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Native Sons; Or, How "Bigger" Was Born Again

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This article reconsiders Richard Wright's *Native Son* by comparing divergences between the published novel and an earlier typeset manuscript. It argues that such revisions render protagonist Bigger Thomas an icon of global class conflict rather than a national figure of racial tension. By revealing the continuities among critical essays that bookend the writing of *Native Son*, this essay also reveals how the novel's restructuring further elaborates Wright's globalism – highlighting his desire to produce work that transcended both national and racial categories. Finally, it considers *Native Son* as a work of "world literature" and a model for global minoritarian discourse. By examining "translations" of the novel into postcolonial contexts, it argues that the global afterlife of *Native Son* is no departure from the localized vision of the novel, but rather the recapitulation of its explicit globalism. This article thereby challenges critical convention dividing Wright's career cleanly into two phases: his American period and later self-exile. It emphasizes rather that Wright's worldliness should be traced back through his revision of *Native Son* and earlier critical essays – ultimately finding his globalism not a late-stage development, but actually the single theme that unifies his *oeuvre*.

Today the problem of the world's dispossessed exists with great urgency, and the problem of the Negro in America is a phase of this general problem, containing and telescoping the longings in the lives of a billion colored subject colonial people into a symbol.

Richard Wright, unpublished speech (undated)[1]

When the feeling and fact of being a Negro is [*sic*] accepted fully into the consciousness of a Negro, there's something universal about it, something saving and informing, something that lifts it above being a Negro in America. Oh Will I ever have enough strength and courage to tell what I feel and think; and do I know it well enough to tell it …

Richard Wright, journal entry (1946)[2]

"The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever," wrote critic Irving Howe in 1963.

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[1] Richard Wright, "Speech Sent to Constance Webb," Richard Wright Collection, 1935–1967, New York Public Library, Box 3, Folder c13, Reel 2, acquired by the Schomburg Collection in April 1969.

[2] Quoted in Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 251.

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No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.[3]

Howe correctly noted the impact of Wright's work, but his narrow reading of the novel as an indictment of "American culture" – "our culture" – belies the expansiveness of Wright's vision. Indeed, *Native Son* cannot be so easily pinned down; the elusiveness of its origin speaks to the scope of its critique. Drafting the novel at the crucial moment when he began articulating an original aesthetic program, Wright fashioned *Native Son* not from a "claustrophobia of vision," but rather from an incipient globalism. Though conventionally read as a quintessential American race narrative, *Native Son* should be understood on its own terms: as a work of world literature addressing economic oppression on a broader, global scale. Wrought from an earlier draft focussing on mother/son conflict, Wright's revisions to the novel reflect the development of his globalist perspective.

The budding vision of global class struggle evident in Wright's earliest criticism and prose forces a reconsideration of his lifelong intellectual trajectory. The standard story proceeds as follows: following a public break with the Communist Party, announced in the *Atlantic Monthly* article "I Tried to Be a Communist" (1944) but which had most likely taken place several years earlier, Wright exiled himself to Paris in 1946. He never returned in earnest to the United States. From Europe, Wright published a series of existentially inflected novels often critiqued for being clumsy, stilted, and uninspired: *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *The Long Dream* (1958). But the most significant and contentious works of his post-American era were collections of travel writing and reportage: *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), an ethnography of post-independence Ghana; *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), on the meeting in Indonesia among political leaders of twrnty-nine decolonizing nations across Africa and Asia; and *Pagan Spain* (1957), an account of daily life under the strict Catholicism of Franco's regime.

In Paris, Wright was quickly embraced by the cosmopolitan in-crowd, including French existentialists Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, foundational theorists of *négritude* Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, and other African American expatriate writers James Baldwin and Chester Himes. He signed on as a founding member of the editorial board of *Présence africaine*,

[3] Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, 10, 4 (1963), 353–68, 354–55.

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the leading pan-African journal of its day.[4] In the final eighteen months of his life, he composed nothing but haiku – leaving over four thousand of them at his death.[5]

Within Americanist literary criticism especially, this trajectory has cemented a particular narrative dividing Wright's life and work cleanly in two parts: his early American phase, and his late post-exile phase, punctuated by such efforts as *White Man, Listen!* (1957) that established his political solidarity with anticolonial struggles the world over. This portrait of fracture, I argue, is both reductive and inaccurate. As evidenced by his earliest attempts at delineating a program for so-called "protest" art in his "Notes on 'Personalism'" (1935), "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), early working drafts of *Native Son* (*c.*1938–39), and finally his essay/speech "How 'Bigger' Was Born" (1940–42), Wright's globalist imagination is rather the predominant theme that unites his *oeuvre* with a single continuous thread.

I

At the tender age of twenty-seven, Richard Wright began outlining what may have been his first attempt at an aesthetic agenda. American artistic expression should "have as its main burden and theme the posing of the problem of the individual in relation to society," he writes. American literature was uniquely able to take up this question, he claims, because "[f]rom its inception Amer [*sic*] civilization was a class civilization."[6] The Great War and the Great Depression, Wright observes, "divided the American scene into 2 camps: one is tending to prolet. [*sic*] themes, and the other is tending toward fascist themes."[7]

[4] Michel Fabre sees Wright's participation in these intellectual circles as uniting two seemingly disparate modes of thought, arguing that "From the very beginning, the existentialists took a stand against colonialism, supporting colonized peoples against their oppressors, demanding immediate and unrestricted independence for them, denouncing American racism and the Marshall Plan as an imperialistic political maneuver." See Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and French Existentialists," *MELUS*, 5, 2 (1978), 39–51, 45.

[5] A selection Wright's 817 preferred poems was published posthumously as Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998). Little scholarly attention has been paid to these last works of Wright's life, with the exception of Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Haiku* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014); Jianqing Zheng, ed., *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011); Eugene E. Miller, *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), and Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985).

[6] Richard Wright, "Notes on 'Personalism,' 1935," Richard Wright Collection, 1935–1967, New York Public Library, Box 3, Folder c13, Reel 2, acquired by the Schomburg Collection in April 1969.

[7] Ibid., 2.

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It is not so much these two "camps" that interest Wright; his fascination fixes rather on the predicament of those lingering in ominous limbo between the so-called "proletarian" and "fascist" tendencies. "Between these 2 camps is a sort of twilight region[,] a No Man's Land, an unexplored ground upon which both occasionally and strangely meet," he continues. "I speak now … of the Petty bourgeoisie, a dream-like domain where theories sprout like mushrooms. It is a ground strewn with statues, human statues striking unusual and outlandish poses … It is a bog of quicksand with no bottom … In its diffuseness it transcends petty national boundaries."[8] Here, Wright stakes his claim: "It is on the basis of this restless class of non-class that I [seek] to formulate an aesthetic theory. It is a theory of extreme individualism, or better, personalism."

And what is personalism? It is hard to say – Wright's language is both imprecise and inflammatory. "Personalism will foster expression of protest in terms as individual and personal as possible," he writes. It will be "anti-aesthetic," "anti-literature," it will be "an art of attack."[9] Wright's program is self-obsoleting, as he concludes in a dramatic flourish: "The personalist who becomes a perfect personalist ceases to be a personalist, and becomes an artist writing for and speaking to mankind."[10] In perfecting "personalism," the artist's "extreme individualism" becomes a transcendent, worldly gesture.

"Notes on 'Personalism,'" an unpublished essay from 1935, is indeed a "somewhat curious" piece of writing.[11] Despite its vagueness, the essay outlines in broad strokes Wright's self-styled artistic program: it speaks in Marxist terms to the condition of the artist in America; it unapologetically unites literary expression and social protest; it claims the outward resonances of a singular action, the dramatic interplay between the individual and all mankind; its scope "transcends petty national boundaries."[12]

Just two years later, Wright published his "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in *New Challenge*, famously lamenting the black literary tradition to which he positioned himself as the unfortunate heir. "At best, Negro writing has been something external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves," he writes. Accusing previous writers of abandoning the culture of the Negro masses

[8] Ibid. [9] Ibid., 4. [10] Ibid.

[11] Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 143.

[12] Wright's "Notes on 'Personalism'" has received almost no critical attention whatsoever. For a brief summary of the essay see Jerry Ward and Robert Butler, eds., *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), 301–2. For brief mentions of "personalism" see Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright*, 14; and Gilroy, who identifies Wright's "aesthetics of personalism" in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and other writings of ex-slaves. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 69.

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("unwritten and unrecognized") for that of an itinerant Negro bourgeoisie ("parasitic and mannered"), Wright seeks to forge a new kind of expression: "A Negro writer must learn to view the life of the Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class," he continues. "Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something."[13]

Although few remnants of "personalism" remain in Wright's "Blueprint," several continuities arise: he retains a substantively Marxist framework; he reiterates the embeddedness of politics and art; he nurses an increasingly global vision of class oppression, stretched across "one-sixth of the earth surface" to include the "struggles of minority peoples everywhere." And just as the perfectly realized "personalist" "speak[s] to mankind," the same is true of nationalism in Negro writing. "Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them," he contends. "They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must *possess* and *understand* it."[14]

Although seemingly a blueprint for "Negro writing," Wright is ever conscious of the broader implications of this work – fearing that Negro writers might "alienate their allies in the struggle for freedom,"[15] his theory always attuned to "world movements."[16] Of course, it may come as no surprise that the globalist rhetoric demonstrated by these early essays follows the internationalism inherent to Marxist theory – as in its famous call to action ("Workers of the world unite!") and the title of its anthem ("The Internationale"). Building on his evident Marxist predilections and an earlier outline of transcendent artistic practice, Wright articulates a daring concept of literary engagement. "Blueprint for Negro Writing": a model for global minority discourse?

By the following year, Wright has published the short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) to great critical acclaim and resettled in New York City. By 1939, he has moved to Harlem and begun drafting his next effort – a novel called *Native Son*. The novel was readied for publication by Harper's in 1939, at which point it was chosen as a main selection by the

[13] Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Angelyn Mitchell, ed., *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 97–106, 104.
[14] Ibid., 101, original emphases. [15] Ibid. [16] Ibid., 103.

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Book of the Month Club for 1940. The club mandated several revisions to the original text: the frank depiction of public masturbation in Book I was removed, in addition to the requested "toning down of explicit sexual language, altering details of the plot, and shortening the speeches of Bigger's lawyer and the district attorney. A few paragraphs were added, and some changes may have been made to avoid resetting long stretches of type."[17] This first edition of the novel went on to sell 250,000 copies that year, making Wright America's preeminent black writer.

It was not until a half-century later that the Library of America editions of Wright's early works "restored" *Native Son* to its initial form prior to the Book of the Month revisions, "the last version of the text that Wright prepared without external intervention."[18] This edition of *Native Son* sparked considerable controversy. James Campbell claimed that the volume's editor, Arnold Rampersad, "appears to have overstepped his brief" in preparing the edition.[19] James Tuttleton more forcefully called these decisions into question: "In the Library of America text, these excisions have been restored as instances of unwarranted external interference. But Wright approved the deletion, rewrote the [masturbation] scene, and modified later particulars … to harmonize with his changes. Do not these changes represent his final intention?"[20] He goes further: "We need to have these restored passages – but they belong in the notes, not in the text. When later editors, on their own authority, undertake to restore cancelled material, they do not honor the author's final intention and do not produce 'definitive texts.'"[21]

Although Tuttleton's criticism of such editorial restoration is fair, Wright's earlier versions of *Native Son* are still ripe for analysis, at least to reveal whether his intentions may have changed over time before becoming "final."[22] Any

[17] Richard Wright, *Richard Wright: Early Works*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Library of America, 1991), 912.

[18] Ibid., 909.

[19] James Campbell, "The Wright Version?", *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 Dec. 1991, 14. For the controversy over the Library of America edition played out in the *Times Literary Supplement* see also James Campbell, "Letter to the Editor: Richard Wright," *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 Feb. 1992, 16; Ellen Wright and Julia Wright, "Letter to the Editor: Richard Wright," *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 Jan. 1992, 17; and Mark Richardson, "Letter to the Editor: Richard Wright." *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 Jan. 1992, 15.

[20] James W. Tuttleton, "The Problematic Texts of Richard Wright," *Hudson Review*, 45, 2 (1992), 261–71, 270.

[21] Ibid., 271.

[22] This close examination of Wright's working manuscript and final published version of *Native Son* also importantly emphasizes the author as literary figure and not simply an ideologue, which is too often the case in scholarship on Wright. By observing the numerous changes to the *Native Son* manuscript, we come to see his literary craft in real time, and how this expressive practice was shaped by larger social and political concerns. See Joyce Ann Joyce, "Style and Meaning in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Black American Literature Forum*, 16, 3 (1982), 112–15.

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notion of original (and singular) authorial intent is especially complex in this case, when the itinerant Wright had already delineated a radical program for protest art and Negro writing in the years leading up to his completion of *Native Son*. Moreover, "Wright's intentions have been difficult to grasp, because many of his books were mangled or chopped up by various editors, and their publications was strewn over five decades," writes Louis Menand. "Putting the expurgated material back in gives all three of the novels a grittier surface; and in the case of *Native Son* it also adds a dimension to the story."[23]

There are two known typeset manuscripts of the novel, one with largely grammatical and typographical edits, the other with Wright's handwritten notes and revisions. What is most striking about this earlier version of the novel is that several of its scenes diverge dramatically from their counterparts in both the revised Harper's (1940) and the "complete" Library of America (1991) editions. The relationship among the three known versions of *Native Son* – the working manuscript, the Book of the Month selection, and the restored text – is not simply one of deletion and addition. Wright's manuscript covered in handwritten revisions – presumably from 1938 or 1939, before the final typescript was delivered to Harper's in June of that year – is markedly different from both the "revised" and the "restored" editions. Specifically, the novel's introduction of protagonist Bigger Thomas, his family life, and his tentative job offer includes extended passages that were removed or altered prior to the novel's 1940 publication but that also do not appear in the restored text.[24]

Since the publication of the Library of America edition of *Native Son* nearly three decades ago, textual criticism of the novel has focussed predominantly on the consequences of the Book of the Month revisions and Wright's concession to their editorial oversight.[25] In examining the print histories of both *Native*

[23] Louis Menand, *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 78. Here Menand is referring to the "restored" Library of America text, not the typeset manuscript discussed here.

[24] Keneth Kinnamon has briefly surveyed these changes in Wright's *Native Son* manuscript, arguing rather superficially, "If the novel had been published with the omitted original opening, many bored readers would have put the book down after the first few pages." Although Kinnamon claims that the manuscript opening "lacks any drama," rather the earlier draft of the novel stages any entirely different *kind* of drama. See Keneth Kinnamon, "Introduction," in Kinnamon, ed., *New Essays on Native Son* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–33, 9–10. Scholarship on Wright has largely neglected this sort of comparative work, despite the "need for … comparative studies of published works with manuscript versions." See Maryemma Graham, "Introduction," *Callaloo*, 28 (1986), 439–45, 444–45.

[25] See Hazel Rowley, "The Shadow of the White Woman: Richard Wright and the Book-of-the-Month Club," *Partisan Review*, 66, 4 (1999), 625–34; and James Olney, "Richard Wright in the Library of America," *Partisan Review*, 61, 3 (1994), 518–28.

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Son and *Black Boy/American Hunger* (1945), John Young proposes an alternative method of handling these materials than that underscored by the Library of America debacle: "The interesting and productive question is then not which version of *Native Son* or *Black Boy* to privilege but rather how to read their manuscript and published editions in mutual relation, for what they reveal about both Wright's authorial choices and the social spheres circumscribing them."[26] Indeed, by including a third, earlier typeset manuscript in the ongoing debates over Wright's novel, I aim to mediate between "intentionalist" and "materialist" schools of textual criticism.[27] Rather than read the first known manuscript of *Native Son* as more or less indicative of authorial intention – thereby reducing the novel to "before" and "after" – I take each text as its own set of alternatives and possibilities. In that sense, the manuscript discussed here is truly an *avant-texte* in the parlance of genetic criticism, no more or less important than either version of the novel ultimately published.[28] What concerns me is not so much what any single instantiation of *Native Son* might signify, but rather what the process of its revision reveals about Wright's narrative and critical strategies.

This essay focusses on significant moments of divergence in Book I, "Fear."[29] Wright's complete revision of the novel's exposition – including descriptions of Bigger's domestic circumstance – reframes Bigger's condition in the novel: feelings of oppression, frustration, anxiety, and anger attributed to maternal relationships in the earlier manuscript are rewritten as images of class struggle and extreme poverty in the published version. This rewriting of the novel resonates with Wright's growing concern – as articulated in his "Notes on 'Personalism'" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing" – for the global resonances of the predicament of America's Negro underclass. By reframing Bigger's anxiety away from filial conflict and toward the oppressive living conditions of the urban poor, Wright repurposes *Native Son* as a sign of global class struggle and a model for world literature.

[26] John K. Young, "'Quite as Human as It Is Negro': Subpersons and Textual Property in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*," in George Hutchinson and John K. Young, eds., *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 67–92, 69.

[27] Hutchinson and Young, *Publishing Blackness*, 9.

[28] For the primer on the theory of genetic criticism in English see Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden, "Introduction: A Genesis of French Genetic Criticism," in Deppman, Ferrer, and Groden, eds., *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1–16.

[29] The focus on Book I of the novel is for two reasons. First, the domestic sphere of the exposition sets the tone for the entire narrative arc of Bigger's crime and punishment. Second, it is arguably the most aesthetically realized or effective section of the novel. See Matthew Elder, "Social Demarcation and the Forms of Psychological Fracture in Book One of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 52, 1 (2010), 31–47.

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II

Comparative analysis of the typeset *Native Son* manuscript with the published editions reveals how Wright methodically empties his protagonist of personal or familial conflict, thereby thematizing the novel's exposition around images of hunger, housing, and work. His process for doing so involved depicting Bigger's frustration and anger as less peculiar or individualized and more social or structural.

Both editions begin with an intrusion, and these distinct intrusions indicate exactly how Wright's depictions of filial friction gain class consciousness. The published novel actually begins with two intrusions: the first is sensory, the loud ring of an alarm clock waking Bigger, his mother, and his siblings Vera and Buddy:

> Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinng!
>
> An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked. A woman's voice sang out impatiently:
>
> "Bigger, shut that thing off!"
>
> A surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly.[30]

This scene typifies Wright's play with typography to depict the sensory world of his characters. The extended "BRING!" is, with relation to the surrounding text, as startling as the alarm would sound to the Thomases. Before we return to this opening and its significant clock imagery, we should recall the second intrusion:

> Abruptly, they all paused, holding their clothes in their hands, their attention caught by a light tapping in the thinly plastered walls of the room. They forgot their conspiracy against shame and their eyes strayed apprehensively over the floor.
>
> "There he is again, Bigger!" the woman screamed, and the tiny, one-room apartment galvanized into violent action.
>
> …
>
> "There he is!" the mother screamed again.
>
> A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger's trouser-leg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on.[31]

Here is the double intrusion – a technological device invades Bigger's dream space, followed by a rat invading his personal space. The one is surprising and discomforting yet commonplace; the other causes extreme fear.

The manuscript opening is dramatically calmer:

> One moment he was sound asleep and then the very next a loud knock on the door made him jerk full awake; he leaned upon his elbows in bed, staring unblinkingly into

[30] Wright, *Early Works*, 447.

[31] Ibid., 448–49.

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darkness, listening with that muscular tensity of a man trying to decide if harm is threatening or not …

Wright begins:

There was a short silence in which he wondered if he had heard anything; he thought that perhaps he had been dreaming. But the knock came again, sharp and hard, and he relaxed, thinking, Somebody's knocking … Suddenly he felt the cold air of the room and slid back beneath the covers.

"Ma!" he called softly.

Directly after he had spoken the knocking stopped and a muffled voice called.

"Sister Thomas!"[32]

Here, the double intrusion is still present and analogous to that in the published novel. The "loud knock on the door" corresponds to the "BRING!" and the visitor to the rat. But these are subtle differences with significant implications. In the published novel, Bigger's mother commands him to shut off the alarm clock. In the typeset manuscript, this dynamic is perfectly reversed – Wright uses the exact same language to describe the sequence of events, but in the novel he substitutes Bigger for his mother (or vice versa).

Novel

An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked. A woman's voice sang out impatiently:

"Bigger, shut that thing off!"

A surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly.[33]

Manuscript

"Ma!" he called. "Somebody's at the door!"

A grunt came from the darkness.

"Hunh?"

"Ma!"

"Who's that? What is it? That you, Bigger?" his mother asked in sleepy confusion.

"Somebody's at the door! Can't you hear 'em knocking?" his voice sang out with impatience.

"At the door?"

"Yeah, can't you hear 'em?"

"Oh, Sister Thomas!" {the muffled voice came loudly.}[34]

The knock {sounded} again, then {a} shout.

"It's me! It's Sister Mosley!"

"Oh," his mother said.

The bed springs creaked and his mother's {bare} feet scratched faintly on the wooden floor.[35]

[32] Original typescript to Richard Wright's book, *Native Son* (published by Harper & Brothers, 1940), showing extensive intercalation and revision of the text. Acquired by the Schomburg Collection in April 1969, 1.

[33] Wright, *Early Works*, 447.

[34] Throughout this essay, I have bracketed Wright's handwritten edits to the manuscript.

[35] Original typescript, 1–2.

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The words and phrases with broken underlining indicate where Wright has simply recycled material from the manuscript and reworked it into the published novel. Just as Bigger's mother's voice "sang out impatiently," Bigger's voice "sang out with impatience" as he calls his mother's attention to the knock at the door. He summons "a surly grunt" when she commands him to shut off the alarm clock, whereas she replies with a "grunt" to his call, "Ma! Somebody's at the door!" In the novel a single generalized "bed spring creaked," whereas in the manuscript "the bed springs creaked" as his mother rises to meet their guest. As she gets up to answer the door, her "bare feet scratched faintly on the wooden floor," just as Bigger's "naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floors" as he rises to shut off the alarm clock. This subtle role reversal is significant: the manuscript emphasizes repeatedly the tension between Bigger and his mother – a deep-rooted tension that is the primary source of his frustration and anger and the primary instrument of his oppression. That this single relationship might be the most immediate cause of Bigger's resentment dramatically refocusses the action of the novel and resituates Bigger's violence within an entirely new framework.[36]

The difference between the alarm clock/rat and the knock/Sister Mosley is also crucial. The latter signify normal social behaviors, whereas the ring of the alarm clock and the appearance of the rat are loaded signs of economic dispossession. The rat represents filth, disgust, unrelenting poverty, and the everyday traumas of the oppressed underclass. The immediate fear that the rat is there "again" implies the constant, recurring fear of its reappearance. The published novel's opening description thus focusses on the harsh realities of the Thomases' domestic situation. Wright shows how their tiny and filthy apartment produces fear, dread, and especially shame from lack of personal space.

> "Turn your heads so I can dress," she said.
>
> The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The woman rushed out of her nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins.
>
> …
>
> The two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed; and the mother and sister did the same while the boys dressed.[37]

As the rat reappears, "They forgot their conspiracy against shame."[38] This short image of the men and women of the family turning away from each

[36] Growing tension between Bigger and his mother is not totally absent from the final version of the novel. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Diane Long Hoeveler, "Oedipus Agonistes: Mothers and Sons in Richard Wright's Fiction," *Black American Literature Forum*, 12, 2 (1978), 65–68.

[37] Wright, *Early Works*, 447.

[38] Ibid., 448.

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other as they take turns getting dressed indicates how poverty produces shame – the entire family uncomfortably close in "this garbage dump."[39]

If the rat signals extreme poverty, then the alarm clock can also be understood as a symbol of the urban underclass. The alarm clock and its clamorous "BRING!" recall the daily routine of a wageworker and the strict control over time exercised by industrial managers – indeed, a routine Bigger is set to join upon the insistence of his mother, most likely a remainder from the earlier manuscript. In an urban, industrial setting like Chicago's Black Belt, the life of an impoverished worker and the separation between his private life and work life are regulated and mediated by the "BRING!" of bells and alarms.[40] "The "BRING!" negates leisure and pleasure, rest and repose. It is harsh and violent, and the intrusion of the clock suggests ever so subtly how Bigger and his family are poor folk, living in the dingiest of conditions, captive to shared shame and dread. As Abdul JanMohamed notes, "What has not been adequately appreciated is that the kitchenette, in which the famous opening scene is located, was later characterized by Wright as, in effect, a 'death cell,'" and thus "the entire novel can be said to map the movement from one form of death to another": from the "social-death" of the kitchenette to the "symbolic-death" of the prison cell.[41] The published novel's opening scene is Wright's pointed portrait of class oppression and the mundane traumas of urban destitution.

This sense of fear and shame described in the published novel, including the moment of mutually averted eyes, is absent from Wright's typewritten manuscript. The earlier version of the exposition dwells rather on Bigger's relationship with his mother. This scene in the manuscript is primarily an extended dialogue among Bigger, his mother, and Sister Mosley. First, Sister Mosley enters and scolds Bigger: "You know, Sister Thomas … And I'm saying this out real loud so somebody can hear it! You know, I was just sitting there in church last night wishing that that big boy of yours was at the Mourners' Bench."[42] This tiff between Sister Mosley and Bigger serves to illuminate the central maternal tension:

> "You hear me talking to you, boy," said Sister Mosley. "You there curled in that bed making like you don't; but you do. There grunting like you trying to wake up. You wake already and I know it!"

[39] Ibid., 452.

[40] For more on clocks, time, and the working class, see E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, 38, 1 (1967), 56–97.

[41] JanMohamed, *Death-Bound-Subject*, 84.

[42] Original typescript, 5, underlining in original. On the role of religion in the novel see James A. Miller, "Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Callaloo*, 28 (1986), 501–6.

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There was still another silence.

"Sister Mosley's talking to you, Bigger." His mother called in a mollifying tone which told him that she wanted him to lift his head and talk with Sister Mosley if even for only the sake of appearances.

But he was damned if he would; if they kept on he would get mad and if he got mad he would talk and then there was no telling just what he would say. He kept his lips closed and his eyes shut tightly.

"Bigger, why don't {you} answer Sister Mosley when she's talking to you? You ain't sleep."[43]

Sister Mosley's address becomes the point of dispute, the axis of animosity between Bigger and his mother as she calls him in a "mollifying tone." Moreover, this short exchange gives us a brief glimpse into Bigger's psyche through Wright's use of free indirect discourse: "if they kept on he would get mad and if he got mad he would talk and then there was no telling just what he would say." The phrase, "and then there was no telling" indicates the unpredictability of Bigger's behavior – his lack of control, his uncontainable anger. What makes this peek into Bigger's mind so striking is that the foreshadowing of future violence is sparked by his mother's scorn.

After Sister Mosley leaves, Wright zooms in on Bigger's reaction to the preceding scene:

The door swung again on the rusty hinges and the lock clicked. He heard his mother walk again to her bed and sit upon it. He waited. Like always, she was going to say something to him for having acted as he had. Well why didn't she speak? What was she waiting on? Seconds passed. Maybe she wasn't going to say it this time?

Wright continues:

He hoped she wouldn't. Then she spoke, in a voice that was low, complaining, resigned; a voice that told him that she felt that her words were useless but a voice which said that she had to speak and let him know how she felt, that she disapproved.[44]

Bigger's frustrated anxiety and his mother's resigned disappointment set the stage for an extended argument that goes far beyond any brief spat remaining in the published novel:

"All I want you to do is leave me alone. Before day you start fussing …"

"It ain't before day. The sun's shining outside."

"But how come you want to argue so early in the morning?"

"Nobody's arguing with you. What I'm saying to you's for your own good. Bigger, you got a soul and you've got to save it or you'll go to hell."

"Well, then, let me go. I'm sick of hearing you say it. It's me that's going, ain't it?"

[43] Original typescript, 6.

[44] Ibid., 11.

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"And you're going to get sicker! I'm doing my duty! I'm your mother and it's my duty to tell you right from wrong!"

"You done told me once. That's enough."

"Naw, it ain't! I'm going to keep on telling you till you listen and hear it."

"Aw, for Christ's sake, stop!"

"Boy, now you listen to me! Don't take the Lord's name in vain in this house, you hear?"

"Well, you keep worrying me. If it ain't one thing it's another!"

"Naw, stop that sassing. I don't have to take that from you and you know it!"

"I ain't sassing."

"Don't you tell me; I know. Here get up out of that bed."

"Aw, ma …"[45]

The frequent exclamations of "Aw" and "Naw" succinctly depict the growing frustration between mother and son. What is perhaps most startling about this passage is that Bigger and his mother rehearse previous disputes concerning damnation and salvation, vice and virtue, and family dynamics. Exclamations such as, "Bigger, you got a soul and you've got to save it or you'll go to hell," "I'm your mother and it's my duty to tell you right from wrong!" and "Don't take the Lord's name in vain in this house, you hear?" would be incongruous in the published novel.

The only real argument between Bigger and his mother in the published edition of *Native Son* concerns nothing so dire as the fate of the protagonist's soul. Rather, they argue about Bigger's job prospects:

"You going to take the job, ain't you, Bigger?" his mother asked.

He laid down his fork and stared at her.

"I told you last night I was going to take it. How many times you want to ask me?"

"Well, don't bite her head off," Vera said. "She only asked you a question."

…

"You know you have to see Mr. Dalton at five-thirty," his mother said.

"You done said that ten times."

"I don't want you to forget, son."

"And you know how you can forget," Vera said.

"Aw, lay off Bigger," Buddy said. "He told you he was going to take the job."[46]

This conversation stands in direct contrast to that found in the manuscript. Bigger's siblings Vera and Buddy act as mediators between Bigger and their mother, softening the tone of the conversation with subtle teasing. Indeed, the sharp words exchanged between Bigger and his mother in the manuscript are refracted in the published edition through Vera and Buddy. For example, Mrs. Thomas addresses Buddy: "You shut your mouth, Buddy, or get up from this table … I'm not going to take any stinking sass from you. One fool in the family's enough."[47] Here Mrs. Thomas's aggression is directed at Buddy rather

[45] Ibid., 11–12. [46] Wright, *Early Works*, 454. [47] Ibid., 455.

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than at Bigger, but she uses the same basic phrase to rebuke her sons ("I'm not going to take any stinking sass"/"Naw, stop that sassing"). As if to parallel this tiff between Mrs. Thomas and Buddy, Bigger and Vera square off:

"Oh, Bigger!" his sister said.
"I wish you'd keep your big mouth out of this!" he told his sister.[48]

Here, Bigger's language reflects that found in the manuscript, though redirected at Vera rather than his mother in the published edition ("You keep worrying me"/"I wish you'd keep your big mouth out of this").

In addition, the direct aggression between Bigger and his mother in the manuscript – here refracted and split in two as hostile speech between Buddy and Mrs. Thomas and Vera and Bigger, respectively – diverges markedly from the passive aggression they employ in the published novel. Mrs. Thomas's statements that "One fool in the family's enough" and "Bigger's setting here like he ain't glad to get a job" when added to Bigger's command to Buddy ("Don't tell 'em nothing") mark the roundabout, suggestive ways in which Bigger and his mother fight.[49] There is nothing here about heaven or hell, let alone Mrs. Thomas's maternal obligation to moral instruction. Their immediate concern is Bigger's job: "'If you get that job,' his mother said in a low, kind tone of voice, busy slicing a loaf of bread, 'I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs.'"[50] Here, Wright returns to the dreadful living conditions of the urban poor. "'You know, Bigger," his mother said, 'if you don't take that job the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food.'"[51] The question of housing is thus conflated with that of hunger. As she describes it in the published novel, Mrs. Thomas's primary role is not to teach Bigger right from wrong or to save his soul from eternal hellfire – it is rather to provide him and his siblings with shelter and food. All of this rests not on Bigger's church attendance, but rather on his steady employment. In the published edition of the novel, the Thomases' salvation is dependent upon Bigger's aptitude as a worker, not as a suppliant.

In the typeset manuscript, this basic plot point – Bigger's job offer from the Dalton family – does not come for several pages after his initial fight with his mother. Their second row, preceding any mention of the Daltons, starts with Bigger lighting a cigarette in the apartment.

He said nothing; he sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his cigarettes.
"Don't you smoke in here now."
"Aw, hell!"
"And stop that cussing and get out of here!"

[48] Ibid. [49] Ibid. [50] Ibid. [51] Ibid.

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"If I could I would, so help me God. I'm tired of this. Every time you mention God to me I want to commit murder. I swear I do."[52]

In one swift move, Wright foreshadows the central action of the novel. And what is so jarring about this premonition, assuming knowledge of this parallel scene in the published edition of the novel, is that Bigger's almost uncontrollable, uncontainable desire to commit murder finds its primary source in such maternal sparring. If we distill the sentence to its basic components, it reads thus: You mention God; I want to murder.

A final side-by-side comparison of two almost identical scenes in the early manuscript and published edition confirms this shift. When Bigger returns home from the brawl at the poolroom before his job interview at the Dalton residence, Wright inserts a single paragraph that does not appear in the restored text.

Novel	*Manuscript*
"Bigger!"	"Bigger!"
He stopped and frowned.	He hesitated, sighed.
"Yeah, ma."	"Yeah, ma."
"You going to see about that job?"	"You going to Mr. Dalton's?"
"Yeah."	"Yeah, ma," he said, feeling that he may as well tell her.
"Ain't you going to eat?"	"Ain't you going to eat?"
"I ain't got time now."	"I ain't got time now."
She came to the door, wiping her soapy hands upon an apron.	He wished she would give him some money, not food. He heard her footsteps, she came into the room.
"Here; take this quarter and buy you something."	"Here; take this quarter and buy you something."
"O.K."	He took it and said nothing; he noticed as he turned from her a light in her eyes which he had grown so much to hate. It was a light that sought to bind him again to her life and way of doing and thinking things, a light which denied him the right to act on his own. Many times he and his mother in a queer sort of way had long talks about this rebellious way of his: she telling him that that he ought to act and live with other people, and he telling her to leave him alone. It was the home, he knew, that she was trying to get him to love and help; but what he wanted in his deep and violent way was not there; he could never see or feel it; and nothing she did for him could make him feel that this was what he wanted. He put the money in his pocket, adjusted his cap, and turned to leave.
"And be careful, son."[53]	"Be careful, son."
	He did not answer.[54]

[52] Original typescript, 14. [53] Wright, *Early Works*, 485. [54] Original typescript, 40–41.

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Beyond this addition, these two sections are almost identical in the two versions of the novel. The paragraph evidently struck from the 1940 edition and yet not included in the 1991 edition cements the drastic change in Wright's depiction of the domestic realm. The manuscript describes Bigger's "hate" originating in "a light in her eyes." This light is an oppressive force "that sought to bind him again to her life and way of doing and thinking things, a light which denied him the right to act on his own."

Another passage appearing in the manuscript but in neither published edition of the novel echoes this image:

Novel	*Manuscript*
Far away a clock boomed five times. He sighed and got up and yawned and stretched his arms high above his head to loosen the muscles of his body. He got his overcoat, for it was growing cold outdoors; then got his cap. He tiptoed to the door, wanting to slip out without his mother hearing.	The clock boomed five times and he felt that he did not want to eat; he had thought that he would have wanted to at five o'clock, but now that the moment had come he felt he did not want to answer his mother's questions about why he had come back to his room in the middle of the day. And he did not want to have her saying anything about his going to take up that job at Dalton's. He had made up his mind to take it when he was in the movie; he felt that he was taking the job because he wanted to, not because his mother wanted {it.}[55]

The typeset manuscript has Bigger rebelling not against the oppressions of Jim Crow legislation, let alone free-market ideology. He is rebelling against his mother, her "questions," her wishes, the light in her eyes. Bigger's potential employment is understood not in terms of earning sufficient money to provide food and comfortable, shame-free housing; it is rather understood in terms of filial obligation: "He had made up his mind to take it when he was in the movie; he felt that he was taking the job because he wanted to, not because his mother wanted it." Bigger can only exercise his decisive free will – independent of his mother's wishes – outside the domestic space.

We see, then, Bigger's hostile relationship with his mother not merely pushed to the margins or minimized in the published edition of the novel, but actually erased and written over with signs and descriptions of class oppression and the debasement of the urban poor. In so doing, Wright fashions out of Bigger a sort of non-character: a generic type, a model, a template meant to be altered to local variations. Indeed, "Bigger's sense of self is so based on artifice that he now has no identity at all – that his identity is only theoretical (at least until Book Three) defined almost entirely by the single emotion of overwhelming, chaotic fear."[56] This theoretical, vacuumed identity is not,

[55] Ibid., 39–40.

[56] Elder, "Social Demarcation," 32.

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however, a weakness in Wright's crafting of his protagonist; it is rather the exact structure of Bigger's outward adaptability. By rendering Bigger in moveable type, "The opening of the book provides sufficient evidence to show the universal approach to humanity."[57] Bigger's purposeful emptiness was meant to be filled in.

III

This narrative shift evident in Wright's early reworking of *Native Son* marks no strict departure from his previous critical endeavors. To the contrary, his first published novel recycles and fleshes out more fully the aesthetic program laid out in "Notes on 'Personalism'" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing" years prior. Wright's globalist vision is also demonstrated by his essay on the conception and completion of the novel – "How 'Bigger' Was Born" – based on a lecture delivered on several occasions in New York City and again in Chicago and Durham throughout 1940 and subsequently published in the *Saturday Review* and *Negro Digest*, then as a pamphlet of its own, and finally as a preface to a 1942 reprint of *Native Son*. His public recollection of the origins of *Native Son* has posed considerable difficulties for some critics, especially those who take at face value his claim to have known or witnessed exactly five "Biggers" in the Jim Crow South of his childhood and adolescence, or who get stuck on Wright's observation that "Bigger" could have grown up in Nazi Germany. But the central insight to be gleaned from Wright's essay is its continuation and vivid elaboration of the globalist rhetoric presaged in "Notes on 'Personalism'" and "Blueprint for Negro Literature." The unifying thread in Wright's own interpretation of *Native Son* is this emphasis on Bigger as a multiple character: that the internal psychological, emotional, social, and political struggles of that young man in Chicago's Black Belt can be multiplied almost infinitely out into the world; that his predicament is far from unique, and necessarily so.

Wright constructs this multiplicity in two ways. Within the American context, he writes, "The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect."[58] The second way that Wright constructs Bigger is by envisioning his protagonist beyond the Jim Crow South, even beyond the Chicago Black Belt, as a global type. Wright recalls reading about Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Lenin walking through the streets of London and being struck by their shared experience of exclusion and outsiderness: "In

[57] John F. Bayliss, "Native Son: Protest or Psychological Study?", *Negro American Literature Forum*, 1, 1 (1967), 5–6, 5.

[58] Wright, *Early Works*, 854.

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both instances [that of Lenin/Gorky and Bigger Thomas] the deep sense of exclusion was identical. The feeling of looking at things with a painful and unwarrantable nakedness was an experience, I learned, that transcended national and racial boundaries."[59] More controversially, Wright also likens Bigger's political consciousness to contemporaneous developments in Nazi Germany: "And on innumerable occasions I was startled to detect … reactions, moods, phrases, attitudes that reminded me strongly of Bigger, that helped to bring out more clearly the shadowy outlines of the negative that lay in the back of my mind."[60]

By embracing an avowedly Marxist framework, Wright envisions Bigger as conditioned not so much by American race politics, but rather by global class oppression. He writes,

> I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere … I sensed, too, that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine.[61]

"Trade-union struggles and issues began to grow meaningful to me. The flows of goods across seas, buoying and depressing the wages of men, held a fascination," he continues. "I approached all of these new revelations in the light of Bigger Thomas, his hopes, fears, and despairs; and I began to feel far-flung kinships, and sense, with fright and abashment, the possibilities of alliances between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness."[62]

The startling continuity of language across "How 'Bigger' Was Born" and Wright's two earlier essays reveals the increasingly sophisticated articulation of his globalist perspective. Recall that the petty bourgeois "personalist" "transcends petty national boundaries," that Negro writers must accept nationalist implications in their work "in order to change and transcend them," and that Bigger's dispossession also "transcended national and racial boundaries." Recall how Marxism provided Wright the vocabulary to articulate the opposing tendencies of "proletarian" and "fascist" camps, that the "parasitic and mannered" Negro bourgeoisie had abandoned the folk culture of the Negro masses, and finally that the Jim Crow South was a "ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine." Recall that the fully realized "personalist" aesthetic "speak[s] to mankind," just as the Negro writer should be conscious

[59] Ibid., 863.
[60] Ibid., 864. For a fuller account of this particular passage in Wright's essay see Frank Mehring, "'Bigger in Nazi Germany': Transcultural Confrontations of Richard Wright and Hans Jürgen Massaquoi," *Black Scholar*, 39, 1–2 (2009), 63–71.
[61] Wright, *Early Works*, 860–61.
[62] Ibid., 861.

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"that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class" and look with empathy upon the "hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere," lest he "alienate their allies in the struggle for freedom," just as Wright – in crafting *Native Son* – became increasingly attuned to "far-flung kinships" and "the possibilities of alliances between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness."

In this sense, attending to the transnational vision explicit in Wright's work, both in his earlier essays and ultimately in *Native Son* and "How 'Bigger' Was Born" – as well as his later expatriate writings – is not simply an anachronistic projection of current critical preoccupations. Rather, it reveals how Wright was already concerned with the possibility of global class or antiracist struggle well before the latter-day onset of globalization. This attempt to recover his earliest globalist imperatives – like recent reassessments of Zora Neale Hurston's vehement and career-spanning anticolonial politics[63] – works to counteract the consolidation of figures like Wright and Hurston within Americanist canons such that the ways their political and literary imaginations transcended the nation-state and its racial signifiers might otherwise be obscured.

And while this theme in Wright's thinking has long been neglected or dismissed as eccentric, it has not gone entirely without notice. Indeed, early critics of the novel gleaned its outward adaptability, anticipating its eventual reuptake by later writers and intellectuals.[64] Jean-Paul Sartre described how Wright's fiction assumed a "double simultaneous position"[65] – that is, always addressed to multiple audiences and referring to multiple contexts at once. But perhaps Sartre also underestimated the global reach of *Native Son*, adding, "The books of Richard Wright will remain alive as long as the negro question is raised in the United States."[66] Frantz Fanon, on the other hand, took Bigger Thomas as representative of the condition of the Negro writ large, thereby using Wright's work to interrogate the social and psychological effects of colonialist racism.[67] And while Paul Gilroy has mobilized a trenchant critique of the tendencies within Americanist literary criticism and cultural studies to "overshadow" the "range and diversity of Wright's work" by placing "fortifications" between his American and post-exile

[63] See Ernest Julius Mitchell II, "Zora's Politics: A Brief Introduction," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 5, 1 (2013), 1–38.

[64] On the global reception of the novel see Andrew Warnes, *Richard Wright's Native Son* (London: Routledge, 2007), 57–74.

[65] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 80.

[66] Ibid., 137.

[67] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), 118.

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writings, he, too, still maintains that Wright's "mature position" diverged from an earlier "exclusive concern with American racial politics."[68]

If Gilroy aims to show the continuities between Wright's "American" works and the "supposedly inferior products of his European exile" by suggesting that, for Wright, "The image of the Negro and the idea of 'race'… are living components of a western sensibility that extends beyond national boundaries" – in other words, that we must understand Wright's work on its own terms rather than "the same narrow definitions of racialised cultural expression that he struggled to overturn"[69] – then this essay perhaps offers the obverse argument. My aim is not to show that Wright's post-exile work retains a peculiar racial consciousness abundant in his American work, but rather to suggest that the globalism evident in his later work was present from the outset. The idea that "the Negro is no longer just America's metaphor but rather a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole" might not simply reflect Wright's "mature position," but his "immature" position, too.[70]

More recent scholarship has also sought to reorient conventional understandings of Wright's earlier American works. One essay on "How 'Bigger' Was Born," for example, mentions briefly that "Wright attributes to black people, then, a psychological and intellectual equivalent to class consciousness."[71] Yun-Hsing Wu goes further, claiming that Wright's essay actually restages the act of comparison itself, oscillating constantly between the the local and the global. "Wright's essay conjures a peculiar existence for Thomas – one in which he shuttles between being a specific classification and a global type," Wu writes.[72] "Without Bigger – the representative of the African American experience – as a point of comparison, the Bigger Everyman could not exist."[73] This is not really a claim so much as a truism; as we have seen, Wright's aesthetic theory always understands the particular/local as the proper route to the general/global. That Bigger is globally typical is far less interesting than the authorial construction of that condition. Bigger is not simply "representative" of the world's oppressed millions because Wright says so; he is because the novel's rewriting so clearly demonstrates the fact. This reconsideration of Bigger as "global type" thus places *Native Son* firmly within Wright's own intellectual trajectory stretching back to his earliest critical efforts. Bigger's revision shows Wright aligning his novel to the

[68] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 155–61. [69] Ibid., 155, 159, 186. [70] Ibid., 159.
[71] Joel Roache, "'What Had Made Him and What He Meant': The Politics of Wholeness in 'How "Bigger" Was Born'," *SubStance*, 5, 15 (1976), 133–45, 137.
[72] Yung-Hsing Wu, "Native Sons and Native Speakers: On the Eth(n)ics of Comparison," *PMLA*, 121, 5 (2006), 1460–74, 1465. [73] Ibid., 1467.

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principles and precepts put forth in his essays of 1935 and 1937 and eventually his lecture of 1940–42.

Barbara Foley, too, draws attention to how "Bigger's brief and tragic career assumes typifying status" even within the narrative bounds of the novel, only to be further amplified by "How 'Bigger' Was Born," which reveals the protagonist's "synecdochic function in relation to the lives of alienated and disaffected youth of *any* nation or race."[74] As Foley argues, this truly global vision of "Bigger's symbolic status as an exemplar of *class*-based disaffection" competes with – and perhaps supersedes – the "nationalist analysis" offered by Bigger's attorney Max in the novel that construes Bigger as typical only of black America, a "nation within a nation."[75] Foley implies that these two ideological strands in the novel and essay respectively are analogues for the Communist Party's "nationalist" and "integrationist" approaches to the "Negro problem."

But it would be a mistake to consider the perspectives of Max and Wright isomorphic – as is too often the case in scholarship on *Native Son* – as it would be to map loosely Wright's craft onto contemporary debates in mainstream CP politics. First, as I have shown, the internationalist rhetoric of "How 'Bigger' Was Born" does not undo or contradict the nationalism of *Native Son*, but rather the essay recapitulates and articulates further the internationalism already embedded in the novel's revision and Wright's earliest critical writings. Second, it is exceedingly difficult to pin down Wright's ambivalent and ambiguous relationship to the CP. From the onset of his professional literary career, first in Chicago and then to some extent in New York, Wright was closely associated with various Communist associations and publications – including *New Masses, Left Front*, and *New Challenge*, which published his "Blueprint." We know that he joined the party in 1933 and made his exit sometime thereafter; precisely when, we can only speculate. As Bill Mullen writes, Wright demonstrated a "selective political memory" regarding his relationship with the CP,[76] dating his official break with the party further back in time as his career progressed in an attempt to mask his "red roots."[77] Mullen is correct to remind us that conflating Wright's work with his supposed political affiliations (or what we think we know about them) "reduce[s] Wright himself to a set of Manichean dualisms": Chicago and post-Chicago, folk and modern, Communist and anticommunist, socially committed and existentialist, native and exiled.[78] It serves us better – and serves Wright better – to track his

[74] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 210–11, original emphasis.
[75] Ibid., 211, original emphasis.
[76] Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–46* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 27. [77] Ibid., 38. [78] Ibid., 41.

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worldly vision through close attention to his craft and criticism rather than to such historical vagaries.

And *Native Son* was certainly a novel with global reach. If we read Wright's critical output (including "How 'Bigger' Was Born") alongside his substantial revisions to the working manuscript of the novel, we begin to see how this global reach was not simply a by-product of the work's explosive imagery, but more crucially part of its narrative strategy. If, as David Damrosch writes, "world literature" is that which gains in translation and takes on an afterlife beyond the culture of its origin, then *Native Son* is world literature par excellence – most of all because Wright constructed the novel that way.[79] That is, Wright's novel is a work of world literature in two respects: that of its globalist vision and that of its global afterlife, the latter primed by the former.

For instance, upon its publication in 1940, *Native Son* was immediately translated into Japanese by Moriya Emori, a leftist poet and editor in chief of the *Red Flag* (*Akahata*), an official newspaper of the Japan Communist Party. Further translations of *Black Boy* (1952), *Uncle Tom's Children* (1955), and *The Outsider* (1955) into Japanese, along with growing interest in Marxist criticism, prompted the establishment of the Association of Negro Studies in Japan in 1954. Wright's collected work there provided a model for literary studies of the African American literary tradition.[80]

Elsewhere *Native Son* also provided models for anticolonial discourse and postcolonial literature. After Wright exiled himself to Paris, French translations of his work became widely available in publications like *Les temps modernes* – which serialized a translation of *Black Boy* (*Jeunesse noir*) in 1947 – and *Présence africaine*, where the author became "the talk of the town."[81] It was probably in these outlets that Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene discovered Wright's work, leading him to *L'enfant du pays* (1947), from which he borrowed liberally in his novel *Le docker noir* (1956). As Dominic Thomas has shown, one sees quite startling similarities between the French and English translations of both *Native Son* and *Le docker noir*.

While Thomas understands such "transparent" intertextual borrowings as Sembene's postcolonial elaboration of Wright's indictment, I see this discursive recycling as merely redundant. Whereas Thomas claims that "Wright addresses the question of race relations in the United States, and Sembene takes the lead from him in order to perform a parallel task in France,"

[79] See David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 281.

[80] See Yoshinobu Hakutani and Toru Kiuchi, "The Critical Response in Japan to Richard Wright," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 50, 2 (1997), 353–65.

[81] Dominic Thomas, "Intertextuality, Plagiarism, and Recycling in Ousmane Sembene's 'Le Docker Noir (Black Docker)'," *Research in African Literatures*, 37, 1 (2006), 72–90, 76.

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thereby drawing analogies between the "African colonial and … immigrant context *and* the African American framework," I think it is evident that Wright's novel actually collapses these two frameworks, making them congruent. *Native Son* excavates how "racial constructs are conceived, deployed, and disseminated" in both American and global, postcolonial, or other contexts affecting "minority peoples everywhere" simultaneously.[82]

In other words, Wright's revision of the novel enacts a global script, which helps explain why the critically and financially disastrous cinematic adaptation of *Native Son* was attempted by "an unlikely international … team consisting of a French director (Pierre Chenal) and an Argentine studio (Sono Film)."[83] The film, farcically starring the middle-aged Wright himself as teenaged Bigger, was both censored by American studios and derided by US critics. But in Argentina, where it was filmed, produced, and screened nationally with Spanish subtitles, the movie took on an altogether different life. Perhaps most crucially – and contrary to the French-titled *L'enfant du pays* – Wright's film was not produced as *Native Son* but rather as *Sangre Negra*, "black blood." This evolution from "native son" to "black blood" semantically purges Wright's work of any notion of national origin.[84]

Although Thy Phu perhaps mistakenly reads "the story of Bigger Thomas" as "firmly rooted within Chicago," the cinematic "translation" of *Native Son* surely "became rerouted as a transnational process of coproduction. In this manner, the *local* specificity of the novel shifts … to impart instead a subtext of *dislocation*."[85] Phu continues,

> Tracing its origins to an early literary triumph clearly located within the U. S. which shadows and informs its subsequent visual revisions of this triumph that destabilizes this American site, *Sangre Negra* serves as a symbolic tie in the development of a race consciousness that turned, for Wright, from a local to an increasingly comparative, indeed, global, form

[82] Ibid., 84, original emphasis. The resonances between African American segregationist and francophone postcolonial arrangements as revealed by the intertextual borrowing between *Le docker noir* and *Native Son* are perhaps further elucidated by Wright's planned but unfinished fourth travelogue, "French West Africa." See Virginia Whately Smith, "'French West Africa': Behind the Scenes with Richard Wright, the Travel Writer," in Virginia Whately Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 179–214.

[83] Thy Phu, "Bigger at the Movies: *Sangre Negra* and the Cinematic Projection of *Native Son*," *Black Camera*, 2, 1 (2010), 36–57, 37.

[84] The title *Sangre Negra* also alludes to the particular history of racial hierarchy in Latin America (especially colonial Mexico's *sistema de castas*) according to anxieties about blood purity, or *limpieza de sangre*, a concept inherited from exclusionary practices targeting Muslims, Jews, and newly converted Christians in the Iberian context. See, for example, María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[85] Phu, 54–55, original emphases.

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The author is correct to signal how Wright's film project more explicitly stages its condemnation of blackness on a transnational scale, gesturing toward the "shared memory … yet ultimately unrealized affinity between African American and Afro-Latin American racialization."[86] But, as I have illustrated, this is no real departure from the original template. *Native Son* already "destabilizes this American site," already assumes a self-consciously "comparative, indeed, global, form."

Anthony Reed, along with Phu, points to the larger, transnational "imaginative scope" of the novel by considering the 1931 film *Trader Horn*, an American safari adventure film obsessed with the "exotic and savage wildlife" of Africa shown at the cinema where Bigger and his friend Jack enact their infamously lewd scene. As Reed puts it, this subtle evocation of the African continent and its colonial politics "suggests a common horizon of time, of global history," taking the novel "beyond the narrow now, the site-specific now," of Chicago's South Side. This particular cinematic "translation" from *Native Son* to *Trader Horn*, Reed argues, "initiates a challenge to think anew the international, and internationalism," in Wright's work.[87] But perhaps the "American site," the "site-specific now," was never there to begin with, excepting the novel's requisite narrative setting. Moreover, the site-specificity of Wright's Chicago landscape seems much more central to the thrilling, snow-covered police chase of the second book, "Flight," than to the social critique at the heart of the entire work. *Sangre Negra* and *Trader Horn* signal not so much the development of Wright's race consciousness from the local or site-specific to the comparative or global, but rather the explicit "translation" into cinema of what is already embedded in the novel and Wright's intellectual trajectory.

One could argue even further that *Native Son*, although it need not represent a sort of prophetic post-racial outlook, might be understood as simply "a-racial" or "meta-racial," in the sense that racial difference is not absolutely fundamental to its critique.[88] Indeed, as Menand quite astutely claims that *Black Boy/American Hunger* read in its unadulterated entirety is "a book about oppression in general" and "no longer [simply] a book about Jim Crow,"[89] *Native Son* might, too, merit this kind of reading, "that racial

[86] Ibid.

[87] Anthony Reed, "'Another Map of the South Side': *Native Son* as Postcolonial Novel," *African American Review*, 45, 4 (2012), 614. Ngwarsungu Chiwengo has also remarked that the novel's mention of *Trader Horn* lends a certain (post)colonial logic to Bigger's predicament. See Ngwarsungu Chiwengo, "Gazing through the Screen: Richard Wright's Africa," in Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, 20–44.

[88] See William Dow, Alice Craven, and Yoko Nakamura, eds., *Richard Wright in a Post-racial Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[89] Menand, *American Studies*, 85.

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oppression is just another example of the pleasure the hammer takes in hitting the nail."[90] Perhaps a more precise way to understand *Native Son* specifically is that the novel depicts how hammers take pleasure in hitting nails the world over – and that the relationship between hammer and nail is not a uniquely American phenomenon.[91]

Interpreting Wright as a diasporic intellectual, Kevin Gaines also concedes that the author's Marxist framework lent itself to analyses of global oppression transcending the contingency of racial classification. "Wright's quest found expression in the merging of black American consciousness with global anticolonial and nonaligned liberation movements, which eventually carried him to Africa and Indonesia," Gaines observes. "Wright understood that the very pursuit (let alone the realization) of a transnational culture of opposition predicated on something other than race or communist dogma held grave consequences for his continued freedom and ability to function as an intellectual."[92] Though this description of Wright's intellectual commitments is apt, it still associates his "global" consciousness with his travels in Europe, Africa, and Asia. I contend that Wright's novel and his early critical writings articulate such a "realization" even if, hypothetically, he had never quit the American scene. At the very least, if we are to maintain the significance of a specifically racialized kind of oppression in *Native Son*, then let it be a global vision of race – as in W. E. B. Du Bois's oft-quoted and more often abbreviated conjecture that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, – *the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea*."[93]

That *Native Son* should resonate so powerfully as both *L'enfant du pays* and *Sangre Negra* should come as no surprise. Wright's deeply, if idiosyncratically, Marxist critique of power was born to run. "Richard Wright is one of the most widely discussed writers in the Third World," writes Sri Lankan scholar and poet Wimal Dissanayake. He continues,

> In order for Bigger to realize his identity and attain visibility, he has to subvert the cultural discourse into which he has been born. The need for subverting the dominant cultural discourse so as to create a more satisfyingly human one is acutely felt in most Third World countries which are still struggling with the forces of colonialism despite

[90] Ibid., 97.

[91] Such an interpretation would pose a sturdy challenge to the argument advanced in Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[92] Kevin Gaines, "Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora," *Social Text*, 19, 2 (2001), 75–101, 78.

[93] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 17, emphasis added.

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their liberation from foreign rule. It is largely for this reason that Richard Wright has struck a deep chord or response in many intellectuals and writers in the Third World.[94]

Native Son was not just ripe for translation into new contexts, igniting artistic reflections on the postcolonial condition across francophone Africa and Latin America, not simply relevant or inspiring to intellectuals of the Third World. *Native Son* was postcolonial all along.[95]

Wright's writings in exile have posed considerable difficulties for his interpreters – most notably, his concurrent sympathies with the oppressed masses of the Third World and with colonialist discourses of industrialization and Western modernity.[96] But whatever the foibles and ambiguities of his post-exile writings, their prescience has not been missed: "Richard Wright may not have invented 'postcolonial' studies, but he was at the very least a founding member."[97] One might recognize Wright's work as prophetically

[94] Wimal Dissanayake, "Richard Wright: A View from the Third World," *Callaloo*, 28 (1986), 481–89, 483.

[95] Comparative readings and analogies between *Native Son* and postcolonial texts are not at all uncommon. Consider, for example, Menand's juxtaposition of Wright's novel and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and Wu's notion of "ethnic comparison" between *Native Son* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, among others. See Louis Menand, *American Studies*, 83; and Yung-Hsing Wu, "Native Sons and Native Speakers." Outlining the "oneiropolitics" of *Native Son*, Mikko Tukhanen notes the resonant dream-oriented rhetoric of both Wright and Frantz Fanon. As such, "Wright predicts that the West will live the time of post-coloniality as a series of traumatic awakenings" See Mikko Tukhanen, "Richard Wright's Oneiropolitics," *American Literature*, 82, 1 (2010), 151–78, 159.

[96] Numerous critics have bemoaned what could be called "neocolonialist" tendencies in Wright's writing on the Third World, particularly Africa. Henry Louis Gates Jr. recalls Wright's "condescension" that "colonialism was the best thing that had ever befallen the continent of Africa." See Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Third World of Theory: Enlightenment's Esau," *Critical Inquiry*, 34, 5 (2008), 192–95. For critiques of Wright's African writing see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast," in Arnold Rampersad, ed., *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995), 188–201; Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction," in ibid., 1–11; S. Shankar, "Richard Wright's *Black Power*: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative," in Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, 3–19; Cornel West, "Introduction" to Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), vii–xiii. For critiques of Wright's Asian writing see Chiwengo, "Gazing through the Screen"; Yoshinobu Hakutani, "*The Color Curtain*: Richard Wright's Journey into Asia," in Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, 63–77; and Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[97] Bill V. Mullen, "Discovering Postcolonialism," *American Quarterly*, 54, 4 (2002), 701–8, 701. Virginia Whately Smith, too, shares this view. She writes, "After all, it was Richard Wright the foreign traveler who had the prescience of vision as a global humanist and eyewitness to history to pioneer postcolonial studies, and to forecast in *The Color Curtain* (1956) its preeminence in the academy… The body of resistance literature and transcultural studies promoted by such esteemed critics of Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt … fulfills

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"postcolonial" not only because the field of postcolonial studies owes so much to his latter-day travel writings (as Mullen and Smith note), but also because Wright himself anticipated significant developments in postcolonial theory. More specifically, works like *Native Son* and "How 'Bigger' Was Born" articulate a Manichean conception of social relations in the segregated or colonial world foreshadowing the elaboration of this image in Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) and most famously in Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) a full two decades later. The global scripting of Wright's work occurs on successive, though not unrelated, levels: the first enabled by the Marxist internationalism of his early criticism; the second articulated as the (assumedly post-Marxist) proto-postcolonialism of his novel.[98] If the precise technique of its expression shifts slightly over the course of his career, Wright's globalist vision remains constant.

Indeed, the explicit globalism, the post- and anticolonialism of Wright's first and greatest novel poses a sturdy challenge to conventional interpretations of Wright's career and intellectual evolution. Enacting diaspora every day, Wright's "agonized wanderings of the 1950s" across Europe, Africa, and Asia have led almost irrevocably to the critical consensus that his prophetic "postcolonial" writings in exile marked a clean departure from the distinct "racial politics of [his] American-authored books like *Black Boy, Uncle Tom's Children*, and *Native Son*."[99] Rather than positioning his later expatriate works as marking a deviation from the specifically American race consciousness of his earlier output, we should begin to reconsider how each successive text further elaborates a globalist critique of power that was present from the outset. Although conventionally understood as a

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the author's prophecy." See Smith, "Introduction," in Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, xi–xv, xiv.

[98] There is also another possibility, namely that Wright's internationalist consciousness preceded his encounter with Marxism. Indeed, his childhood experiences under Jim Crow segregation and lynch law might have pushed him to question his place in society in connection with international systems of various kinds. See Harold T. McCarthy, "Richard Wright: The Expatriate as Native Son," *American Literature*, 44, 1 (1972), 97–117. Here one is reminded of C. L. R. James's recollection of a visit to Wright's home, wherein he showed James his volumes of Kierkegaard and remarked, "I want to tell you something. Everything that he writes in those books, I knew before I had them." See C. L. R. James, "Black Studies and the Contemporary Student," in Anna Grimshaw, ed., *The C. L. R. James Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 390–404, 399. For a discussion of this encounter, see also Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 159.

[99] Mullen, "Discovering Postcolonialism," 707, 705. For examples of this tendency see especially Smith, "Introduction"; Hakutani, "*The Color Curtain*"; McCarthy; John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-fiction: Stepping Out on the Stage of the World," *Callaloo*, 28 (1986), 507–20; and Alex Weik, "'The Uses and Hazards of Expatriation': Richard Wright's Cosmopolitanism in Progress," *African American Review*, 41, 3 (2007), 459–75.

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quintessentially "American" work, *Native Son* was primed to do the work of world literature. And more than that: the author – the solitary wanderer, forever unable to escape the lingering dispossession that followed him wherever he went – embodied, in a way that can only be described as eerie, the planetary sojourns of his greatest work.

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