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(Mis)Reading Richard Wright:
Literature as Organizing

by

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For my mother

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Introduction

> It's Bigger Thomas who is afraid, terribly afraid. But afraid of what? Of himself. We don't yet know who he is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world once the world finds out. And when the world finds out, the world always expects something from the black man. He is afraid that the world will find out; he is afraid of the fear in the world if the world knew... In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tension, he answers the world's expectations.
>
> – Frantz Fanon,
> *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

> Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human (384).
>
> – Richard Wright,
> *Black Boy* (1945)

To understand Richard Wright, one must read Frantz Fanon. And to understand Fanon, one must read Wright. Reading and studying both of these radical writers, I have found this mutual imbrication to be increasingly evident. As I will discuss in the first chapter, this is not by mere coincidence—Fanon wrote what was essentially a fan-letter to Wright, mentioning that he had read all of Wright's work and was laboring "on a study bearing on the human breadth of your works" ("Letters to Richard Wright" 150). Common to both writers is a deep commitment to understanding the condition of blackness and the role of art in potential liberation from it. This thesis is primarily a study of Wright; nevertheless, Fanon and his recent interlocutors in critical theory and black studies play key roles in articulating the implications of much of Wright's work.

Wright's first encounter with art came in the form of children's stories, when he persuaded a young schoolteacher to read him a story, *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* (the first non-Biblical story to which he was ever exposed):

> 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 (*Black Boy* 39).

Time and time again, Wright suggests that stories fundamentally change his experience of reality. Despite his destitute upbringing in black ghettos in the American South in the early 20th century, Wright's passionate love of narrative and learning overcame the severe educational disadvantages constitutive of his adolescence. In storytelling and literature, Wright identified what he understood as an immensely powerful emancipatory tool, one that lifted him from Mississippi to literary stardom in Chicago, New York, and Paris upon the release of his first novel, *Native Son* (1940). From one perspective, Wright is emblematic of the classic American dream story, the rags-to-riches feel-good that Hollywood can't get enough of. But what complicates this account is his fierce rejection of an America that was founded (and continues to be re-founded) upon the oppression of black people, who know no other land than this one, a land which is nevertheless alien to them.

The scope of my project—from Wright's early writing to his autobiography *Black Boy*—reflects my desire to focus on Wright's work in America. The supposed epistemological break occurring after his move to Paris, proposed by certain disparaging critics, I do not find entirely convincing (although I acknowledge the

inevitable evolution in his thinking). More simply, I want to analyze his work before he encountered the French intellectual scene, when he was still living the very conditions about which he wrote.

In this context, the subject of Wright's literary study is, strictly speaking, the black experience in America. But what blackness is (or what it means to be black) is highly disputed and, according to scholars like David Marriott, unthematizable and unknowable. The ensuing question—who qualifies as black—can be answered by identifying those who continue to suffer the "afterlives," as Saidiya Hartman suggests, of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, that historical trauma with which Wright begins *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), his part-photo book, part-folk history. In Wright, then, there is both an extreme pessimism and an extreme optimism, which respectively arise from his critical response to the art of the Harlem Renaissance—which he savagely described as "the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice"—and his membership in the Communist Party—which impelled Wright to consider seriously the possibility of revolution and social change ("Blueprint for Negro Writing" 37).

In Wright, I find the roots of the present debate in critical theory and black studies between so-called Afro-pessimists (Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and Marriott) and black optimists (Fred Moten). This tension in his work produces dramatic pronouncements like his suggestion that the unique historical journey of black people is symbolic of all peoples who attempt to lift themselves up into the body of civilization. In such a statement, there is a contradictory call for systemic change and a desire to join the very society which is founded upon structural

exclusion. Apposite this dissension, I will be employing the term "antiblackness," which refers to the unique structural antagonism which defines black life and is used by both Afro-pessimists and black optimists. Jared Sexton argues that racism, as a generalized concept, effaces the specificity of black suffering and the way in which "[b]lackness has an essential relation to social death" (Sexton 48; Marriott, "Judging Fanon" 6).

One of the reasons why Wright deserves continued study is that he refuses any kind of theoretical reductionism. His emphasis that "No theory of life can take the place of life" is a vital warning against theoreticism and idealism ("Blueprint" 44). To read Wright is to take seriously the relationships through which (for instance) capital accumulation, white supremacy, and colonialism mutually enforce each other—or put more simply (at the risk of being reductive), how power reproduces itself through a variety of hierarchies, structures, and rebellions. The significance of this project relies on the mutual entanglement of the problems of domination and organizing, and Wright's attempt to handle both.

In addition to his valuable contribution in conceptualizing structural domination, Wright's focus on those who are "totally dispossessed and disinherited" makes his work especially valuable to the contemporary world ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 446). What Karl Marx described as "*the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*" is an increasing generalized pauperism of the "surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour" (*Capital* 798). Communist journal *Endnotes* elaborates on Marx, suggesting that because capital does not need these people as

laborers, in order to subsist "[t]hey are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty-production and services" (30n15). Thus, Chris Chen notes that "[t]he rise of the anti-black US carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialisation of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness" (217). Likewise, Cameroonian political philosopher Achille Mbembe, writing in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), argues there is an ever-increasing number of these "abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a 'superfluous humanity'" (3). For this thesis, my founding argument is that Wright's literary project is the genesis of an organizing project that seeks to call out to the abandoned, to offer them the possibility of meaning in a life defined by antiblackness, and thus to aid them in the struggle against their oppressors.

In the first chapter, I analyze black social death in Wright's work through what theorist Abdul JanMohamed describes as the "death bound subject," a subject who is produced by death, the very process of subject-negation. Next, I give a brief historical account of Wright's interest in political struggle and explicate his historical narrative of black trauma in the United States, intertwining his focus on the dispossessed with Fanon's emphasis on the revolutionary spontaneity of the "lumpenproletariat." Under the terms of black social death, Wright establishes a need to focus on those dispossessed black proletarians who he judges lack the values or clear meaning in their lives by which they can struggle.

In the second chapter, I focus on the tension between the optimism and pessimism in his writings. In the first section, I describe Wright's theorized process

of rebellion embodied in Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son* that JanMohamed calls the "dialectic of death," which I frame as a part of the fugitive movement that Moten identifies in his interpretation of Fanon, "The Case of Blackness" (2008). The second section consists of an exegesis of Afro-pessimist thought, in which I consider Wilderson's perspective on the impossibility of narrativizing blackness, as well as Marriott's response to Moten, in which blackness is not fugitive, but "*n'est pas*" [is not] (to quote Fanon). Wright, I argue, prefigures what Marriott considers a Fanonian conception of blackness.

In the third and final chapter, I consider the relationship between Wright and Fanon's understanding of black nationalism and how that influences *12 Million Black Voices*. For both radical thinkers, art plays a crucial role in the possibility of black liberation, which I frame in terms of Fanon's use of "crystallization" in the development of nationhood and the emancipatory desire of collective existence that Wright evokes in *12 Million Black Voices*. Under the terms of Afro-pessimism, the logic of Wright's work leads to a demand for the end of the world and the creation of a new one without antiblackness. In this context, what makes Wright such a powerful thinker and writer is his ultimate willingness to subordinate his own text to the praxis of other activists and organizers; in other terms, it is his recognition that while organizing needs values by which people can struggle, these values ultimately contribute to the production of the space in which that organizing can occur.

Thus, when I suggest by this project's title that I am "misreading" Wright, I mean that I read him, as Jacques Derrida puts it, under the "principle of selectivity

which will have to guide and hierarchize among the 'spirits,'" and thus "will fatally exclude in its turn" (109). There are ambiguous and contradictory spirits in Wright that, from one perspective, I arbitrarily emphasize as well as downplay. While this is inevitable in any interpretation, my goal is to read Wright as an author focused on producing space in the struggle for black freedom. Without Wright, neither Fanon, nor Moten, nor Marriott are possible. In this way, the ambiguity which defines his work is more potentially productive than any singular optimistic or pessimistic reading. At the same time, in "misreading" Wright, I refer to Marriott's reading of Fanon, in which blackness is perpetually misrecognized. Just as I analyze Wright's positionality as a writer and activist, I must acknowledge my own position. I grew up as a first generation American with white Australian parents in upper-class suburbia and attended private schools, first in the Bay Area in California and then in Kansas City. In taking Wright's lesson to heart, I recognize that my perspective on his work and the black experience is necessarily a marginal one; indeed, much of this project is my attempt to reckon with and learn from the radical distance between myself, the text, and the lives that the text recounts.[1]

[1] In my citations, I will be using "n-a" instead of the n-word, a custom some non-black academics have taken up to acknowledge their positionality while simultaneously not attracting needless attention to such modifications. (I found this neologism in the senior thesis "All My Friends Area Dead: Listening to Trap" (2019) by Nick Byers, who noted that the term originated from Django Paris, Professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Washington.) Additionally, I will be using "they/their" as a way of referring to individuals without delineating their gender identity.

Chapter One – The Consciousness of Historical Trauma

> Three hundred years are a long time for millions of folk like us to be held in such subjection, so long a time that perhaps scores of years will have to pass before we shall be able to express what this slavery has done to us, for our personalities are still numb from its long shocks; and, as the numbness leaves our souls, we shall yet have to feel and give utterance to the full pain we shall inherit.
>
> *12 Million Black Voices*
> – Richard Wright

In this chapter, I first describe Wright's account of black social death through the main character of his first novel, *Native Son*. Next, I give an account of Wright's own intervention in black proletarian struggle and literature's role in producing the values by which this struggle can take place. I also discuss his narrative of the historical journey of black people in America and its relationship to social death through *12 Million Black Voices*.

Bigger and Social Death

As a twenty-year-old black man, Bigger, the protagonist of *Native Son*, Wright's most famous novel, is always already in prison—even before his "ruthless" murder of wealthy white heiress Mary Dalton, his attempted escape from the Chicago police, his eventual capture, and his guilty plea in court. The blackness of his skin denies him existence and the possibility of a future. Right from the very beginning of the novel, Bigger can't help but feel an inevitable sense of foreboding. Standing outside a poolroom, he asks his friend Gus where white people live:

> "You know where the white folks live?" "Yeah," Gus said, pointing eastward. "Over the 'line'; over there on Cottage Grove Avenue." "Naw; they don't," Bigger said. "What you mean?" Gus asked, puzzled. "Then, where do they live?" Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus. "Right down here in my stomach," he said.

> Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though ashamed. "Yeah; I know what you mean," he whispered. "Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em," Bigger said. "Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too," Gus said. "It's like fire." "And sometimes you can't hardly breathe...." Bigger's eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space. "That's when I feel like something awful's going to happen to me...." Bigger paused, narrowed his eyes. "Naw; it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's.... It's like I was going to do something I can't help..." (20).

In this short exchange, we find the basic structure of the problematic that defines *Native Son*. The brutal antiblackness that Bigger and Gus face is not only experienced in the evident injustice of Chicago housing segregation, but even more so in the raw feeling of fear and imprisonment that they can never escape. It is intrinsic to their lives. And yet, while Bigger willingly discusses this internalized terror, Gus's shame reveals his anxiety about the implications of their carceral existence. All this fear, worry, subjugation, oppression cannot but result in a lashing out, a rebellion. Something bad *is* going to happen to Bigger (and by extension, Gus), or rather, Bigger will be held responsible for something bad that "he will do."

One way of understanding this fearful behavior is through what JanMohamed calls the "death-bound-subject" in his study of Wright, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (2005). For JanMohamed, the death-bound-subject is "the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2). Emblematic of this subjectivity is the simple, yet harrowing, line in *Black Boy*: "I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings" (74). Black people in Wright's work are slaves, forced to obey white people under a constant threat of death; their lease on

life can be rescinded at any moment. In this way, the death-bound-subject is "a deeply aporetic structure to the extent that he is 'bound,' and hence produced as a subject, by the process of 'unbinding'" (JanMohamed 2). This is an unendurable tension in the subject's self-reproduction—what the subject ties itself to is the process of subject denial and destruction, the process that removes the subject from existence.

In describing black people as slaves, even after their alleged liberation due to the Emancipation Proclamation, JanMohamed draws on Orlando Patterson's landmark study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982). Patterson describes how, even after the Civil War, the enslavement of black people continued, even if not in a strictly legal manner, under the terms of social death. In essence, "The most distinctive feature of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated... as a substitute for [their] death, usually violent" (5). In exchange for their life, the slave had to surrender themselves entirely to their master, rendering them completely powerless. Yet slaves were not pardoned upon submitting themselves. Instead, "*death was conditionally commuted and could be revoked at the master's whim*" (JanMohamed 16). The constant threat of death, including and especially lynching, meant that black people had to totally commit themselves to their white masters. Crucially, slaves were socially dead in two ways: they had no existence as a sociopolitical entity, and they were already dead in the sense that they could be killed without violating any legal or social structures.

Because of their extralegal status, there were no official records of lynchings in the South, and as a result, estimates vary. Trudier Harris suggests that 4,951

lynchings occurred between 1882 and 1927 (7). Harris's emphasis, however, was not on the sheer number of lynchings, but rather the fact that they were the most significant factor governing the lives of Southern black sharecroppers.[2] In words that echo Marx, Wright chillingly notes how black soldiers were killed not at the Marne, but in Atlanta, Georgia; not at Château-Thierry, but in Brownsville, Texas upon their return from the First World War: "It is a lesson we will never forget; it is written into the pages of our blood, into the ledgers of our bleeding bodies, into the columns of judgment figures and balance statements in the lobes of our brains" (*12 Million* 89).

Of course, this violence was not exclusive to the South. In a Columbia University lecture entitled "How 'Bigger' Was Born" (1940), Wright narrates a stereotypical situation where police arrest a black boy who seems homeless or vaguely autonomous. The boy is held without a charge and isn't allowed to communicate with his family, and after a few days the boy will confess to any crime. Why? Because "the boy has been grilled night and day, hanged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty-story windows, and beaten" (455). Wright notes bitterly that despite the confession, the boy will likely be executed or sentenced to life in prison.

This last anecdote demonstrates a fundamental aspect of social death: any minor violation of Jim Crow etiquette can justify the end of the slave's life, rather than for particularly egregious violations of the master-slave relationship. As I will

[2] I.A. Newby notes that "[b]etween 1900 and 1910 an average of more than ninety Negroes was lynched each year in the South, and race riots frequently accompanied disfranchisement" (145). Furthermore, between June and December of 1919, black soldiers returning from the First World War faced twenty-five race riots in varied urban centers (158).

show, social death and the violent struggle against it define Bigger's life, and thus Wright's project.

Writing Historical Trauma

During the spring of 1928, having relocated to Chicago with his mother and brother from Memphis, Richard Wright began working for the post office in Chicago (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 77).[3] In the midst of sorting mail, he became friends with a "'gang' of Irish, Jewish, and Negro wits who poked fun at the government, the masses, statesmen, and political parties," mocking "all ideas of protest, of organized rebellion or revolution" (Wright, *Black Boy* 285). However, Wright's cynicism toward organized struggle would not last long. Having just moved to Chicago a year before, Wright was still exploring different social scenes and searching for intellectual niches. Rejecting a black literary group which he felt "[denied] the racial and material foundations of their lives," Wright was captivated by the supporters of Marcus Garvey, the Garveyites.

The United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded and primarily run by Marcus Garvey, focused energy on "the development of a powerful Black nation [in Africa] economically organized by a modified form of capitalism" and run by a black technocratic elite (Robinson 214). Wright sympathized with the Garveyites and their "passionate rejection of America," but he "gave no credence to the ideology of Garveyism" (*Black Boy* 286). What the Garveyites missed, according to Wright, was that Africa was controlled by European imperialists, and that black people in America were necessarily Western,

[3] Wright's father left his mother when he was six years old, an event recounted in *Black Boy* (14-35).

whether they liked it or not. And yet, despite his skepticism, in the passion and intensity of the Garveyites, in their desire to build their own nation, Wright "caught a glimpse of the potential strength of the American Negro" (287). Indeed, as Cedric J. Robinson estimates, "[h]undreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of Blacks were enrolled in the organization," such that the UNIA was "by far and away the largest nationalist organization to emerge among Blacks in America" (214). With his sympathy for the Garveyites, Wright was beginning to leave behind his mailroom cynicism—protest and organization were no longer notions to be ridiculed.

In 1929, after the stock market crash had inaugurated the Great Depression, Wright managed to find a job as an insurance agent, scamming already impoverished black families (against his own wishes) to make ends meet. While collecting payments from various households, he encountered black members of the Communist Party agitating for revolution and imitating Communist leaders, like Lenin and Stalin, with disheveled fashion choices and terse rhetorical style. But Wright felt this sheer imitation of the Communists' flair was part of an organizing effort that lacked nuance and a connection with the material circumstances of black people:

> The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back. I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them (*Black Boy* 320).

These words, which appeared chronologically in Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* after he had joined the John Reed Club—a leftwing artists' organization and publisher of the magazine *Left Front*—but before his ultimate entrance into the Party in 1933, reveal his belief that the problem of organizing was closely tied to the possibility of black liberation.

While the Party's organizational strategy was overly abstract and disconnected from material experience, Wright would use his literary endeavors to articulate the lived reality of black proletarians to Party members. Indeed, Wright ultimately joined the Party not out of deep ideological commitment, but rather to save *Left Front*, which was under threat of termination by Party officials (*Black Boy* 323).[4] Ultimately, both *Left Front* and the John Reed Club were voted out of existence by Party leadership in 1934 and 1935, respectively, leading to a disaffected and bitter Wright (342, 350).

At this point in time, Wright had already been isolated by the Party because of his intellectual tendencies: "'He talks like a book,' one of the Negro comrades had said. And that was enough to condemn me forever as bourgeois" (331). After the dissolution of the John Reed Club in spite of Wright's fierce resistance, Communist International leader Buddy Nelson began referring to him as a "bastard intellectual" and "incipient Trotskyite" who "possessed an 'antileadership

[4] Wright had been elected secretary of the John Reed Club as a compromise between warring factions, the liberal writers and the Communist painters. He recalls in *Black Boy*, "Without my knowledge and consent, [the writers] confronted the members of the party with a Negro, knowing that it would be difficult for Communists to refuse to vote for a man representing the largest single racial minority in the nation, inasmuch as Negro equality was one of the main tenets of Communism" (322). Even in an organization dedicated to revolution and liberation, cynical politicking still abounded.

attitude'" (351). Opposed to the extreme organizational rigidity, including the authoritarian leadership structure, as well as the anti-intellectual and anti-artistic sentiment, Wright announced his intention to functionally separate from the Party, albeit remaining ideologically sympathetic to its goals (360).

In 1937, now based in New York, Wright embarked on the creation of a new literary magazine entitled *New Challenge*, intended as the magazine of a new organization "similar in purpose and structure to that of the old John Reed Club" (*Byline, Richard Wright* 237). In the first and only issue of *New Challenge*, Wright published "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), what Wright's biographer Michel Fabre refers to as "the most complete, coherent and profound statement of Wright's theories on Afro-American writing" (*Unfinished Quest* 144). Continuing his criticism of the Party, in the "Blueprint," Wright argues that although Marxism should be the point of departure, "[no] theory of life can take the place of life" (44). In other terms, any theory will also remain inadequate to the black experience.

In this context, the final section of the "Blueprint," titled "*The Necessity for Collective Work*," emphasizes that black proletarian writers can only accomplish their emancipatory goals if they properly organize, both with each other and white writers. Wright does note that this style of organizing needs, as a basis, a kind of "ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of our day" (49). This does not refer to a religious adherence to Party doctrine, but rather a presumed unity based on "the collectivist and proletarian ideal," where "honest politics and honest feeling in imaginative representation ought to be able to meet on common healthy ground without fear, suspicion, and

quarreling" ("How Bigger Was Born" 449). What the Party lacked, for Wright, was a kind of intra-organizational trust.

Thus, in a proposition worthy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Wright identifies the importance of the writer in "[creating] values by which his race is to struggle, live and die," in the context of "the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church" as well as "the increasing irresolution which is paralyzing Negro middle-class leadership" ("Blueprint" 43). As a result, when black writers "think they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should want to test it with others, feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves" ("Blueprint" 49). This sort of proposal suggests that writing is a crucial element in resolving the problem of organizing, because it can identify, produce, and instill the collective values vital to rebellion against power.

Who, specifically, are these groping millions? Wright bases his theory of black proletarian literature on a recognition that "the nationalist character of the Negro people is unmistakable" ("Blueprint" 40-41). The possibility of a collective black identity is strongly tied to the material circumstances of black people: there is "a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world, a Negro school system, Negro professions; in short a Negro way of life in America" (41). Even though many of these institutions are "cowardly and incompetent," Wright asserts that black people have no other social institutions through which to effect change (42). In simple terms, the black world is quite literally segregated from the white world, such that it could and effectively did

function as a separate collectivity, or nation. But Wright's proposal is not a fetish of national identity, one which essentializes and prioritizes national (or racial) identity above all other antagonisms, like the Garveyism that he dismissed. Rather, his black nationalism, which seeks the liberation of black people, nevertheless "knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America" (42). In other words, Wright's conception of black collectivity recognizes that it must seek its own transcendence through a radical reconstruction of the social relations that produced it in the first place. Black nationalism, in this manner, acts as the vehicle for social transformation, rather than its destination.

I will explore this formulation of nationalism in the third chapter. Presently, it provides important context for Wright's theoretical framework for black liberation, including what he refers to as "*The Problem of Theme.*" Theme is the central focus of the black writer—and for Wright, if the writer aims at rendering the whole of life, then they will necessarily include the different economic, social, and political forms in which black life exists. Specifically, this means that black writers "must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the *whole*, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long, complex (and for the most part, unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again" (47). Theme is necessarily historical. If black writers are intent on the liberation of black people, for Wright their work must concentrate on the reconstruction of collective values which can motivate their struggle. Organizing, in these terms, requires a common outlook; the production of this attitude is itself part of organizing work. From Wright's point of view, the

reconstruction of these collective values entails a historical conception of the processes that lead to the oppression of black people. Thus, I read his prescriptions in the "Blueprint" not just as recommendations for other black writers, but also as a framework for his own literary project.[5]

In the foreword to *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright identifies the purpose of the photo book as a folk-history that seeks to understand and explain the historical journey of black people in America: "This text, therefore, accepts as basic and centrally historical those materials of Negro life identified with the countless black millions who made up the bulk of the slave population during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries" (6).

12 Million Black Voices' historical evaluation of black people in America is the crucial connection of several different historical forms of intertwined domination: white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. For Wright, black people "typified a colonized people coming upon industrial civilization" and enduring the shocks of technological and social change (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 234). What's more, in the book's final chapter, Wright argues that "We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*. If we black folk perish, America will perish" (146). Similarly, in a *Book-of-the-Month Club Bulletin* in February 1942, Wright describes how he wanted "to show in foreshortened form that the development of Negro life in America parallels the

[5] Wright's emphasis on historical understanding places him in a long lineage of Marxist thinkers, exemplified by Fredric Jameson's famous injunction at the beginning of *The Political Unconscious* (1981) to "Always historicize!" (9).

development of all people everywhere" (572n41). According to Wright, if black people are emblematic of the historical suffering of people everywhere, then on account of the logic of their extreme marginalization, their national liberation would imply the emancipation of all of humanity. This formulation mirrors a classical Marxist framework, in which the proletariat were deemed the universal class because they had universal interests, i.e. their liberation would entail the liberation of everybody from class society.[6] Additionally, if Wright is correct that black people exist under a colonial system, the revolutionary implication is an anticolonial nationalism.

Wright's emphasis on black people, colonialism, and national liberation foregrounds a vital intellectual relationship that this project will continually explore—that between Wright and anticolonial psychiatrist, activist, and writer Frantz Fanon. Fanon's relevance to America has always been, and will continue to be, in dispute. Although he notes in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* that "our observations and conclusions are valid only for the French Antilles—at least regarding the black man *on his home territory*," Fanon has nevertheless played a central role in black studies in America (xviii). If black Americans exist as a colonized people, then despite the difference in colonial context between the Antilles, where Fanon was born, Algeria, where he fought against the French and learned about anticolonial struggle, and the United States, where he died, Fanon's anticolonial analysis immediately gains applicability.

Wright and Fanon lived in Paris around similar times—Wright came to

[6] See Erik Olin Wright. *Class Counts: Student Edition*. Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 8.

Paris in May 1946, and Fanon from Martinique the following year (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 299; "Fanon et Richard Wright" 170). The precise nature and extent of the relationship between Fanon and Wright is disputed;[7] however, a 1953 letter from Fanon to Wright illustrates the intellectual debt that Fanon owed the American author:

> ...I am working on a study bearing on the human breadth of your works. Of your work I have *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, which I have ordered (I do not know whether the book is available in France), two short stories published, one in *Les Temps Modernes*, the other in *Présence Africaine*. Eager to circumscribe in the most complete way the breadth of your message, I'd greatly appreciate your letting me know the title of those works I might be ignorant of. My name must be unknown to you. I have written an essay *Black Skin, White Masks* which has been published by Le Seuil, in which I intend to show the systematic misunderstanding between Whites and Blacks... ("Letters to Richard Wright" 150).

Fanon never achieved his ambition of completing the full-length study of Wright's œuvre. Nevertheless, what this letter establishes is a clear genealogical link between the radical thinking of these intellectual giants.

There is a fundamental, if obvious, difference in colonial context between Fanon and Wright. Rather than being subject to what we might understand as "typical" colonialism such as in India or Africa, where imperial powers settled in "foreign" lands and enslaved the "natives," black people suffered an inverse fate. They were abducted from their homelands in Africa and imported as slaves. Yet, after the Emancipation Proclamation's promise of liberation, "some of us [black

[7] Margaret Walker in *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988) suggests they were friends for seven years, a claim which Michel Fabre rejects as fallacious. See Michel Fabre. "Margaret Walker's Richard Wright: A Wrong Righted or Wright Wronged?" The Mississippi Quarterly, vol. 42, no. 4, 1989, pp. 429–450. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26475150.

people] turned back to the same Lords of the Land who had held us as slaves and begged for work, resorted to their advice; and there began for us a new kind of bondage: sharecropping" (Wright, *12 Million* 36). Denied ownership or control over any of the South's primary industries, black people were forced to participate in a mercantilist economy, supporting their rich, white colonial masters. They farmed and sold crops like cotton for artificially low prices, and then purchased the subsequent manufactured goods back at much higher prices. In this extremely asymmetrical arrangement, black sharecroppers increasingly accumulated debt they could not pay back, and if they attempted to flee, "white policemen [would] track us down and ship us back to the plantation" (38).

In the colonial South after the Civil War, Wright describes how black people were the lowest of four social classes: "the Bosses of the Buildings" (industrial capitalists) take advantage of "the Lords of the Land" (plantation owners), who exploit "the 5,000,000 landless poor whites" and the black sharecroppers, "throwing to the poor whites the scant solace of filching from us 4,000,000 landless blacks what the poor whites are cheated of in this elaborate game" (35). Wright specifically points out how the class hierarchy participates in the constitution of the racial hierarchy. The Lords of the Land coerced poor white and black people into mutual antagonism to prevent any attempt at organized rebellion against the class system: "the poor whites are warned by the Lords of the Land that they must cast their destiny with their own color, that to make common cause with us is to threaten the foundations of civilization" (46). But he does not mean to somehow subordinate racial struggle to class struggle, as certain vulgar Marxists might argue, or vice

versa. In the introduction to *Black Metropolis* (1945), a sociological study of urban black life, Wright critiques trade unions, who despite having spearheaded black struggle, “convert the Negro problem from a complex, race, cultural, and national problem into a relatively simple one of class conflicts and interests” (xxviii). The point is that black people endure a complex matrix of different forms of marginalization, dispossession, and exploitation, all of which are mutually constitutive of each other.

Tied directly to race and colonialism is the problem of capital. Indeed, Wright notes that “the slave traders, operators of fleets of stench-ridden sailing vessels, were comparable to our contemporary ‘captains of industry’ and ‘tycoons of finance’” (*12 Million* 13). The drive to accumulate capital helps partially determine the historical origins of the slave trade. This logic likewise began to cut into the slaveholding profits, as “[t]here began to crawl across the landscape lumbering machines that magically threatened to turn millions of our black fingers idle” (25). The rising industry of the Bosses of the Buildings began competing with the slaveholding Lords of the Land. Black people were freed from slavery not merely because of a sense of morality among abolitionists, but also because of the rapid decline in soil quality, and “because of the new logic of life that came in the wake of clanking machines” (27).

As profit margins for the Lords of the Land fell, the Bosses of the Buildings began purchasing plantations and “converting them into ‘farm factories’” (56). Eventually, work on the plantations began to dry up, and with the encouragement of industrialist propaganda and without any other options, sharecroppers made their

way North, usually by train. From 1916 to 1928, roughly 1.2 million black people, including Wright and his family, were forced North in a mass movement referred to as the Great Migration (98).[8]

This historical process resembles what Marx describes as "so-called primitive accumulation." In Volume 1 of *Capital* (1867), Marx explains how the rise of the industrializing capitalist mode of production necessitated the expropriation of the producer from their means of production. While "bourgeois" historians understand primitive accumulation as the emancipation of serfs from their feudal bonds, Marx emphasizes how feudal peasants were dispossessed from their land and forced to find opportunities for labor in growing towns and cities—they were "freed" from their land "and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements" and were thus "free" to sell their labor power in exchange for minimal wages (*Capital* 875).

For Wright, the breakdown of the Southern sharecropping economy as a result of Northern industrialization is similar, but not identical, to primitive accumulation's rupture of European feudal bonds. Just as European feudal land was taken over by industrial capitalists intent on factory farming, the Bosses of the Buildings coerced, via market forces, the Lords of the Land to sell their plantations for conversion into industrial farm production.

Wright emphasizes the psychological violence associated with the subsequent Northern journey of black people:

[8] Although some historians periodize the Great Migration into two parts (employing the year 1940 as a common divider), from 1916 to 1970 "more than 6 million African Americans [relocated] from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West" (History.com Editors).

> Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. We, *who were landless upon the land*; we, who had barely managed to live in family groups; *we, who needed the ritual and guidance of institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose; we, who had known only relationships to people and not relationships to things*... 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 in death? (*12 Million* 93, emphasis added).

Wright recounted in a French radio interview in 1960, his final year, "that nothing in his life, before or since, was as difficult or traumatic as that journey from the South to the North" (Rowley 52). And yet, noting the trauma associated with both Marx's primitive accumulation and the Great Migration, one of the fundamental differences between the European serfs and the black sharecroppers was land—or more specifically, the sharecroppers' lack of it. Having always already been divorced from the means of production through the Middle Passage, slavery, and sharecropping's debt peonage, black Southerners seemingly had little else to lose. But a crucial line indicates a vital similarity: "we, who had known only relationships to people and not relationships to things" (*12 Million* 93).

In the feudal mode of production, the relation between serf and lord (as well as between serfs) was a relationship between human beings.[9] The serf's labor was appropriated by the lord, but the hierarchy of dominance was not concealed. Under the capitalist mode of production, however, the worker sold their labor power—their ability to labor for a specific amount of time—rather than their labor itself, to

[9] This explanation of the social relations involved in different modes of production builds on a previous assignment from the course "Reading Between Freedom and Necessity."

the capitalist. The crucial difference is that the worker-capitalist relation was mediated by the commodity form—in exchange for their labor power, the worker received a wage. When the producers are separated from the means of production, as in primitive accumulation, the result is that an individual can only realize their own labor through exchange with others (Marx, *Grundrisse* 295).

Amid the harsh conditions of Southern oppression after slavery, black people lived in terms of the folk tradition, rather than based on the logic of private property. Wright describes how "delicate families are held together by love, sympathy, pity, and the goading knowledge that we must work together to make a crop" (*12 Million* 60). Because "[t]here is nothing" for black people to own, the folk community is one of love and solidarity, rather than one divided by "lust for power" (61). Through "[b]lues, spirituals, and folktales recounted from mouth to mouth," black people "achieved [their] most indigenous and complete expression" in folklore in the feudal social life of the South ("Blueprint" 40). In addition, the Church acted as a center for rejuvenation and resistance. After a Sunday service, Wright relates how the worshippers returned home with the feeling, deep in their hearts, of "a possibility of inexhaustible happiness," as well as the knowledge that "if we could but get our feet planted firmly upon this earth, we could laugh and live and build" (*12 Million* 73). Crucially, this happiness "purges the pain from our memory of the past, and banishes the fear of loneliness and death" (73).

Yet, when black people journeyed North and became waged laborers working in the heart of industry, they lost the final remnants of their previous communal folk life. Instead of relationships directly between people, their

relationships were now mediated by commodities, by the wage relation. The colonial mercantile sharecropping arrangement, which doubled as a feudal one, was burst asunder.

In the context of the Great Migration in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, Wright diagnoses the decline of the black Church and the paralysis of black middle-class leadership. The violence of industrialization mutilated the feudal folk tradition and divided black social life. And, Wright finds the black Church fundamentally unwilling to morally condemn the industrialization and its necessarily racialized violence "for fear that it would place itself in a position of having to do something about it" (*Black Metropolis* xxviii). For instance, protagonist Bigger Thomas receives the visit of a black preacher during his imprisonment in the final third of *Native Son* but spurns the offered religious salvation: "And he loathed it because it made him feel as condemned and guilty as the [white] voice of those who hated him" (283). For Wright, Christianity produces a kind of quietism amid the oppression of antiblackness rather than a site of rebellion or resistance.

As a result, two different cultures arose: "one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered" ("Blueprint" 40). This ideology of individual—rather than collective—achievement is part of the system of industrial social values that further devasted black life. Black literature should not be for self-valorization, Wright suggests, but rather for the black masses, for the creation of values by which they can struggle. The critique of black bourgeois literature, which "went a-begging to white America...curtsying to show that the Negro was not

inferior" is implicitly a denunciation of the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920s black artistic movement located in Harlem, New York (37).[10] In a brutal review of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), regarded by many scholars as the literary apogee of the movement, Wright condemns the novel as addressed, not to black people, "but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy... [exploiting] that phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" ("Between Laughter and Tears" 25). According to Wright, the desire to "humanize" black people reproduces white supremacy and conceals the necessity of racialized struggle. Wright's misogyny certainly played a significant role in his severe criticism of Hurston. Nevertheless, his examination of the social hierarchy internal to black culture reveals his belief that the work of black writers committed to black liberation and the reconstruction of society must address the concerns of the black masses.

The division between the black masses and the black bourgeoisie seemingly maps onto the traditional Marxist class contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. But "proletariat" is a historically contested term, sometimes referring to members of a working class in particular, other times used more generally. In Bigger, Wright finds a man who is a "product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out" ("How 'Bigger'" 447). This estrangement could lead Bigger to either an emancipatory

[10] Wright includes an even more acerbic line: "For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks" (37).

politics or authoritarianism, Wright notes, but this is all the more reason to focus on Bigger, to harness his power and desire for revolutionary change. In his exclusion, I understand Bigger very clearly as a member of the black masses, but also as a member of the proletariat. In this case, the term "proletariat" would not refer strictly to the working class or the poor, but rather to the original meaning of the term, "those who are dispossessed, 'without reserves,' who are nothing, have nothing to lose but their chains, and cannot liberate themselves without destroying the whole social order" (Dauvé 47).

This call to the dispossessed is very similar to that of Fanon in his masterfully influential anticolonial polemic *The Wretched of the Earth* [*Les damnés de la terre*] (1961). Similar to the distinction between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in black America, Fanon identifies a bifurcation between the colonized urban proletariat, who "represent the 'bourgeois' fraction of the colonized population," and the colonized rural masses who are increasingly being dispossessed of their land (64). The urban proletariat, which consists of a small fraction of the colonized, historically refused to include or cater to the concerns of the rural masses, consistently sidelining and ignoring them in the anticolonial struggle. But this is a fatal mistake, according to Fanon, because these rural masses contain the revolutionary spontaneity necessary for a successful anticolonial independence movement:

> These men, forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in. It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead. The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from

> tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people (81).

The African colonial situation that Fanon describes is obviously not identical to Wright's America. Nonetheless, the expropriation of the colonized masses from their tribal lands mirrors the process of primitive accumulation which produces the Great Migration. From their dispossessed standpoint, Fanon argues that the colonized masses "will always respond to the call to revolt" (87). But because of their limited political consciousness, these masses have the potentiality of fighting both for and against their oppressors, just like Bigger.

Marx originally used the term "lumpenproletariat" to describe "the lowest and most degraded section of the proletariat" who "make no contribution to the workers' cause" (OED Online). In imbuing revolutionary potential into this group, Fanon critiques (or at least reveals as historical) the centrality of the workers and the working class in Marx's original analysis. Indeed, it is these very workers who are the best compensated in the colonial system and as a result are, of those colonized, the most resistant to systemic change. The recovery of the term "proletariat" to include the disinherited like Bigger Thomas also incorporates the colonized rural masses, in such a way that the prefix "lumpen," which describes those who are "boorish, stupid, unenlightened," can be easily discarded (OED Online).

Thus, like Fanon, Wright pulls no punches in his emphasis on the revolutionary potential of these dispossessed members of society. In his courtroom speech defending Bigger, Communist-affiliated lawyer Boris Max argues that people like Bigger, those so completely alienated, "form the quicksands upon which

the foundations of our civilization rest. Who knows when some slight shock, disturbing the delicate balance between social order and thirsty aspiration, shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling?" (402). The contradictory social structures that produce Bigger—contradictions endemic to white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism—necessarily produce more and more people like Bigger, to the extent that the structures endanger their very own existence. Consequently, Max is quick to note that the future of American society rests on the problem of organization: "If that mob outdoors is afraid of *one* man, what will it feel if *millions* rise?" (403). What threatens the ruling order, according to Max, is the possibility of these Biggers—these proletarians—organizing against the ruling class. The implication of Max's suggestion, Cedric J. Robinson argues, "went even beyond the most extreme position in the 1930s of American radicals," who merely asserted the leadership of black people at the forefront of the American working class (300). Wright, in fact, predicts the emergence of "the Black revolutionary movement... as a historical force that would challenge the very foundation of Western civilization" (300).

The fundamental question, of course, is how to harness such a powerful force, which returns us to the problem of organizing. In the South, Wright finds serious opposition to any organizing attempt, suggesting that "[n]o Negroes in my environment had ever thought of organizing, no matter in how orderly a fashion, and petitioning their white employers for higher wages" (*Black Boy* 200). The problem, or rather, the (im)possibility of organizing is strongly linked to the psychological trauma of social death. The fact that the (lumpen)proletariat, for both

Wright and Fanon, contain the possibility of fighting both against and for their oppressors indicate the vital importance of political education in the liberation struggle. In this context, Wright's emphasis on the psychological dimension of the trauma black people have historically experienced is simultaneously diagnosis and prognosis, revealing the contours of black social death as well as the possibilities of rebellion against its conditions.

This focus, expressed in the sheer brutality and cruelty of Bigger, is one of the most controversial aspects of *Native Son* (as well as Wright's work in general). James Baldwin famously critiques Wright for what he understands as a reproduction of negative black stereotypes. The tragedy of Bigger, for Baldwin, is that "he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 18). The problem is essentially that Bigger is pathological, that he fails to behave like a real human engaged in struggle and thus is a poor representative of black America. But Bigger is real. Growing up in the South, Wright documents five different iterations of him who compel the creation of *Native Son* ("How 'Bigger'" 435-37). And, Baldwin himself admits that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull" ("Many Thousands Gone" 32).

Black social life, which had offered a kind of respite to the violence of oppression in the South, was decimated in the industrializing North. In his literary organizing project, Wright focuses upon the mutilation of the inner life of black

people as a result of their historical journey. What Baldwin seeks to avoid is that "the trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ship—all these hollowed us out, numbed us, stripped us, and left only physiological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue" (*12 Million* 15). In short, Wright recognizes that he must account for "how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor" ("How 'Bigger'" 453). In other words, Wright identifies black life and its inability to struggle with pathology. *Native Son*, then, is a case study of the struggle against this illness and the conditions which produce it. In the next chapter, I discuss Wright's attempted rebellion against these conditions.

Chapter Two – Optimistic Wright, Pessimistic Wright

> 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. It was Mrs. Dalton.
>
> *Native Son*
> Richard Wright

> *Le nègre n'est pas. Pas plus que le Blanc.* [The black man is not. No more than the white man.]
>
> *Peau noire, masques blancs* [*Black Skin, White Masks*] (1952)
> Frantz Fanon

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the relationship between the production of meaning, black struggle, the optimistic fugitive movement away from pathologization, and the dialectical process of learning to face death embedded in Wright's work known as the "dialectic of death." In the second section, I incorporate Afro-pessimist critiques of blackness and attempts to narrativize blackness, first applying them to Wright before arguing that his work prefigures the Afro-pessimist analysis of antiblackness and the consequent possibilities of black emancipation.

The Existential Opening

The "existential opening" in Wright originates in his account of familial tragedy in *Black Boy*. Aged twelve, Wright's mother suffers a stroke, leaving her temporarily paralyzed. Care for her depletes their finances, and her condition has no cure; Wright and his family grow to accept her bedridden misery, as her health fluctuates. This familial tragedy becomes a symbol, in Wright's mind, for existence: "the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering" (100). Black people, just

like his mother, are condemned to endure the violence and pain of white oppression, without ever having a choice in the matter; they must accept the injustice or die at white hands.

But in this pain, Wright makes an existential turn: "At the age of twelve...I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase...a conviction that the meaning of life came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering" (100). Wright's discovery displays a considerable resemblance to proto-existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche's own understanding of existence: "If you have your '*why*' in life, you can get along with almost any '*how*?'" (157). And thus, the "why" for Wright consists of a deep, lifelong investigation of suffering and its social production:

> It made me want to drive coldly to the heart of every question and lay it open to the core of suffering I knew I would find there. It made me love burrowing into psychology, into realistic and naturalistic fiction and art, into those whirlpools of politics that had the power to claim the whole of men's souls. It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion; it made me love talk that sought answers to questions that could help nobody, that could only keep alive in me that enthralling sense of wonder and awe in the face of the drama of human feeling which is hidden by the external drama of life (101).

Paradoxically, Wright's intense experience of suffering doesn't leave him wanting for sedatives and opiates. If the suffering was ceaseless, he reasons, then the best response is a deep investigation of the it, a desire to question and understand it. This is the basis for Wright's intellectual adventures and ultimately for his career as a writer. At the same time, it founds his sympathy for rebels; indeed, it encourages his own rebellious action—implicitly, the attempt to understand suffering and make meaning out of that quest will necessarily challenge power, for power wants to

conceal its origins and its methods of control. If, as identified in the first chapter, Wright thinks industrial capitalism has wrecked the values by which black people struggle, the way it has done so is by attempting to obfuscate, suppress, and restrict the representation of the suffering which they feel. Only by returning this agony to the surface can organized rebellion ever occur—indeed, the values on which such organizing is contingent emerge from the encounter with systemic suffering itself. I refer to this perspective as existential, not because it conceals the ways in which suffering is socially produced (it actually does the opposite), but because it refuses to deny the suffering and instead chooses to accept it and use it for the purposes of liberation. Additionally, Wright's study of Dostoyevsky, including *Poor Folk* (1846), *The Possessed* (1872), and *Notes from Underground* (1864), link him firmly to the European existential literary tradition (Fabre 84).[11]

Even when Bigger Thomas is with "friendly" white people, the terms of social death mean that he explicitly loses his ontological status. As chauffer for the wealthy Dalton family, Bigger is asked to drive the daughter Mary Dalton to her university lectures. However, on their very first outing, Mary takes Bigger to meet Jan Erlone, her lover and a Communist Party member. Despite Mary and Jan's attempts to be kind to Bigger, such as shaking his hand and asking not to be called "sir," Bigger feels increasingly self-conscious and degraded:

> Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. *He felt he had no physical existence at all right then*; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew

[11] In the introduction to the first edition of *Native Son*, Dorothy Canfield Fisher writes that Wright's novel is "comparable only to Dostoievksi's revelation of human misery in wrong-doing...the author of this book, as has no other American writer, wrestles with utter sincerity with the Dostoievski subject—a human soul in hell because it is sick with a deadly spiritual sickness" (x).

> was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate (67).

Instead of elevating Bigger's status to a "normal" human being, Mary and Jan's behavior actually helps reproduce the racial divide which wrecks Bigger's psyche and denies him an ontology. White people normally never treat Bigger with such respect and kindness; for Bigger, Jan and Mary's attempts at compassion deny his racial status. In essence, they treat him like a "normal" person, which is to say, like a white person. In doing so, they make Bigger increasingly aware of his own blackness, his non-whiteness. Of course, Bigger's reaction is one of "a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (67).

As a result, Jan and Mary force Bigger into this space of non-existence, seemingly denied both whiteness and blackness, but retaining an implicitly pathological status. How can Bigger remain on the page—presumably still in existence—and yet lose his ontological status? In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon makes a similar point in his famous line, "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (90). Fanon argues essentially that the category of ontology, based on a Hegelian idea of mutual recognition, cannot comprehend or account for blackness. Under the Hegelian framework, each subject recognizes and realizes themselves in the Other (subject),[12] but for Fanon, the black subject is not allowed to reciprocate the recognition of the white man. The black

[12] See G.W.F. Hegel. "Self-Sufficiency and Non-Self-Sufficiency of Self-Consciousness; Mastery and Servitude." *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 109-116.

person is defined as black because of their association with whiteness, not because of their own intrinsic subjecthood. That is to say, "the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man," in that their lived experience of reality cannot be assimilated to that of a white person (117). As a result, the black person finds themselves not a subject, but rather "an object among other objects" (89). Linked to the death-bound-subject, the black person exists in an aporetic position, caught between being a subject and object. Fanon argues that as a consequence, ontology simply cannot account for the lived experience of the black person.

Writing in response to Fanon, Fred Moten consents to the inadequacy of standard ontology in "The Case of Blackness," but the ultimate result is not to disregard ontology altogether. Instead, Moten calls for "an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology" that seeks to upset and subvert standard notions of ontology to match the lived experience of blackness (187). Moten is fundamentally responding to what he understands as a pathologizing, objectifying trend in black radical discourse, linking Fanon with Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his famous 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. This pathologizing identifies black people as morally corrupt, profligate, or otherwise socially harmful and destructive.

For Moten, Fanon's theorization of anticolonial resistance simultaneously relies on and seeks to overcome this pathologization. In a fundamental way, "authentic upheaval" is aligned not with the explosion of the unconscious into consciousness, "but as that conscious mode of sabotage carried out every day" by those who have been "relegated... to the status of impossible, pathological

sociality," those true proletarians who have nothing to lose but their chains (210).[13] Yet, the inability to attain political consciousness and join the anticolonial struggle "is a general pathology suffered by the ones who take their political consciousness with them on whatever fugitive, aleatory journey they are making" (211). Indolence and noncooperation in colonial society—considered pathological by the colonial regime—is necessary for the colonized as a part of their fight against the social forces which produce their social death. However, their failure to properly achieve anticolonial consciousness is itself pathological.

Betwixt this contradiction of pathology, Moten identifies the space for what he considers to be a cause for a "black optimism," responding to the claim by certain thinkers in the Afro-pessimist tradition (like Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and David Marriott) that there is an essential relation between blackness and social death (182). Moten first makes a Heideggerian distinction between "thing" and "object." To identify blackness with "thing" is to say that it cannot be represented; instead, we can only thematize it as an object. Whereas Fanon understands black sociality as a reduction of the black subject to objecthood, Moten identifies a "fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure" (179). This fugitivity is constantly escaping ontology, which attempts to represent it pathologically as object, and at the same time it steals from and disrupts ontology. For Moten,

[13] "The duty of the colonized subject, who has not yet arrived at a political consciousness or a decision to reject the oppressor, is to have the slightest effort literally dragged out of him" (Fanon, *Wretched* 220).

blackness can never fully escape the representational demands of ontology (ontology's attempt to represent it as a pathological object), but at the same time ontology can never fully capture it: blackness, in short, remains forever fugitive. Amid the stifling conditions of social death, Moten understands this fugitivity as a way of conceptualizing blackness from an optimistic perspective, one in which blackness is simultaneously a negation and an excess, something which is concurrently expelled and incomprehensible (182). It is in black art—of which Wright is an exemplar—that Moten finds an emblematic instance of this fugitive movement, in "between the color black and what it absorbs and reflects, what it takes in and pours out" (204).

Does this leave Bigger as emblematic of Wright's pathologizing tendencies, as James Baldwin suggests? In the moment with Mary and Jan, there is a failed attempt to reduce him to objecthood as they drag him into the "shadowy region" between whiteness and blackness. This indeterminate place, while clearly not objecthood and pure pathological existence, is nevertheless unendurable, and so his hate grows. But only in the next scene, when Bigger commits the fatal act, do we witness the consequences of the time spent in this contradictory space, the beginning of Bigger's flight from the law as a fugitive.

After a night of drinking and racial obliviousness, Mary is helped by Bigger up the stairs of the Dalton mansion and into her bedroom. While both are intoxicated, Bigger begins kissing and fondling Mary, seemingly intent on raping her, before Mary's blind mother opens the bedroom door: "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. It was Mrs. Dalton" (85). Afraid that Mary will yell out, Bigger begins to smother her: "Frenzy dominated him...He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode" (85). Mary eventually succumbs to the lack of oxygen, and when Bigger recognizes that she is dead, it is not simply that he has committed murder: "She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman" (87). In this scene, arguably the climax of the novel, Bigger experiences that inevitable violent paroxysm that he predicted with Gus. Mrs. Dalton, the specter of whiteness that constantly haunts Bigger and his blackness, ultimately arrives at the most comprising time possible. Bigger is not just drunk with her daughter, but he is also sexually assaulting her, in effect fulfilling the great racial-sexual anxiety of white masculinity.[14] So, in experiencing the apogee of racial terror, Bigger responds in kind, asphyxiating Mary to prevent his own annihilation.

At the end of the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explicitly references Bigger to make a similar point:

> It's Bigger Thomas who is afraid, terribly afraid. But afraid of what? Of himself. We don't yet know who he is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world once the world finds out. And when the world finds out, the world always expects something from the black man. He is afraid that the world will find out; he is afraid of the fear in the world if the world knew... In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tension, he answers the world's expectations (118).

[14] In *Black Boy*, Wright describes this pervasive anxiety, for instance manifesting in a cartoon caricature of Abraham Lincoln: "The only dream of a n-a is to be president and to sleep with white women! Americans, do we want this in our fair land? Organize and save white womanhood!" (131).

The fear that Bigger articulates with Gus will inevitably result in something like the murder of Mary. This violence is not an incidental effect of social death—in fact, the world demands Bigger do what he is afraid of the most. Ultimately, in a sense, Bigger must give in to the demands.

From this perspective, it appears that Bigger's murder of Mary is produced by antiblackness. And yet, by the end of the novel, Bigger is convinced of the positive significance of his actions: "'What I killed for must've been good!' Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. 'It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something.... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (429). In this scene, the Communist Party-associated lawyer Boris Max implores Bigger to stop talking, to quiet these feelings and their untimely appearance just before Bigger's execution. But in doing so, Max is attempting to prevent Bigger's self-realization. These final words show how Bigger has found significance through his murder—he has finally felt alive, perhaps even free, in his rebellious killing. In trying to deny or ignore Bigger's feelings, how different, really, is Max in the final scene compared to Jan and Mary? Bigger has changed—he has come to a new self-consciousness about his life and its meaning.

The standard reading of this scene has always mapped Bigger's repudiation of Max onto Wright's fractured relationship with the Communist Party (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 184). The Party, clearly not happy with the prioritization of a black perspective instead of the Party line, delayed defending the book for nearly two months. Needing to support "one of their most prestigious black writers" amid

the controversy the novel generated, influential Communist literary critic Mike Gold, who amounted to the official Party word, eventually vindicated the book: "And I still cannot understand how any reader misses the heroic character of the Communist lawyer in Wright's book. He is a sufficiently positive hero to offset the negative aspects, and he occupies at least a third of the book" (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 184-5; Gold 7). The delay, nevertheless, revealed the Party's disapproval.

Between the scene and Wright's historical conflict with the Party, we find Moten's black fugitivity. Bigger, who has been on the run throughout the entire novel, has finally been captured, tried, and sentenced to death. But even in a situation in which all options, except death, are closed off, Bigger comes to believe in the importance of his life and his actions—and their goodness is absolutely incomprehensible to Max. In the end, "Max's eyes were full terror," while Bigger tells the lawyer that he will be alright (429). Max's inability to comprehend Bigger is the inability of the Party and its Marxism to grasp blackness, both in its negativity as well as its excess.

The process by which the black subject escapes social death as a fugitive is what JanMohamed refers to as "the dialectic of death," based on his formulation of the death-bound-subject. In this dialectical process, the slave's "social-death," their exclusion from white society at the risk of death, is in contradiction with their "actual-death," when they become physically deceased (biologically dead) (17). Crucially, the slave's *actual-death* is both the prerequisite for their *social-death*, as well as its possible negation—a subject's *actual-death* would result in the end of their *social-death*. The potential resolution to the contradiction between *social-* and

actual-death is “symbolic death,” which “is constituted by the death of the slave’s subject-position as a socially dead being and his rebirth in a different subject-position” (17). In *symbolic-death*, the rebellious slave chooses their actual death, thus going beyond their socially-dead subject-position to an instant of freedom. Dialectically, *symbolic-death* is a coming-to-consciousness about the inevitability of death. The white master, who can control black slaves only under the threat of death, loses their status as master when the slave chooses to die—in deciding to die, there is a moment of liberation for the black slave, for they no longer feel subjected to their socially-dead status.

For Bigger, this moment of symbolic death, of liberation, comes not immediately after the murder of Mary, but through a gradual realization that runs the course of the entire novel. Prior to the murder of Mary, Bigger’s subjectivity is always conflicted, always forced to live in that shadowy realm between whiteness and blackness. As the narrative progresses, Bigger’s subjectivity begins to alter with his admission that he unconsciously desired to kill Mary and that this desire constituted a generally murderous psyche: “He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her... And in a certain sense he knew that the girl’s death had not been accidental... His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this” (*Native Son* 106). For JanMohamed, Bigger’s affirmation of the inevitability of his murder and his association of this with his blackness participates in “affirming himself as the product of the dialectic of death” (101). Indeed, the knowledge of his

murder and its consequences create for Bigger "a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared" (*Native Son* 105).

But it is not enough for Bigger to have a private, internal coming-to-consciousness about the dialectic of death. Vital to Bigger's *symbolic-death* is his need for a public recognition of his desires, motivations, and actions—without a recognition of the dialectic, such knowledge would risk being repressed. Thus, Bigger "wished that he had the power to say what he had done without fear of being arrested; he wished that he could be an idea in their minds" (130). Similarly, Bigger is obsessed with newspapers and their reporting of his crime. JanMohamed notes how after reviving from a three-day semi-conscious trance state that was instigated by his imprisonment, Bigger's first request "is for the newspapers, and he eagerly devours the terrible images of himself that are carried in them" (108-9).

This public aspect of symbolic death is not mere narcissism. Rather, Wright seeks to emphasize that symbolic death is not just about an individual acceptance of death but is instead deeply linked to the political consequences of the subject's *actual-death*. After Bigger has been captured and imprisoned and thus effectively condemned, he attempts to withdraw from life: "He was not so much in a stupor, as in the grip of a deep physiological resolution not to react to anything" (*Native Son* 274). This withdrawal is not just a vegetative state, but rather a suicidal desire, a desire to return to nature: "...there should be a merging with some other part of the natural world in which he lived. Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself" (274). Even though Bigger seeks to renounce his

own life, his "very *desire* for death ironically affirms [his] subjectivity as well as [his] agency" (JanMohamed 121). Seemingly at his lowest point, Bigger nevertheless continues along the dialectic of death and asserts a kind of liberation in his desire for suicide.

Yet Bigger does not simply "move beyond" this painful stage. A complete *symbolic-death* amounts to the reconstruction of his subjectivity. Dreaming of this subjectivity in his trance, Bigger notes that he would require

> a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic and power could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dream of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory. This would have to happen before he could look them in the face again: a new pride and a new humility would have to be born in him, a humility springing from a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived, and this identification forming the basis for a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity (275).

In *symbolic-death*, Bigger would need an entirely new system of language and thus an entirely new subjectivity. In this new system, the foundational difference would be a resounding acceptance of death. And just as Wright argued in the "Blueprint," there would be a new set of values—a new pride and a new humility—by which he could live and struggle. No longer would Bigger feel dispossessed and dislocated; instead he would newly identify with some part of the world.

What finally awakens Bigger from his trance, JanMohamed continues, is the state's unavoidable politicization and racialization of his death at the coroner's inquest:

> 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. And as he felt it, rebellion rose in him. He had sunk to the lowest point this side of death, but when he felt his life again

> threatened in a way that meant he was to go down the dark road a helpless spectacle of sport for others, he sprang back into action, alive, contending (276).

Bigger returns to the world not in an attempt to prevent his own death, but rather to "fight against the attempts by Buckley [the state prosecutor] and the court to *use* his death for their particular racial and political purposes" (JanMohamed 122). For the first time in the novel, with an awareness of its political consequences, Bigger now self-consciously attempts to control the meaning of his death. What initially begins as an internal awareness of the dialectic of death becomes a desire for public recognition of his actions, which ultimately transforms into a struggle over the kind of recognition that his actions will receive.

Jan, Mary's lover, is the only character in the entire novel who affirms Bigger and his actions. Following the inquest, Jan meets Bigger in his cell, where he apologizes for his prior antiblackness and acknowledges his own responsibility in Mary's death due to his participation in the system of social death that mutilates Bigger's subjectivity. In response, Bigger's attitude toward Jan changes from hatred to sympathy: "For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him" (*Native Son* 289). This emotional connection between the two men sets up Jan's emphasis on the significance of his murder of Mary: "'You believed enough to kill. You thought you were settling something, or you wouldn't have killed,' said Jan. Bigger stared and did not answer. Did this man believe in him *that* much?'" (290). For JanMohamed, these lines imply "an existential insistence on the precedence of action over meaning" (126).

Thus, at the end of *Native Son*, Bigger insists that "What I killed for must've been good" (429). In his *symbolic-death*, Bigger comes to realize not just the political significance of his actions, but also how his liberation commands the meaning of his actions. Or, as Moten may suggest, the meaning of Bigger's life is unwritable. But considering the possibility for black optimism, it must have been good, for now Bigger knows how to die, something he had been searching for, unknowingly, his entire life. Under conditions of social death and extreme dispossession, Wright seems to be saying, there is always an existential opening for meaningful rebellion in the struggle for black liberation, one that is dialectical in nature.

The potential freedom that Wright depicts in *Native Son* also arises from his writing itself. To endure the violence of the Jim Crow South, Wright conjures up "spontaneous fantasies" that acted as "a moral bulwark that enabled me to feel I was keeping my emotional integrity whole, a support that enabled my personality to limp through days lived under the threat of violence" (*Black Boy* 74). To prevent the kind of ultimate psychological destruction that he diagnoses as a consequence of social death, Wright escapes into his fantasy world as a defense of his psyche. But in this world, as one fantasy about shooting a white mob in an act of martyrdom suggests, Wright also "rehearses his opposition to Jim Crow society" and thus begins to comprehend "the processes of racial formation" (JanMohamed 170). When Wright moves to Chicago and embarks on his literary journey, his fantasy world transforms into his literary world. JanMohamed argues that literature allows Wright to explore social contradictions such as race and class and resolve them symbolically—such as with the dialectic of death. In other words, literature is a

space of potentiality, one which allows him the possibility of simultaneously describing and performing rebellion.

Wright enacts this rebellion by gesturing towards the new values by which black proletarians can struggle, such as that new pride and new humility which Bigger proposes. But Wright can only make such gestures through a Moten-esque fugitive process of stealing words. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright describes how slaves who originally spoke different languages and thus were brought together specifically so they would be unable to plot rebellion began to create their own system of meaning based on their masters' language:

> We stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning. And we charged this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety, by hurried speech, in honeyed drawls, by rolling our eyes, by flourishing our hands, by assigning to common, simple words new meanings, meanings which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware! Our secret language extended our understanding of what slavery meant and gave us the freedom to speak to our brothers in captivity; we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, though they were the words of the Lords of the Land, they became *our* words, *our* language (40).

This language creation follows the logic of Moten's fugitivity—excluded from comprehension of their masters (or Western thought/ontology), the slaves stole those words they were interdicted from knowing and gave them new meanings, ones that were totally incomprehensible to the slaveowners. Dialectically, the strategic attempt by their masters to prevent rebellion actually had the inverse effect, for the slaves now had their own secret means of communication that constituted a rebellion against their social death, consequently a kind of liberation

and thus a kind of social life. The literal words may have sounded or looked the same, Wright seems to be saying, but they nevertheless contained completely different meanings, impossible for the slaveowners to grasp.

Wright's description of this rebellious process likewise points to his own writing. In the introduction to *Black Metropolis*, he asks an ambitious question: "What would life on Chicago's South Side look like when seen through the eyes of a Freud, a Joyce, a Proust, a Pavlov, a Kierkegaard?" (xxxi). And yet, it is these very figures, as well as Marx, Dostoyevsky, Maupassant, Conrad, Tolstoy, Dreiser and more, who Wright intensely read, studied, and imitated.[15] There is clearly no doubt about Wright's indebtedness to these canonical figures. But Wright uses the (white) Western canon not to uphold its traditional values and oppressive structures, but rather to subvert them. When Mary and Jan treat Bigger as if he is white, they deny the singularity of the black social experience, which is to say, its utter distinctness from the lived social experience of the white person. Understood within Moten's idea of fugitivity, what Wright steals from Dostoyevsky and Marx is also what disrupts the ontology those thinkers presume—Wright steals, but (white) Western thought can never fully steal back, never fully understand, for it simultaneously captures and expels blackness, including Wright's work.

To steal, then, is to begin organizing resistance against the very institutions that placed blackness in its fugitive state in the first place. Wright's utilization of

[15] See Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books & Writers* (1990), for an exhaustive catalog of Wright's library. Additionally, in an interview with Anne Brièrre for *France-USA*, Wright remarked, "Among great novelists those I go back to most often are Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, Thomas Hardy, Maupassant, Proust, Dostoevsky. But I'd give them all for a book by Dreiser. He encompasses them all" ("R. Wright: America Is Not Conformist" 210).

the dialectic of death is his attempt to reveal an opening for rebellion, to justify its possibility by exposing the suffering of Bigger Thomas and the associated values by which black proletarians can collectively struggle.

Wright and Afro-Pessimism

Throughout *Native Son*, the fact that "the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man," rings true for Bigger in his flight from the whiteness (Fanon, *Black Skin* 117). Nevertheless, Wright's white readers reveal themselves unable—even and especially those presumably sympathetic to his perspective—to grasp this essential point of the novel. In the introduction to the first edition of *Native Son*, Dorothy Canfield Fisher declares: "...although I think there is no one single effect in Dostoievski finer than the last page of *Native Son* in which—just before he dies, not having yet lived—the stultified Negro boy is born at last into humanity and makes his first simple, normal human response to a fellow-man" (x).

But this is the opposite of what actually takes place. When Mary and Jan (like Wright's white readers) treat Bigger as a white person, they reproduce the process that forces him into that shadowy realm of nonbeing, between the humanity of whiteness and the pure pathological objecthood of blackness. The narrative's progression through the dialectic of death does not ultimately resolve Bigger as a (white) human, but rather something else—somebody free, albeit temporarily, from the domination that defines the structure of race. In a review of *Black Boy*, celebrated Columbia University intellectual Lionel Trilling asserted about Wright, "He is not an object, he is a subject; he is the same kind of person as his reader, as

complex, as free" (152). But again, Wright's purpose is to explain how being black is fundamentally to exist as a kind of object in white eyes. It is true that Wright was the one writing, presumably acting as a subject, as an agent with authorial authority. But does that negate his explication of the objectifying process that defines blackness? Does the medium of literary text itself prevent the expression of a certain idea of blackness?

The final lines of *Black Boy's* first chapter, in which he recounts meeting his father in Mississippi following his rise to fame on the heels of *Native Son* after 25 years of separation, likewise registers Wright's paradoxical position:

> ...a quarter of a century during which 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... I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me or the scalding experiences that had swept me beyond his life and into an area of living that he could never know... how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body. . . (34).

What separates Wright from his father? In a very literal sense, Wright argues that the underlying structure of reality changes for someone who has been educated by text, by literature, by knowledge. Paradoxically, even though text produces this immense separation, it cannot undo the damage and return Wright back to the world of his father. Wright is distanced from his father by the very representation of black social death, similar to and including his father. It seems that his social elevation is dependent upon his father's continued deprivation. But what creates this distance? The answer lies in "the city," that node of extreme social disparity and contradiction

which "had lifted me in its burling arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing," while compelling his father to remain "a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city" (35).

The radical distance between Wright and his peasant father frames his desire to become a writer of black proletarian lives. After joining the Communist Party, Wright began work on a biographical project of a fellow black Communist named Ross, interested in understanding his origins and his motivations for political struggle:

> I wanted to make the lives of these men known through the images already accepted as the common coin of communication. I wanted to make them know that they had allies, that more people than they knew, and in ways they did not understand, were their friends, and that I was their friend. I wanted to voice the words in them that they could not say, to be a witness for their living (*Black Boy* 338-9).

Wright places himself as a mediator, as the common coin, between those black people who are socially dead, but not completely dead, and their allies. He wants to witness their existence, "resurrecting them from the margins of death" in order to return them "to mainstream life" (JanMohamed 33). Through Wright, the socially dead will recognize the world, and the socially alive will recognize them. In doing so, Wright is also "directly mediating his own liberation from the margins of life," such that he becomes crucial to the process of subject-creation (33). In response to the death-bound-subject, Wright binds the lives of the socially dead to his own life. Ultimately, the Communist Party put an end to his biographical work, intimidating Wright with insinuations of his supposed counterrevolutionary activity and eventually ejecting Ross on account of "antileadership tendencies" (*Black Boy*

340). But Wright's attempted role as a common coin fundamentally structures his placement in regard to his work and is thus responsible for his greatest strengths as a writer and organizer, as well as his greatest weaknesses.

The problem, essentially, is the problem of blackness itself.[16] Wright's representation of blackness, even in his attempt to elevate and liberate black people, reproduces the very pathological analysis that both Wright and Fanon describe and criticize and which Moten attempts to escape. For Frank Wilderson in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), considered the manifesto of Afro-pessimist thought, attempts to analogize black suffering and place it in the world are mystifications and erasures because of its singularity and uniqueness. A common comparison is made to the Jewish person in the concentration camp, who was similarly reduced from the status of the human to the sub- or non-human just like the black person. Nevertheless, the analogy fails for Wilderson because it "erroneously locates Blacks in the world—a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness" (37). Whereas Jewish people entered Auschwitz and left as Jewish, "Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks" (38). The violence of the Middle Passage, which Wilderson understands as "a Human *and* a metaphysical holocaust," expelled black people from ontological understanding "because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject" (38).

[16] This summary of Afro-pessimist thought derives in large part from the course "Necropolitics and Black Fugitive Life."

Marxists and other historicists are often troubled by the seeming abstractions and generalizations made by Afro-pessimist thinkers, especially in regard to history. However, part of what makes Afro-pessimism's intervention so powerful is its recognition of the ways in which History fails to be a meaningful concept for blackness. As Christina Sharpe notes, the historical record has never been an accurate rendition of black violence and suffering, consisting of "accumulated erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings" (12). What it means to be black or to have endured slavery may be partially learned from archival work and historical analysis but is also, crucially, gained "in excess of those studies... through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday" (12).[17] Blackness is not an abstraction, but rather indicative of a fundamental exclusion, obliteration, and incoherence that is the fact of being black.

In this way, Wilderson argues, the attempt to thematize blackness by pretending that it "is present, coherent, and above all human" is similar to the process by which the International Monetary Fund forces certain debtor nations to pretend they have the ability to pay off structural adjustment loans—even though said loans and their accompanying austerity measures exist to further enslave the debtor nations to European capital (38). Narrating blackness, as Wright does, "means feigning ontological capacity regardless of the fact that blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form" (38). The relationship between the white and the black person, for Wilderson, is ultimately a relationship between a master and a slave. No recognition by the white person of the black person is

[17] Importantly, Sharpe identifies the limitations of not just Wright's work, but also this project.

possible. In this way, Wilderson describes this relationship as a "structural antagonism," because it is the logic on which the Western world is founded.

In a famous response to Moten's essay entitled "Judging Fanon" (2016), Fanon scholar David Marriott builds on the implications of Wilderson's perspective to critique the fugitive movement from object to "thing." Seeking to defend Fanon, Marriott argues that "[b]y writing blackness as ceaseless fugitivity, Moten has moved towards a position in which blackness is only black when it exceeds its racist disavowal" (3). In Moten, Marriott finds a kind of racial metaphysics, reproducing in the terms of colonial logic a binary between black pathology and black consciousness (or cure). Moten's fugitivity, in essence, relies on and reinscribes the very pathological thinking that it seeks to escape, leading to a paradox: if blackness is ceaseless fugitivity, is blackness always in the process of escaping and never free? Or has it always already escaped its pathological status as an object? If the escape is perpetual, is one closer to attaining liberation? Or is fugitivity perennially deferred and thus never actualized? (Byers 76).

Additionally, Moten's desire to find a black social life leads him to identify Fanon as a member of the history of black pathologization, rather than as one of its staunchest critics challenging the meaning of blackness ("Judging Fanon" 5). Evidently, the description of black pathology and the conditions of its production by no means constitutes an endorsement of said pathology. To suggest, as Moten does, that Fanon relies on black pathology in anticolonial resistance is to separate Fanon's clinical work as a psychiatrist treating war-stricken patients and his political prescriptions demanding the colonized to resist (7). What Moten misses in

this reading of Fanon is a conception of resistance, not as a telos, but "as an event that exceeds all such narratives," one that fails to exhaust "the permanent hemorrhaging of this black body which ultimately no art or politics can stem" (7). Fundamentally, Moten seeks a new cure, just like the cure of the colonial psychiatrist that reproduces the very pathological conditions from which the black person seeks a reprieve. What Marriott identifies in Fanon's work, then, is its emphasis on the undecidability of blackness.

"*Le nègre n'est pas. Pas plus que le Blanc*" (*Peau noire* 187). "The black man is not. No more than the white man" (*Black Skin* 206). There are too many attempts, for Marriott, to narrate or explain what precisely Fanon means by this enigmatic phrase. In fact, understanding it as optimistic or pessimistic is to truncate the phrase's ambiguity, its hesitation, to a straightforward desire, "rather than engage with Fanon's refusal to represent or name" ("Judging Fanon" 7). Instead, the *n'est pas* refers to what Fanon calls the abyss, which precedes both the desire for and the possibility of a world and "consequently begins, always violently, where *le vecu noir* [sic] undergoes the shock of a sudden shift or a reversal in its phenomenal existence" (9). The *n'est pas* is Fanon's hesitation, his unwillingness to define blackness. For Marriott, this implies a startling conclusion:

> blackness is defined not by its exorbitance, nor by its censorship, but by the way that it is always imaginarily misrecognized as a limit-work, rather than what, on the contrary, makes it so singular and disturbing as the unnameable event of an infinite postponement (9).

Blackness as abyss, as what Fanon calls *mort à bout touchant* [touching death/death-in-life/social death]. The Middle Passage exists as the event of blackness, changing Africans to blacks, creating a rupture that produces blackness

not merely as a kind of material deprivation "but as the structure of a never-having-had" (9). The attempts to give a name to blackness, to narrativize it, always result in failure, in objectification and pathologization because of this infinite postponement of what blackness is, which itself arrives from the never-having-had. Essentially, blackness is always misrecognized. In the context of this aporia, as Marriott identifies in the forward to *Whither Fanon: Studies in the Blackness of Being* (2018), through his clinical work "Fanon wishes the colonized to be absolutely free," not in the traditional (Western) framework of political sovereignty, but rather that "each citizen should stand on their own feet and be able to look the enemy in the eye without trembling" (xv).[18]

The violence that constitutes the anticolonial struggle is not Hegelian, in the sense that the struggle between master and slave is a progressive struggle for the slave to attain the status of a human subject. Rather, decolonial violence "refers to a struggle that is not *to* the death, but to a struggle *with* and *from* death, a struggle that seeks to go beyond the death in life that, however dialectical, no philosophical anthropology has yet grasped" ("Judging Fanon" 14). What it means to struggle against the colonizer is intimately tied to the ability to come to terms with one's inevitable death. In other words, Marriott describes how "the moment of invention [of decolonial violence] is an event without sense or content" (15). This moment defies and exceeds representation, especially in its political form. Just as Fanon's opening lines from "On Violence" identify a "tabula rasa which from the outset

[18] In "Judging Fanon," Marriott similarly states, "Fanon's notion of wretchedness compels us to conceive of revolutionary liberation no longer in terms of a sovereign decision or desire, but as the very exercise of a suspicion, or a discomfort, with the traditional discourse or literature of sovereignty" (13-14).

defines any decolonization," Marriott emphasizes that the violence through which the colonized express themselves is little related to a kind of justice or morality (*Wretched* 1). Whatever decolonial violence brings, its meaning "is always unprecedented" ("Judging Fanon" 15). To ultimately be able to look the colonizer in the eyes without trembling, without fearing death, is an unnameable event, beyond the limits of the very systems of representation to which it brings about disorder and violence. In contrast to Moten, what Marriott identifies in Fanon is the production of an ungoverned space through which anticolonial struggle can actually occur, instead of a fugitive movement which reproduces the very pathology it supposedly wishes to escape.

I do not engage in this exegesis to accuse Wright of failing to be Fanon or Marriott, to disavow the dialectic of death and its relationship to fugitivity. From one (e.g. Baldwin's) perspective, there is little doubt that the brutality of his work engages in the kind of pathologization that Moten decries. And, even as Wright "steals" words from the white master, his literary masters like Dreiser and Dostoyevsky, it is still the master's language that he uses. The very act of writing and representing socially dead black proletarians is, à la Wilderson, less a theft and more a structural adjustment loan that claims to reveal the meaning of blackness while simultaneously reproducing the ejection of blackness from the world of ontology. Similarly, Wright's emphasis on a recognition of Bigger's "humanity" from white characters like Jan and Max, as well as his oath at the end of *Black Boy* "to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human," betrays an idealized humanism that Afro-pessimists traditionally scorn (384).

Nevertheless, I can identify traces of Marriott's Fanonian thinking of blackness in Wright, specifically the opening epigraph to this chapter, in which Bigger encounters Mrs. Dalton:

> 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. It was Mrs. Dalton (85).

The hesitation of the *n'est pas* is Bigger's hysterical terror, the abyss his hallucinatory plunge. He is frozen in an aporetic structure, in the gaze of Mrs. Dalton. He is forced into that shadowy region of non-existence, and his recognition of Mrs. Dalton as that white specter which perpetually haunts him is the recognition by Wright that "there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white" (Fanon, *Black Skin* xiv). Bigger's declaration to Max at the end of *Native Son* that "What I killed for must've been good!" is a refusal to narrate blackness and instead functions as a prioritization of action over meaning (JanMohamed 126). On the one hand, Bigger's self-affirmation, his acceptance of death as a result of the dialectic of death, is the realization of Fanon's dream that the black man look the colonizer in the eyes without fear. At the same time, the refusal to narrate demonstrates an implicit recognition of the inevitable pathologizing of blackness and thus a commitment to the event of blackness, of black liberation, to come. Bigger's murder of Mary is not merely misplaced class antagonism, as one Marxist reading of *Native Son*'s finale might suggest, but an unthinkable event of decolonial violence that challenges the very foundation of the West. Wright, in a sense, identifies the limitations of his art, while simultaneously using his art to gesture beyond the antiblack, capitalist, and colonial world.

Marriott's attitude to art and its relationship to blackness is considerably gloomier. As cited above, art ultimately fails to staunch "the permanent hemorrhaging of this black body," since no aesthetic or representational form can delineate black suffering without becoming "dirty or hysterical" (7, 8). But this perspective comes into conflict with Fanon's extensive reference to literature and poetry, especially that of the Négritude movement, in his invocation of black resistance. In the third and final chapter, I will argue that Wright's emphasis on black nationalism allows him to conceptualize his art in terms that both recognize the singularity of the black experience and desire the possibility of a more collective existence.

Chapter Three – Wright's Eschatology

> There now remains one fundamental question. What is the relationship between the struggle, the political or armed conflict, and culture? During the conflict is culture put on hold? Is the national struggle a cultural manifestation? Must we conclude that the liberation struggle, though beneficial for a culture a posteriori, is in itself a negation of culture? In other words, is the liberation struggle a cultural phenomenon? (178).
>
> – Frantz Fanon,
> *The Wretched of the Earth*

> "It's the environment; it's society that is responsible for your mystification." Once that has been said, the rest will follow of its own accord, and we know what that means. The end of the world, by Jove (191).
>
> – Frantz Fanon,
> *Black Skin, White Masks*

> Who knows when some slight shock, disturbing the delicate balance between social order and thirsty aspiration, shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling? Does that sound fantastic? I assure that it is no more fantastic than those troops and that waiting mob whose presence and guilty anger portend something which we dare not even *think*!
>
> – Boris Max (Richard Wright)
> *Native Son*

In this chapter, I will first analyze Wright's black nationalism and its focus on transcendence, before connecting it to Frantz Fanon and his conception of national struggle through a process of crystallization. Then, I will argue that *12 Million Black Voices* represents the best expression of Wright's proposed nationhood. Going beyond both the optimism and pessimism of Fanon's successors, the folk history desires the end of antiblackness, while concurrently recognizing the structural limitations antiblackness places on narrative in its refusal to give an account of the decolonial struggle which will take place. At the same

time, it nevertheless expresses a utopian yearning for collective existence, one that can only take place in a world radically distinct from the present one.

Black Nationalism in Fanon and Wright

In the "Blueprint," as discussed at the end of the first chapter, Wright calls for black writers to "accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them" (42). Why a black nationalism, and not some other organizational framework? In the separate black world that characterizes the black nation in America, despite the shortcomings of black social institutions—such as the school system, the business world, or the press—Wright argues that "they are all that the Negro has," and thus "any move, whether for progress or reaction, must come through these institutions for the simple reason that all other channels are closed" (42). In this way, Wright's black nationalism is concerned with involving the black proletariat, those people who necessarily participate in and make up the "Negro way of life in America," as opposed to a black technocratic elite, one which would govern the masses in a similar fashion to the white ruling class (41).

The fundamental value in and purpose of a black nationalism, according to Wright, is the liberation of black people. In Wright's terms, this could only occur in the process of overcoming capitalism and moving beyond black nationalism itself. Thus, it is a nationalism "whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society" (42). In this way, Wright targets the difference in lived experience

between white and black people, a difference to be organized around and challenged.

But if there is a fundamental difference between blackness and whiteness, if blackness is excluded from not just the material white world, but from Western ontology and thus the Western world, then what would overcoming this structural antagonism mean? On this consideration, and on the relationship between cultural production and the liberation struggle, I return once again to Fanon.

Just as Wright distinguishes between writing for the Negro bourgeoisie and the black masses, in "On National Culture" from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon emphasizes the limitations and complicity of the "colonized intellectual," the intellectual elite of African colonies. For Fanon, the colonized intellectual is primarily interested in validating the culture of historical African civilizations with the aim of debunking European claims of African barbarism. Similarly, Wright criticized black writers "who went a-begging to white America... curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human" ("Blueprint" 37). In doing so, the colonized intellectual takes colonialism's assessment of culture and cultural value at its word because "at the very moment when he undertakes a work of art, [he] fails to realize he is using techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier" (Fanon, *Wretched* 160).

Similarly, Marriott argues that blackness is only encountered as a fiction, that "the black cannot put blackness to work" ("Judging Fanon" 16). The point is that any attempt to ground blackness in itself will inherently fail because "blackness is only ever going to be the subject of a limitation that is the limit of its own

fictioning" (16). This logic is an extension of the logic of the *n'est pas*, of blackness as an event of infinite postponement that cannot be narrated nor thematized. In Marriott's eyes, art will always fail to give an account of blackness; any attempt will inevitably become "dirty or hysterical" in unavoidable pathologizing gestures (8).

Fanon's critique of the colonized intellectual's art, however, does not preclude the contribution of art to understanding the problem of blackness, and thus the anticolonial struggle. Indeed, Fanon's work is filled with constant reference to and the inclusion of literature and poetry from the Négritude movement, an artistic and intellectual framework created in the 1930s that emphasized the rehabilitation of blackness and black consciousness for Africans and members of the African diaspora.

For example, Fanon includes a long poem by Keita Fodeba, minister for internal affairs of the Republic of Guinea, as an example of the kind of cultural production in which he is interested. In this poem, a young peasant farmer of the Mandingo people named Naman is sent away by his tribal elders, at the request of the "whites" to fight in the Second World War, in order to "prove to the white man the courage which we Mandingos have always been known for" (*Wretched* 164-65). Receiving only sporadic updates about his situation, including his decoration for bravery, Naman's wife Kadia frets until she receives news that he will soon arrive home. But just as he is about to return, a white policeman shoots Naman in Senegal. For Fanon, this poem has "undeniable pedagogical value" because understanding the poem is both an intellectual and political act:

> There is not one colonized subject who will not understand the message in this poem. Naman, hero of the battlefields of Europe, Naman who vouched for the power and the continuity of the metropolis, Naman mowed down by the police at the very moment he returns home; this is Sétif in 1945, Fort-de-France, Saigon, Dakar, and Lagos. All the "n-as" and all the "filthy Arabs" who fought to defend France's liberty or British civilization will recognize themselves in this poem by Keita Fodeba (167).

The importance of this poem for Fanon mirrors the way in which political struggle, for Wright, can arise from identification with the suffering that is represented in the text. Just as James Baldwin notes that there is a Bigger Thomas internal to all black Americans, Fanon emphasizes that no colonized subject will fail to relate to the pain the poem articulates. There is no specific delineation of what precisely blackness is; rather, the focus is on the violence done to the colonized and the requisite violence that anticolonial revolution necessarily entails.

In this way, Fanon finds literature's significance in its ability to direct and clarify nationalist struggle: "This combat literature... calls upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of the nation" and "informs the national consciousness, gives it shape and contours, and opens up new, unlimited horizons" (173). What the original work of the colonized intellectual lacks, and what combat literature possesses, is a temporality of revolution, an openness to the future. In contrast, the colonized intellectual, obsessed with history, remains frozen in time, "[looking] at what is irrelevant to the present" (161).

For those participating in the liberation struggle, Fanon employs the language of crystallization.[19] Fodeba's work, for instance, is concerned with

[19] I am indebted to Matthew Garrett for this reading of "crystallization" in Fanon.

"defining the place of action and the ideas around which the will of the people will *crystallize*" (163, emphasis added). The word appears once again in a discussion about the future of literature during revolt: "The *crystallization* of the national consciousness will not only radically change the literary genres and themes but also create a completely new audience" (173, emphasis added). And in his criticism of the contemporary state of national consciousness, Fanon polemicizes: "Instead of being coordinated *crystallization* of the people's innermost aspirations, instead of being the most tangible, immediate product of popular mobilization, national consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty, fragile shell" (97, emphasis added).

The struggle for nationhood is closely tied to this process of crystallization, which I understand as "[t]he action or an act of becoming concrete, defined, or clarified" (OED Online). In the nation, Fanon recognizes "a precondition for culture, its ebullition, its perpetual renewal and maturation" (*Wretched* 177). The process of crystallization, of clarification, of becoming, never finishes—the nation and its culture should bubble and boil, forever emerging and materializing. At the same time, "it is the struggle for nationhood that unlocks culture and opens the doors of creation" (177). What I see in the struggle for nationhood and the process by which a nation might exist is this constant crystallization, this constant clarification of what nationhood is, this constant movement. Colonization, on the contrary, arrests the process of change and development.

From one perspective, this movement is the movement that defines Moten's fugitivity. When Bigger loses his ontological existence in the encounter with Mary and Jan, "It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the

white world from the black that he stood upon" (*Native Son* 67). Mary and Jan attempt to pull Bigger into the white world, off of the black land on which he desires to stand, and he is immobilized. The anticolonial conflict of both Bigger and Fanon, despite the objective differences in their respective contexts, is a pulling back, a straining and stealing back onto a black nation with the aim of developing, concretizing, and crystallizing movement.

The problems and contradictions endemic to the concept of fugitivity, as identified in the previous chapter, do not disappear in the context of the crystallizing national struggle. What it means to be free, as Marriott articulates, is the ability to stare down the colonizer without quaking. In this way, the unprecedented violence against the colonizer and the movement of crystallization that ruptures the colonial bonds are closely aligned. Nationhood is not fetishized but rather understood as a nebulous project, one that is constantly (re)defining the terms of its own existence. Put differently, nationhood persistently gestures beyond itself, to the space it cannot articulate, the space that is to come.

Convening *12 Million Black Voices*

12 Million Black Voices is Wright's most explicit literary demonstration of the kind of emancipatory black nationalism that he envisioned. But the folk history's optimistic challenge to the structures of power which condemn black people did not receive the same high-profile status as either *Native Son* or *Black Boy*. Although "critics agreed the story was beautifully conveyed," just a few weeks after it appeared in October 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the

Americans entered the Second World War (Rowley 259-260).[20] The result was that interest in "protest literature," for lack of a better term, declined dramatically as the nation's collective focus turned toward support for the US military, resulting in diminished sales for a book that already had a small print run of 5,000 copies. But Wright's emphasis on black nationalism in the book did not go unnoticed. An unknown white man living in Washington, D.C. wrote to the Secretary of War, saying the book "could lead to 'many forms of sabotage...and result in a general breakdown of morale,'" predicting the possible mutiny of black people against the American war effort (275-276). The letter was directed to the FBI, who began surveillance of Wright until his death. At the very least, this anecdote reveals evidence of the potent revolutionary desire contained within the book.

In the context of the strong relationship between cultural production and the struggle for nationhood, despite its marginal status, I read *12 Million Black Voices* as Wright's sincere attempt to carry his optimism and pessimism beyond simple aporia. What he desires, fundamentally, is the end of the antiblack world in which he lives. As I argue, Wright's deliberate choice to subordinate his text to material struggle reveals that this new world cannot be known. Nevertheless, accepting the inevitable violence that such a desire entails, Wright imagines a utopian collectivity, one which is tied to the love of the sharecropping communities in the South.

12 Million Black Voices is notable for its use of the collective subject "we" as its primary narrative voice. The first-person plural was characteristic of

[20] Michel Fabre agreed with Rowley's positive pronouncement, noting, "The reviews were uniformly enthusiastic" (*Unfinished Quest* 234).

narratives of documentary films and photo captions of the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, whose photos Wright and Edward Rosskam (the photo director) used for the book (Woller 340). Perhaps more obviously, the "we" refers to the twelve million black people that have been historically oppressed and are thus the book's subject (Ghasemi 73). Despite accusations by various critics, this collective subject is not uniform and unvariegated. The title's usage of "the plural 'Voices' rather than 'Voice'" implies a heterogeneity, one which Wright stays true to throughout the book (73). The first chapter, "Our Strange Birth," employs a voice that travels several generations. This makes sense: the first chapter describes the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery in the past tense. Wright employs the present tense in "Inheritors of Slavery," the second chapter, "in a voice which is rural, agricultural, southern, and often markedly parental," while in the third chapter, "Death on City Pavement," he narrates "from the point of view of the youthful, proletarianized, and urban black masses" (Woller 348). "Men in the Making," the final chapter, is concerned with the future of those black masses.

The complexity of this collective subject also implies its own potential overthrow. Just as Wright argues that the "nationalist implications" of black writing must be transcended, *12 Million Black Voices* proposes a dialectical overcoming of its collective subject. Throughout the text, there is a dialectical struggle between the "we" (or "us") of the narrator and the "you" of the reader. The opening lines read:

> Each day when *you* see *us* black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, *you* usually take

> *us* for granted and think *you* know *us*, but *our* history is far stranger than *you* suspect, and *we* are not what *we* seem (10, emphasis added).

Wright identifies an essential distinction, a vertiginous distance, between the “we,” “our,” and “us,” which are linked to black people, and “you,” the reader, who “is assumed to be not-black and/or more or less bourgeois” (Woller 349). This is crucial, because it reveals an awareness of the way white people read the text—that is, they ignore the fundamental differences in the lived experience between black and white people.

Throughout most of the book, Wright identifies the struggle between “we” and “you” as a struggle between black and white. Several photos depict a relationship of domination by whites over blacks—a black waiter serves a white patron (*12 Million* 22); a white landlord stands next to a nice car, while black sharecroppers sit hunched in the background (30); a white buyer looks menacingly at a black sharecropper organizing cotton bushels (42); white lawyers look down upon black defendants (44); a white crowd glares at a black man who has been lynched (45). Wright constructs a dialogue that represents a typical interaction of subservience between a white and a black man:

> “If a white man stopped a black on a southern road and asked: ‘Say, there, boy! It’s one o’clock, isn’t it?’ the black man would answer: ‘Yessuh.’ If the white man asked: ‘Say, it’s not one o’clock, is it, boy?’ the black man would answer: ‘Nawsuh’” (41).

This dialogue articulates the divide between white and black. The distinction between the vernacular of the black man, the slightly more formalized English of the white man, and the more conspicuous formality of the narration itself is emblematic of Wilderson’s structural antagonism.

From a dialectical (strictly Marxist) perspective, the collective subject resolves these textual contradictions. Even though Wright uses the dominant form of discourse (literature) to articulate the struggle between "we" and "you," the "we" is not actually a stable, frozen subject. By the fourth chapter, as he discusses the collective struggles of black and white workers against industrial capitalists, such as the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers who were falsely accused of rape, "we" begins referring to both black and white people: "The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind *us* are deeper than those that separate *us*" (146). A facile reading of the movement of the "we" would argue that Wright is proposing a kind of integration between black and white people that ignores race. But that reading overlooks how the text "clearly demands recognition for black people from whites" (Woller 351). Instead, Wright is attempting to show that "we" are actually "you," in that "We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America" (*12 Million* 146). From one perspective, this is a classic dialectical taking up or overcoming of the previous opposition between "we" and "you." The history of struggle that defines black people is also experienced, albeit in different ways, by everyone else in America—it is possible to understand one's implied solidarity with black people without denying the specificity of their struggle. The contradiction between black people and white people is in one sense conserved, because the significance of race is not denied, but at the same time, that

contradiction is superseded by a contradiction on a different level, the one between proletarians and capitalists.[21]

However, this perspective seemingly denies the validity of Wilderson's structural antagonism between white and black people. If the text, as I argue, simultaneously describes and initiates the process of emancipation through organizing, how might *12 Million Black Voices* overcome the Afro-pessimist criticism of narrative and ontology? In a letter to his editor Edward Aswell, Wright explained that "this text [*12 Million Black Voices*] forms the outline for a long series of novels which I hope to write some day," such that they would "form the saga of the black nation in the United States" (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 234). In his mind, the folk history existed as a centralizing node for explicitly thinking and writing the collective meaning of black struggle, an intellectual project intrinsically tied to his black nationalist perspective. Although Bigger Thomas's "nationalist complex was for me a concept through which I could grasp more of the total meaning of his life than I could in any other way," the collective implications of his life can only appear through an individual subjectivity ("How 'Bigger'" 451). As a result, "There were rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him," but Bigger immediately dismisses this sentiment, suggesting that "Only when threatened with death could that happen" (*Native Son* 114).

[21] Fanon famously takes Jean-Paul Sartre and his essay "Black Orpheus" (1949) to task for asserting that the racial struggle "appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression" that ultimately centers around class struggle (qtd. in *Black Skin, White Masks* 112). One can interpret Wright as prefiguring Sartre; as strategically proposing a coalition of white and black proletarians, albeit emphasizing the centrality of black liberation; or perhaps as suggesting something else.

For Wilderson, since the modern Western world is founded upon antiblackness as the structural antagonism between whites and blacks, freedom from antiblackness entails "freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity, freedom from everyone (including one's black self)" (23). To eliminate antiblackness, as a consequence, amounts to, in a very literal sense, "[t]he end of the world, by Jove" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 191). This is not to delineate some kind of absolute impossibility, but rather to suggest that a world without antiblackness is a world so fundamentally different from the present one that, as a result, it is unthematizable, beyond any conception or understanding of the present world.[22] And, this kind of upheaval implicates the unprecedented, unknowable violence of the colonized against their oppressor.

The collective existence that Wright desires in *12 Million Black Voices* is only possible through the decolonial violence of Bigger Thomas and the systemic upheaval predicted by his lawyer Max in the third epigraph. Cedric J. Robinson observes that even as Wright assumed that liberation would arise from "the disintegration of the capitalist world... he knew, in social terms, even in human terms, that the immediate costs would be unparalleled violence, brutality, and vengeance" (298). If, for Rosa Luxembourg, the choice was socialism *or* barbarism, "Wright anticipated barbarism *and* socialism" (299). The power of Wright's work lies in this prophetic stance. Fanon notes that "[i]t is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness establishes itself and thrives"

[22] This is a positive inflection on Afro-pessimist thought, and as such, a potential misreading. Wilderson, for example, does not believe that the end of antiblackness is possible—since the end of the world does not, for him, imply the creation of another. Wright's dialectical perspective, which contains his optimism, separates him from the Afro-pessimists.

(*Wretched* 180). The black nationalist struggle, as a consequence, has international implications. Likewise, the way in which "we" are actually "you" is the way in which the struggle against antiblackness has universal implications—the end of the antiblack world would be just as much the end of whiteness as blackness. Whereas Marriott argues that the choice of optimism or pessimism in a reading of Fanon is to crudely reduce the *n'est pas* to mere desire, Wright brings forward both in his imagined collectivity, one that takes a symbolic step beyond Marriott's decidedly aporetic standpoint. However, Wright does not make the mistake of claiming some kind of dialectical sense to be had from the "struggle that seeks to go beyond the death in life" (Marriott 14).

Ultimately, I value *12 Million Black Voices* so highly because it *subordinates itself to material struggle*. To better understand exactly how this happens, I will turn to a pamphlet that Wright's text foreshadows, Guy Debord's "The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy" (1965), written for the Situationist International journal in the wake of the Watts Rebellion. Even though several decades separate the work of Wright and the French social revolutionary, Debord's writing is especially relevant because he shares Wright's concerns regarding the white ruling class's domination of the system of representation.[23]

[23] Early in Native Son, Bigger and his friend Jack watch a newsreel about Mary, which shows her and Jan dancing on Floridian beaches. Ironically, Bigger is seduced by the images of Mary, even as she will become a great source of stress and eventually violence for him. Debord is similarly concerned with the division between appearance and reality in modern capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994). The theoretical text was originally published in 1967, one hundred years after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, and one year before the May 1968 protests, occupation of the Sorbonne, and general strike, in which Debord and the Situationist International played a not insignificant role.

In the pamphlet's opening pages, Debord identifies his role as a supporter of the Watts rioters, whose violence had been misunderstood and denigrated by capitalist institutions (including media outlets like *Le Monde*):

> But who has defended the rioters of Los Angeles in the terms they deserve? Well, we shall. Let us leave the economists to grieve over the 27 million dollars lost and the town-planners over one of their most beautiful supermarkets gone up in smoke...let the sociologists weep over the absurdity and the euphoria of this rebellion. *The task of a revolutionary journal is not only to endorse the Los Angeles insurgents, but also to help supply them with their reasons: to offer a theoretical account of the truth sought implicitly by their practical action* (5-6, emphasis added).

Even as Debord writes from the position of a distant French intellectual, seemingly detached from the violence with which he is concerned, he simultaneously places himself in a subordinate position, where his "theoretical explanation necessarily follows the truth expressed through the insurrectionaries' action" (Garrett 122). We can understand Wright's entire literary project in this regard. Wright does not invent Bigger for the purpose of selling books; rather, he discovers an already existing rebel, and helps "supply him with his reasons" for rebellion. Yet, one crucial difference with *Native Son* is the collective nature of Debord's pamphlet—in narrating for the collaborators of a revolutionary journal, Debord is implicitly identifying his own organization with the "organization" of Watts rebels, thus placing emphasis on the importance of collective action in the first place.

The collective subject of *12 Million Black Voices* attempts the same move in its final lines:

> The seasons of the plantation no longer dictate the lives of many of us; hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history. We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry

> urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them. . . . (147).

The closing words—"And we shall be with them. . . ."—epitomize Wright's entire project. Wright never seeks to place himself above the repressed masses of black people, but rather to accompany and guide them, just as they guide him. Undeniable for Wright is the influence of the written word—if print is a force that compels, then part of Wright's duty is to use that force to liberate people historically enslaved by it.

But at the same time, *12 Million Black Voices* does, in part, claim to be the very repressed masses of black people that it is also accompanying. This reiterates the heterogeneity of the collective subject; Wright does not just seek to impose on the world his own take on what the masses are or should be, but instead absorbs a variety of distinct and often contradictory perspectives into the text. The folk history is the opposite of the Communist Party, in that it is the opposite of dogmatism—it seeks its own overthrow, because it knows that the crystallization of movement, whether dialectical or not, can lead to solidarity and liberation. This is the essence of Wright's project, this gesture toward an unthinkable collective existence. As Fredric Jameson puts it in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), "all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society" (291).

This utopian gesture reflects a call to the folk ideal of black sharecropping communities in the South:

> So, living by folk tradition, possessing but a few rights which others respect, we are unable to establish our family groups upon a basis of property ownership. For the most part our delicate families are held

> together by love, sympathy, pity, and the goading knowledge that we must work together to make a crop. That is why we black folk laugh and sing when we are alone together... A black mother who stands in the sagging door of her gingerbread shack may weep when she sees her children straying off into the unknown world, but no matter what they do, no matter what happens to them, no matter what crimes they commit, no matter what the world may think of them, that mother always welcomes them back with an irreducibly human feeling that stands above the claims of law or property. Our scale of values differs from that of the world from which we have been excluded; our shame is not its shame, and our love is not its love (60-61).

What the Great Migration and industrial capitalism destroyed were these utopian social bonds, this strong feeling of collectivity, and internally perhaps even a kind of classlessness, which existed amid the most chilling social violence. In grounding black struggle with existential values, Wright initiates the redevelopment of this feeling of community, one that the gaze of the colonizer can neither understand nor destroy. In refusing to narrate the meaning of these collective values by which black people can struggle and in subordinating his work to praxis, to activism, Wright produces, or rather organizes, the space in which resistance can occur.

Obviously, the problem of organizing—the unification of theory and practice—has by no means been solved. Nevertheless, Fabre notes that Wright's influence on the Civil Rights Movement and its trend toward Black Power (a term which Wright coined with his 1954 study of Ghana) was undeniable. Although sidelined for a decade by the work of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, "Bigger was rediscovered, not only as a monster to be kept at a distance but as a forerunner of the Watts rebels" (xxiii). Ultimately, there is little doubt that the streets are where the revolution will take place. Wright's legacy, however, is what will get them there.

Afterword

> Wright was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle.
>
> – Amiri Baraka

> Some day I will undertake to describe that strange reality which is History, and which is neither completely objective nor completely subjective, in which the dialectic is resisted, pervaded and corroded by a kind of anti-dialectic, itself however still dialectical in character.[24]
>
> – Jean-Paul Sartre
> *What is Literature?* (1948)

Richard Wright's work is scary. Bigger Thomas's incomprehensible violence challenges not just this thesis, but also the logic of the world we presently inhabit. That it might also be somehow necessary for black emancipation is a frightening prospect. Upon the completion of the project, I know that much. Fredric Jameson ascribes to art and other symbolic work "the Utopian vocation... to restore at least a symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it, a world of extension, gray and merely quantifiable" (63). In a similar way, I think the positive, optimistic parts of Wright's project—where he attempts to give black people access to a "pure" humanity—exist only as a kind of abstract compensation for his extreme pessimism about black existence and liberation.

I read the stakes of Wright's work as intimately connected to the stakes of the dialectic itself. From an (very simplified) Hegelian perspective, dialectics is the process through which thought (identity) attempts to conceptualize and comprehend the Other (non-identity), with the final telos a total comprehension in

[24] This rendering of the translation comes from Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971).

the form of the Absolute Spirit. What the work of Marriott and the Afro-pessimists reveals is how blackness resists the dialectic, how the dialectic's attempt to capture the Other will always fall short; and that the dialectical process itself is founded upon the social death with which blackness has an essential relation. For these thinkers, the dialectic necessarily excludes blackness, which it can never process nor understand.

I include the epigraph of Sartre, not to commit to his perspective on dialectics, but because I think it helps articulate a vital problem. Wright's work ultimately stands as a critique of the dialectic, an exposure of its own incongruity: its decomposition into contradictory dialectical and anti- or non-dialectical components. Bigger, ultimately, does not escape his blackness and attain the status of human, even in the moments of freedom grasped after his murder of Mary. Nevertheless, Wright remains committed to the freedom struggle and the possibility of a world without antiblackness (whatever that might mean). Dialectics, under Wright's terms, consists of the contradiction between identity and non-identity, between what is understood and what cannot be. What he remains aware of is how theoretical contradictions are resolved by praxis. But this praxis remains unknowable.

From another perspective, the unprecedented (and unthematizable) decolonial violence that Fanon predicts is this praxis. But for the violence of decolonization to truly mean the end of the world (including the end of antiblackness), it would have to be so violent that it would entail the destruction of all narratives, of all writing, of the dialectic, and in a way, our ability to even speak.

The utopian collectivity that Wright has in mind is so utterly distant, in such radical non-proximity with our present life, that to speak about it is to reveal our true naïveté. Nonetheless, it is this fundamental desire that Wright wishes to keep in the minds of his comrades, *les damnés de la terre*, for whom he hoped so much.

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