bears testimony to his imprisonment by these different forces that control his position in public space as guilty criminal. Law, business and the media are three institutions that define and determine access to citizenship rights. They exclude Bigger from his individual rights and from public space by fixing him in visibility as less than human.

The formation of black masculinity by white hegemony also reveals the myths and ideological structures which white identity deploys to enforce its self-privileging order. Whiteness does not only link seeing with perspective in its perception of the black man as mere body but also institutionalizes its debilitating view of him through a complex regime of ideological constructions in order to legitimize his subjection. It engages in a form of ideological representation that denigrates the black man in the public eye and therefore renders his disenfranchisement not only acceptable but also necessary. This strategy, where the public image of the black man is mobilized to deprive him of his rights, underscores the cruel paradox underpinning whiteness's dependence on creating and maintaining the black subject as Other in order to preserve its supremacy and privileges. It has to emphasize his hypervisibility as body in order to stress his invisibility as a human being stripped of all entitlements in the public arena and body politic. Whiteness's will to incarcerate the black subject in the negative image of the stereotype is motivated by a desire to position itself as a norm that determines what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong and what is acceptable and what is not. This will to truth allows whiteness to legislate and order the public and private spheres of society and organize race relations in its favor. It also makes possible the deployment of the will to power, for it is only by setting itself as a reference-point for legitimacy and truth that whiteness is able to pattern social relations and shape power

configurations between blacks and whites in ways that serve and favor its supremacist claims.

This study has explored the various strategies that white society mobilizes in order prejudicially to misrepresent black subjectivity and hence legitimize its truth claims and networks of values. Equally, it has shown how these discursive practices serve to consolidate the structures of subjection under which black men are held just as they render positive claims about white identity natural and given and, thus, easily put at the service of white supremacy. Stereotypical representation of black male subjectivity in terms of the dual labels, "Uncle Tom" and "Black Beast," reflects this Manichean worldview by which whiteness camouflages its uncertainties and hides its imbalances. In order to enforce the racial barrier which politically, economically and ideologically materializes its Manichaeism, whiteness lures black males into compliance through the Uncle Tom stereotype and condemns and coerces them if they rebel by brandishing the black beast trope. Even though the first label attests to the black man's symbolic emasculation and the second his violent and physical emasculation, both are tools by which whiteness keeps blacks in their place of marginality and preserves its dominant hegemonic order.

At the same time that this study questions the humanist grounding of identity with regard to white culture, it also undertakes to demonstrate that there is no easy and unproblematic return to the black community as the space of identity. Arguing against the concept of black African specificity and of race as a stable category of identification, the thesis has sought to reveal that black male characters in Wright's fiction are as excluded by their black community as they are by white society. Their formation as outsiders in relation to black folk culture and traditions is due to the unsuitability of the collective and closed humanist modes of identification at the heart of social relations

among black people. This collective identity which is protected by race and tradition is examined and then refuted as an adequate reference which can give meaning and bestow orientation on the fragmented and borderline position of black male subjects. Most of Wright's black men are shown to be in revolt against their own black communities before they are exposed to white culture and its repressive systems. Richard, in *Black Boy*, who avows that he understands the idea of race only late in life, is portrayed to be at odds with the community from the very first scene at the outset of the autobiography. The same is true of Bigger, whose wrath against and shame about his family is shown to be the first cause of his explosive character even before he encounters and eventually gets destroyed by the forces of white racism. None of the black characters covered by this study is at one with his own culture but driven apart from it by the demands of collective identity set forth by the community.

All the novels on which I have focused present a picture of the black community as something that has ceased to be a referent to which black men can look for orientation in life, providing them with the resources to handle the pressures that jeopardize their masculinity. Instead of featuring as a home where black men can belong, black culture alienates them and severs their ties with the community's private and public sphere. The family, the private space where bonds of love, affection and solidarity are nurtured, figures as an antagonistic environment that repulses black men more than it attracts them. Usually run by female figures, the space of home is always seen as antithetical to masculinity, forcing black men either to relinquish their masculine agency or succumb to the will of their mothers and grandmothers. Richard's childhood in his family's household is plagued by the authoritarian dictates of the three women who run the home: his grandmother, mother and aunt. The women's demands for conformity and the violence they inflict on him put Richard on a collision course with his family. Intent on

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preserving his individuality and seeking ways to gain agency, he engages in a series of literal and symbolic deaths that determine his interaction with his family. He burns the house down, almost kills his grandmother and deters his aunt from trying to impose her authority on him. Even his father is seen in gendered terms since he is unable to provide for the family or provide them with the care and nurture they require. The father's lack of responsibility, violence and eventual desertion in order to gratify his sexual desires are all seen by Richard as feminine acts he has to denounce to achieve his independence of character. The same antagonistic setting is behind the murder of Silas whose hard work and dedication to protecting his family do not spare him the sad fate of betrayal by his wife, Sarah and murder by a white mob. Sarah cheats on him with a white salesman and ruins the family values he devotes his life to protect. Bigger is another example of black men emasculated by the domestic life and forced to retaliate by using violence to hide a subsequent feeling of shame. The small dreams of his mother and sister and their acceptance of the status quo of poverty and marginalization are the real hindrance to Bigger's self-understanding and his ability to develop a coherent view of life. Mrs. Thomas and her daughter, Vera, blame their miserable life on Bigger and hold him responsible for not keeping a job to feed them. The mother regrets having given birth to him and foretells that his future is going to be destructive. Her anger and verbal abuse of Bigger stems from her compliance to the place accorded her by the white segregation system. She, therefore, scolds him for not behaving like other blacks and accepting his place under the white order; and when the typical humiliating boy's job of a chauffeur at the Daltons presents itself, she keeps pressuring him to accept it. Mrs. Thomas is like other female figures in Wright's fiction who epitomize a feminine black culture that has succumbed to white hegemony and stand in the way of black men's quest for maturity.

The fictional works explored here also share a view of black culture in which the public sphere joins hands with the black family to excommunicate black men from collective black experience. They picture a black public life which has not only succumbed to white hegemony but has become its arm, educating black men to be compliant boys to the white order. In this manner, the wider black community functions as an emasculating space that black men have to forsake in order to develop and maintain their personalities and resist the effeminizing effects of the white system. *Black Boy* presents different scenes of black neighborhoods, schools, the streets and playgrounds which attest to this antagonism that binds black men to their community's public life. In all these places, the small child's eccentric behavior, which denotes his idiosyncratic view of life, is severely punished as wrong as society presses what Wright calls its "tribal" values on him. In "The Man Who Lived Underground," Fred Daniels' encounter with the black congregation first results in his feeling of guilt and alienation and leads, secondly, to his being violently driven out of the church. Bigger, in *Native Son*, holds an extremely tense and occasionally violent relationship with his gang of friends. He also disavows the moral authority of the only black priest he meets in the narrative, rejecting his attempts to make him repent the murder of Mary, which he describes as the only meaningful thing that ever happened to him. These violent incidents depict the uneasy relationship between a black folk culture that denies difference and heterogeneity in the name of race and tradition and a black masculinity that is ceaselessly driven to the margin because it fails to conform to its community's closed system of belonging. This troubled relationship is also underpinned by the fact that the black community's demands for conformity from its men betray its femininization and subjection by the dominant white order, for social calls to embrace the status quo mean that black male subjects are

required to accept a black social experience formed and subsumed by the structures of white hegemony.

The fictional works selected explore and debunk the humanist view of the subject as whole and at home with its own culture and society. They poignantly examine the traditional routes to the realization of this type of subject, concluding that they take the black male nowhere. These routes chart two courses for black men to fulfill themselves by adhering to either white or black social totalities: a first course is through integration with white culture to reap the benefits of the American Dream and achieve social mobility. A second is defined by the black male subject's return to his culture and tradition in an attempt to heal his wounds and achieve a sense of selfhood by invoking racial solidarity and cultural purity. Each of these alternatives is questioned as a valid referent that can anchor black subjects as whole within their social reality and presented as antagonistic contexts that confine them to what Wright calls "No Man's Land." So, instead of seeking their manhood through integration with white culture or through a mythic return to a racial origin, these characters cultivate and embrace their marginality as their place of identity, positioning themselves in the borderline between both white and black communities, in the heart of the No Man's Land.

In the same way that it challenges white identity and its founding myth of the American Dream as well as black culture's imagined racial typicality through the way the two systems form the black male subject, this thesis also further suspends their closed and transparent worldviews of subjectivity by exploring marginality as the black man's place of belonging. Emphasizing fragmentation over wholeness and difference over sameness, this thesis shows how marginality as the site of self-splitting and disjuncture provides black males with perspective, social mobility and freedom of action. Through an analysis of the tropes of hybridity and mimicry but also Blackface and double-

consciousness, it has explored the ways whereby black male subjects can cross and recross the racial divide, improvising tactics that enable them to intervene in the dominant order and achieve agency. Characters like Bigger and Daniels mobilize their Blackface to cheat the white gaze and break free of its surveillance and incarcerating effects. These two characters subvert the very practices that denigrate black people and cause them to stay in their place of inferiority. These practices include mobilizing dissemblance, which incorporates black powerlessness, to move in and out of the white system and also to extricate themselves from black acquiescence to white structures of subjection. By creolizing and hybridizing practices which used to indicate the inferiority and subordination of black people, these black men succeed in slipping away from white surveillance and become agents in their own lives. These mimic black subjects are eventually destroyed by white power and the conspiring silence of the black community, but nonetheless achieve a perspective that gives them a measure of control over their existence and who they are.

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