RECONSTRUCTING BLACK IDENTITY ON THE STRANDS OF DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF RICHARD WRIGHT AND ALEX WHEATLE

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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that in my opinion the thesis submitted by SALAH FARAJ B ABDALHAFED titled "RECONSTRUCTING BLACK IDENTITY ON THE STRANDS OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF RICHARD WRIGHT AND ALEX WHEATLE is fully adequate in scope and in quality as a thesis for the degree of PhD.

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This thesis is accepted by the examining committee with a unanimous vote in the Department of English Language and literature as a PhD thesis. May 26, 2022

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and all information included has been obtained and expounded in accordance with the academic rules and ethical policy specified by the institute. Besides, I declare that all the statements, results, materials, not original to this thesis have been cited and referenced literally.

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FOREWORD

My deepest thanks and gratitude are to Allah, the Greatest, who gave me the patience and strength needed to conduct this research. My special appreciation goes out to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. A. Serdar ÖZTÜRK whom I would like to thank for supervising my research and allowing me to grow as a researcher. His comments, guidance, and advice have been very helpful. Words cannot do my gratitude for his justice. From the first day of my PhD studies, he has offered a warm welcome and extensive help. His valuable comments and his experience hold great significance for this research. I would like to thank Dr. Harith Ismail Turki for his precious comments and suggestions during the supervision meetings. My deepest thanks to Dr. Sinan YILMAZ and Dr. Orkun KOCABIYIK, whose presence (online) in my dissertation committee has been a privilege for me. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Mokhtar Salem from Al-Zintan University.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my family and friends who were my strongest supporters throughout the long session of my study. I also would like to dedicate this work to the Libyan Administration of High Education for bestowing their support upon me.

ABSTRACT

Understanding the viewpoints of people of color is also key in understanding Critical Race Theory. People who have lived through oppression understand the impact that it has on them, and taking the time to consider their perspectives is an important part of moving toward wider advocacy. Taking the time to listen to these perspectives is also important because the viewpoints of people within a culture are almost never homogenous. An essential part of Du Bois' idea of double consciousness is a veil that hangs across the line separating the majority white culture from people of color. White people tend to create an image of people of color based on their stereotypes, prejudices, and preconceptions, preventing them from being able to see the reality on the other side of the veil. Listening to the different perspectives of people of color shreds the veil, turns one image into an infinite number. When people read the work of Alex Wheatle, they encounter protagonists and other characters who challenge the stereotype of the veil, and they come across as having a lot in common, at least in terms of dreams and aspirations, with people in the majority white culture. The fact that there are such different philosophical paradigms at work in the black community in Wheatle's works provides important insight into the important truth that the black community, as in any community, is comprised of individuals, each with their own story, their own perspective, their own priorities – just like majority white culture. However, while that veil remains in place, this truth will not become widely recognized.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Masculine Race Theory, Native Son, Black Boy

ÖZ

Renkli insanların bakış açılarını anlamak, Kritik Irk Teorisini anlamanın anahtarıdır. Baskıyı yaşamış insanlar, baskının üzerlerindeki etkisini anlarlar ve onların bakış açılarını değerlendirmek için zaman ayırmak, daha geniş bir savunuculuğa doğru ilerlemenin önemli bir parçasıdır. Bu bakış açılarını dinlemek için zaman ayırmak da önemlidir çünkü bir kültürdeki insanların bakış açıları neredeyse hiçbir zaman homojen değildir. Du Bois'in çifte bilinç fikrinin önemli bir parçası, çoğunluk beyaz kültürünü renkli insanlardan ayıran çizginin ötesine geçen bir peçedir. Beyazlar, klişelerine, önyargılarına ve önyargılarına dayalı olarak beyaz olmayan bir insan imajı yaratma eğilimindedir ve perdenin diğer tarafındaki gerçeği görmelerini engeller. Renkli insanların farklı bakış açılarını dinlemek perdeyi yırtar, bir görüntüyü sonsuz sayıya dönüştürür. İnsanlar Alex Wheatle'ın çalışmalarını okuduklarında, başörtüsü klişesine meydan okuyan kahramanlar ve diğer karakterlerle karşılaşırlar ve çoğunluk beyaz kültüründeki insanlarla en azından hayaller ve özlemler açısından pek çok ortak noktaya sahip olduklarıyla karşılaşırlar. . Wheatle'ın eserlerinde siyahi toplulukta bu kadar farklı felsefi paradigmaların iş başında olması, her toplulukta olduğu gibi siyah topluluğunun da her birinin kendi hikayesi, kendi bakış açısı, kendi öncelikleri – tıpkı çoğunluk beyaz kültürü gibi. Ancak bu perde yerinde kalsa da, bu gerçek geniş çapta kabul görmeyecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Kritik Irk Teorisi, Eril Irk Teorisi, Yerli Oğul, Kara Çocuk

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SUBJECT OF THE RESEARCH

Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and the notion of Double-Consciousness as suggested by W.E.B. Du Bois form the three lenses through which the present study has analyzed four works by Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle. The oldest of the three lenses is Du Bois' construct, which has served as a useful expression for the different ways that people outside the majority white culture have to assimilate within that culture in order to succeed. As was earlier noted, Du Bois developed the term "double consciousness" in order to give figurative expression to the "tragedy of racism particularly for the self-conscious individual, as well as his perceptions of being black in America.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This suggests no small amount of controversy in defining what it meant to be black in Britain, or perhaps to be black and from Britain, which will inform the present study's discussion of the works of Alex Wheatle. The creation of a "black British" genre, as it were, led to a hurried process of defining exactly what that term meant. notes that there were some critics who tried to link black British writers to the African-American experience across the Atlantic Ocean. There were others who attempted to limit the use of "black British" writing to novels that narrate the immigrant experience, as opposed to the experience of black people living and growing up in the United Kingdom – again, a disparity that will play a role in the reading and interpretation of Wheatle's work.

METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

The first chapter of the present study takes a closer look at the three central interpretive lenses that will drive the analysis: Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and Double-Consciousness as envisioned by W.E.B. Du Bois. Chapters Two and Three offer analyses of Wright's Native Son and Black Boy, following which the study considers East of Acre Lane and Liccle B.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH / RESEARCH PROBLEM

one important function of literature is to allow readers to view society through different or opposing viewpoints. Such literature, therefore, has the potential to

encourage those from the white majority culture to identify the ways in which their own perspective may be lacking when it comes to understanding how their society might change in order to improve outcomes for those outside the majority white culture. Moreover, as any society founded on oppression corrodes and corrupts the souls and identities of the oppressors, not just the oppressed, such literature may also lessen the tensions and problems within, not just outside of, the white majority culture, thus helping, to some extent, to ameliorate the historic antagonisms and divisions that persevere to this day.

INTRODUCTION

The term “double consciousness” with respect to Race Theory first came into common parlance through the writings of W.E.B. DuBois in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The purpose of this term was to express the “tragedy of racism particularly for the self-conscious individual, as well his perceptions of being black in America” (Bruce 1992, p. 307). One arena in which this becomes particularly noticeable is in the world of academia. Faculties can encounter the sense of “double consciousness” when they select groups for their own personal identification (Levin et al, 2013). Professors are, on the one hand, divided socially into groups on the basis of their professional identities, such as belonging to a particular academic department or working for a particular university, but there is also the process of assimilation into a culture in which they “adapt their socialized world view to function in a culture different than their primary one” (Sadao 1995, p. 31). The differences in consciousness can lead to a conflict in the ways in which identities form. For faculty members of color, this can make it more difficult to carry out their professional responsibilities because of the disconnect that can occur.

This might, at first, seem to suggest that professors of color, and professionals in other fields who are of color, simply do not have the same skills and abilities as their peers from the majority culture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, it is a claim that the paradigm for professionalism is driven by definitions that reflect members of the majority white culture in terms of their preferences. Dividing people according to race, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) argues, is simply taking an “American-centered social construct” (n.p.) as a sort of political gospel. So in the final analysis, the issues that people of color have faced in finding and achieving agency in a majority-white culture pertained to fears that white people have had with the possibility that their privilege might vanish.

The pressure to fit within a particular mold when it comes to racial identification remains a problematic element within modernity. Mike Phillips (2007) describes the experience of a Ph.D. candidate who was of Jamaican/Scottish parentage, who felt “the pressure to identify as a single, specific race that tends to come from people outside of the experience of being racially mixed” (1). Phillips (2007), a black writer working in England, also discusses ways in which the term “Black British” was controversial until

the mid-1990s before becoming "a useful way of commanding attention in the cultural marketplace," and that "a great deal of work which carried that label came out of the old postcolonial syllabus and was neatly repackaged as 'black British'" (1-2).

This suggests no small amount of controversy in defining what it meant to be black in Britain, or perhaps to be black and from Britain, which will inform the present study's discussion of the works of Alex Wheatle. The creation of a "black British" genre, as it were, led to a hurried process of defining exactly what that term meant. Phillips (2007) notes that there were some critics who tried to link black British writers to the African-American experience across the Atlantic Ocean. There were others who attempted to limit the use of "black British" writing to novels that narrate the immigrant experience, as opposed to the experience of black people living and growing up in the United Kingdom – again, a disparity that will play a role in the reading and interpretation of Wheatle's work.

One influential work with respect to the interpretation of black writers in England is *London Calling*, by Sukdhev Sandhu. This book opens with the words of people who had at one time been slaves, written in the 1700s and moving into the contemporary era. The primary impression that one gains of black people from the book is that of the exile, the traveler. In other contemporary reality. However, Caribbean migration to the United Kingdom ended near the mid-twentieth century, and there came a time when this generation began to create a place for itself in British society. As such, their experiences were no longer that of the traveler but that of the onetime outsider working to build community in a new land and, in time, raise a new generation in this home (Phillips 2007). As one can observe from the events that led up to the Brixton riots in 1981 (which informed Wheatle's novel *East of Acre Lane*), this was a period that involved signiciant social upheaval – not to the same degree as slavery nor the Jim Crow Laws in the United States, but upheaval nonetheless. Members of the majority white culture were forced to confront their own systemic racism, and government entities and social structures were compelled to change and reform the system to make life at least somewhat more equitable for their neighbors of color.

Some of the most important works in black British writing that are based in London have taken as their topic the ways in which members of the majority white

culture and the Afro-Caribbean culture have found ways to coexist in ways that bring the promise of equity to those outside the majority. Questions such as who is a citizen, what community means, what confers identity, and what nationality means all appear in this literature, and in ways that the easier dichotomy between immigrant/refugee and resident cannot express. As Phillips (2007) notes, this means that the postcolonial perspective in such works as the writings of Sandhu cannot "assess the influence of class and ethnic status, or discuss different responses to the environment of different decades" (2). The experience of the new immigrant is different from that of the former immigrant who has lived in a neighborhood for a decade but still struggles to gain acceptance.

Insisting on approaching the experience of blacks in the United States as still suffering the legacy of Jim Crow, and the experience of blacks in the United Kingdom as still arriving freshly off the boats or planes from the Caribbean, reduces race to the phenomenon of culture. It perpetuates adherence to ideas of geography that are as archaic as the maps that present Zambia and Zimbabwe as divisions of Rhodesia, the colony named after the British settler who controlled those areas, Cecil Rhodes. Tabish Khair (2006) argues that this approach "seeks to cast the reader in a passive and celebratory role" (2). In other words, the reader is not motivated to join any sort of resistance, because that approach celebrates the arrival of the immigrant, or the downfall of the overseer, with much the same fanfare as the happy resolution of a romantic comedy in which the credits roll and everyone lives happily ever after.

This leads to superficial analyses with respect to matters that require a deeper and more nuanced level of consideration. The philosophical basis of this paradigm is, as Phillips argues:

> "…a framework of popular racism which calls on us to trace the history of cultures through a kind of arena of separate development, as if cultures existed in a series of boxes, distinct from each other, and distinct from the world in which they exist" (Phillips 2007, 5).

One example of this is the question of language. Black writers growing up in the United States or the United Kingdom have English as their native language; however, growing up in homes outside the majority white culture often means that they learn multiple forms of English: "standard" English, which they learn in school, and the dialect that they hear and adopt at home. However, limiting the influences on their linguistic

antecedents to just two only reinforces that postcolonialist paradigm. There are many other linguistic elements running through the experiential nexus of every person growing up, as regional dialects differ, as do the influences of language derived from exposure to such phenomena as works of literature and multimedia sources. The English language has many layers, and the idea of a "standard" language mixing with an at-home dialect oversimplifies the linguistic profile. It is comparable to the assumption that the only canonical narratives about the black experience in the United States relate to the eras of slavery or Jim Crow, or that the only canonical narratives about the black experience in the United Kingdom pertain to the status as an exile or immigrant.

Phillips (2007) points out that bringing attention to this complexity of language is often called "a rejection of the task of reconstructing one or the other nativist tradition" (5). However, there is a significant difference between the ideas that operate within traditions and the real experiences of people on the ground. Phillips (2007) notes that "as every genuine artist knows, creativity is a matter of grappling with the landscape in which you find yourself" (5). So the conflicts that Richard Wright will find within his community as he grows up –driven to become a writer despite coming from a community that finds literacy beyond basic matters to be somewhat suspicious –still appear in contemporary work. Alex Wheatle will find it difficult to gain traction and acclaim as a black writer in the United Kingdom because critics believe that the quality of his writing should come naturally to him because of his cultural background, instead of representing the hard work of realistic representation. Stories like the ones that Wright and Wheatle have created are difficult ones because they do not hew to the narratives and agendas that have long found acceptance among contemporaneous black writers.

In the four novels under study in this dissertation, characters struggle in both the discovery and actualization of their identities. The ironies that emerged from human nature in the establishment and propagation of the triangle trade during the colonial era were nothing new in terms of human character. The fact that some humans might resort to artificial delineations in order to justify their own outrageous behavior towards other humans is not a new revelation. People of Jewish descent have found themselves the target of discrimination and oppression since the moment Christianity found itself attached to the power of the Roman Empire and became a system of oppression itself. Ideas about the proper development and expression of a masculine identity have been

problematic ever since Cain became a hunter while Abel tended sheep and grew vegetables, and the question of which of their offerings was more acceptable led to the first murder.

When it comes to matters of race, Coates (2013) points out that "[r]ace clearly has a biological element – *because we have awarded it one*" (n.p.). In other words, the idea that racial difference has a biological component is simply a construct erected in order to justify discrimninating against and segregating people, and as such, preserving and perpetuating that system of oppression. Coates (2013) argues that "[r]ace does not need biology. Race only requires some good guys with big guns looking for a reason" (n.p.). In the writings of Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle, the study will bring findings through the lenses of critical race theory and masculine gender theory showing the ways in which arbitrary constructs inhibit the progress that characters make toward actualization and expression of their own identities.

Native Son is the story of Bigger Thomas, a young black man living in crushing poverty on the South Side of Chicago in the years immediately after the Great Depression. Bigger commits a series of violent acts, beginning with the killing of a rat in the opening scene and extending to other acts of domination over others. He goes to a pool hall and meets some of his friends, and they contemplate how to rob a white man. However, before they can carry out their plans, Bigger watches a movie that lessens his resolve to commit the robbery and instead attacks his friend Gus, even making him lick the blade of his knife.

This odd combination of the violent and the sexual wends its way through the rest of the narrative. Bigger gets a job working for the Daltons, living in their home as a sort of servant. He drives their daughter, Mary, around one night, and she ends up getting drunk with Jan, a Communist friend of hers, who becomes so drunk that she cannot walk when Bigger returns to the house with her. He has to carry her inside and, tempted by her figure on the bed, leans down to kiss her while she is still unconscious. As he does so, her mother enters the room. She is blind, but Bigger is so frightened by what would happen to him if she finds him there that he puts a pillow over Mary's face to keep her from making any noise. Mary wakes up and struggles silently, but her mother cannot tell that Bigger is there (or that Mary is struggling), and she leaves. However, in the

intervening moments, Mary has been smothered and is dead. Bigger decides to frame Jan for kidnapping Mary and takes Mary's body down to the furnace in the basement, cutting the head off so that it will fit through the opening.

Bigger has a girlfriend named Bessie, and once she learns of the fact that Bigger has encountered some sort of awkward night at the Dalton home, she believes that he did some harm to Mary. Bigger returns to work and is questioned by the detective that the Daltons hired. Bigger attempts to frame Jan, but the detective brings both of them together in an attempt to resolve the inconsistencies between their stories. Jan is nonplussed by Bigger's attempt to frame him but still tries to help him. Bigger attempts to take things further by writing a false ransom note after finding out that his employer is also his family's landlord. When they get the note, the Daltons call the police to step in. Bigger is anxious but wants to stay. Reporters descend on the house, increasing the overall sense of anxiety. Bigger is told to go down to the furnace, clear out the ashes, and begin a new fire. Bigger is afraid that someone will discover Mary's remains, so he goes down to the basement and pokes the ashes to fill the room with smoke. A reporter grabs the shovel out of Bigger's hands and moves toward the pile of ashes. There, he locates a pile of bones, along with an earring. Bigger realizes that he has been caught and runs to Bessie. They run away together, and that night, having taken refuge in an abandoned building, they lie down. Bigger rapes Bessie and then kills her the next morning, throwing her corpse into a nearby air shaft. He then runs throughout the city but eventually is caught by the police.

Interestingly, Jan comes to visit Bigger in prison. He feels sympathy for Bigger because he has learned a lot about the injustice that underpins the race relations system in the United States and tells him of a Communist lawyer by the name of Boris Max. Conversations between Max and Bigger help Bigger see his connection with the world around him. He finally comes to terms with his anger and he begins to view white people as individuals, rather than a homogenous group of people. Max's oratorical skill in court becomes an opportunity for Wright to provide an exposition of his views about the socioeconomic implications of the oppression of blacks in the United States. However, despite the lawyer's rhetorical persuasiveness and skill, Bigger is convicted and sentenced to death.

The present study analyzes the ways in which one can read the story of Bigger Thomas through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Masculine Gender Theory. Given the issues that Bigger appears to have with women in the story, it is clear that Bigger's own upbringing has played a role in the way that he treats them. Critical Race Theory looks at ways in which systemic oppression comes to be normalized and accepted over time. One of the more interesting developments in this story is the ways in which the Daltons, Jan and Boris Max all provide Bigger with a much more understanding treatment than Bigger expects. Similarly, it challenges the reader's expectations, approaching the narrative with the knowledge that Wright is an American writer expressing a critique of the systemic racial oppression in the nation's culture. The fact that Wright associates the Communist Party with a more sympathetic view of the experience that black people face in the United States points the reader to Wright's assertion that the excesses of the capitalist system also play a role in perpetuating oppression of black people in poverty.

The present study also looks at the ways in which W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of "double consciousness" plays a role in the story. This concept receives further development in the first chapter of the present study but relates to the ways in which black people in the United States are cognizant of a division, or barrier, that stands between them and the white world. White people, living on the other side of the divide, project their own image of black people onto that division. It has little to do with the reality on the other side, but is primarily constructed by the assumptions of the majority white culture. The assumptions or preconceptions that white and black people have about one another play an essential role in the outcomes of *Native Son*.

While *Native Son* is a work of fiction, *Black Boy* is Richard Wright's memoir about his formative years, as he takes the reader through his experiences growing up in the South as well as his early years in Chicago where his work as a writer takes off. Wright grew up in a family that suffered from extreme poverty, and their movement around the South was a necessity, as they were looking merely to survive. In *Black Boy* and in other writings, Wright points out that the environment in which he grew up inspired him to become a writer and influences his writing. The memoir begins with an account of Wright attempting to burn down his grandmother's house when he is just four years old. He grows up in a family divided sharply on gender lines, as the women are

pious and extremely disciplined, while the men are unreliable. His father leaves the family and his mother is later afflicted with an illness that makes it hard to care for him, and as such Wright spends his childhood living with his mother and a series of aunts, uncles as well as his grandmother. Given that Wright really does not have a place he can call home, he has to develop his own sense of identity and his own foundation. As he enters early adolescence, he learns more about the realities of life in the Jim Crow South and becomes set on moving out of the area.

Wright ends up in Memphis, where he makes his first forays into the world of letters, but he finds that even this city on the western edge of Tennessee has many of the biases that he experienced in other parts of the deeper South, and so he decides to travel all the way to Chicago. He discovers that racism is still present there but is not as deeply entrenched in everyday life there. He finds a job cleaning floors, and then moves on to work at the post office. He finds white men who agree with his pessimistic views on the reality of equality in the United States and joins the John Reed Club, a group that advocates for social change. He also joins the Communist Party, finding common ground with others writers and other thinkers. However, Wright becomes disillusioned with the Communist Party in Chicago, because despite their rhetoric he finds them to be resistant to the ideas of demanding actual change. Wright does not agree with the incrementalist approach that they bring, and so the Communists decide that he is an enemy of their movement. Ultimately, the Communists brand him an official enemy, and Wright ends the memoir by deciding to find other ways to bring revolution to the world around him.

The present study analyzes the memoir through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Masculine Gender Theory, noting the ways in which a childhood plagued by racism influenced Wright's views of the world around them. The issues that Wright has with the women in his life appear in his actual relationships, not just in his writing about the life of Bigger Thomas. The present study considers the ways in which his childhood led Wright down a road that is more than a little misogynistic. The study then moves into a consideration of two works by Alex Wheatle, a black writer who has composed literary and young adult novels in the United Kingdom. *East of Acre Lane* is a YA novel set in Brixton, a brutally poor part of London, predominantly occupied by African-Caribbeans who have not yet found their way to prosperity in the United Kingdom. The historical

background of the novel will undergo further exploration in Chapter Four, but the backdrop of the novel is the series of riots that broke out in Brixton in 1981, brought about by growing tensions between the police and the members of the African-Caribbean community there. In that part of London, council estates (the British term for public housing projects) dominate the architecture, with buildings boarded up left and right, and the vestiges of vandalism everywhere.

The main character, Biscuit, and his friends have to provide for their families by committing crimes such as drug dealing and theft. Because they do not have any sense of solidarity with mainstream London society and have to break laws simply to survive, they feel unwelcome in the country and take no pride in their roots. Biscuit's relationship with his family is an important element in the novel, but the rootlessness that the young men in the novel feel resonate with Wheatle's book and the writings of Richard Wright. There is a greater depth of analysis of Wheatle's backstory in Chapter Four, but his childhood experiences are similar to those of Wright with respect to parental abandonment and early poverty. Wheatle makes different choices from those of Wright, but both narrate poignantly the rootless nature of a culture that has been uprooted from its own antecedents, denied the chance to establish itself in its new homeland, and misrepresented and caricatured by those they meet upon arrival.

The present study views the experiences of Biscuit and his family through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Masculine Gender Theory, while also considering the ways in which Double Consciousness impacts their lives. Because the novel comes from the YA genre, there is not as much of the outright presentation of rhetoric as one sees in *Native Son*. However, one can draw much from analyzing the storytelling to gain a sense of the ways in which growing up as black, and as a young man, influences Biscuit as well as several other characters.

Liccle Bit, also by Alex Wheatle, is another novel aimed at the YA readership that looks at the life of a young man growing up in a poor and predominantly black neighborhood of London. Lemar grows up with a mother who works too hard, an older sister who is perpetually angry, and a father whom he rarely sees, as his parents divorced. One can see considerable similarities between the life of Lemar and that of Richard Wright in *Black Boy*, however one difference is the gang warfare that provided much of

the dynamics of Lemar's young life. Lemar also has his grandmother at home, providing a foundation that takes Lemar back to his Jamaican roots. However, the chaos that ensues outside the home threatens her as well, which causes one of the central conflicts of the novel. His family life provides a great deal of chaos, but unlike the worlds in which Wright's fictitious characters and Wright himself grew up, Lemar has a family that fundamentally cares. That Wright's mother, grandmother, and aunts may well have cared more than he suggests in his writing is of little consequence, however, as his narrative perspective is the one through which the reader views that world.

The works of Wheatle arguably do not approach the narrative depth of Wright due to the fundamental differences between the genres of literary fiction and memoir on the one hand and the relatively easy pleasures of young adult fiction on the other. However, that does not suggest that Wheatle's writing does not also resonate with the benefits that Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and the idea of Double Consciousness can bring to interpretation. Young adult literature tends to be more driven by plot and dialogue, with much less in the way of narrative exposition, simply because of the differences in the reading audience. However, there is much in the writing of Wheatle that lends itself to an interpretation through those three lenses.

The first chapter of the present study takes a closer look at the three central interpretive lenses that will drive the analysis: Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and Double-Consciousness as envisioned by W.E.B. Du Bois. Chapters Two and Three offer analyses of Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, following which the study considers *East of Acre Lane* and *Liccle Bit* before moving to a brief conclusion summarizing the findings of the chapters and suggesting areas for further study. As contemporary events indicate, there is still plenty of work in the twenty-first century when it comes to finding ways to expose and counter the normalization of racism that has occurred in the years since the Civil Rights Movement. While literary analysis pertains to the art of writing, one important function of literature is to allow readers to view society through different or opposing viewpoints. Such literature, therefore, has the potential to encourage those from the white majority culture to identify the ways in which their own perspective may be lacking when it comes to understanding how their society might change in order to improve outcomes for those outside the majority white culture. Moreover, as any society founded on oppression corrodes and corrupts the souls

and identities of the oppressors, not just the oppressed, such literature may also lessen the tensions and problems within, not just outside of, the white majority culture, thus helping, to some extent, to ameliorate the historic antagonisms and divisions that persevere to this day.

CHAPTER ONE

MOVING FROM COLONIALISM TO CONSCIOUSNESS

1.1. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is an interpretive paradigm that provides a way to analyze, break down, and confront racial inequalities as they manifest themselves within society. It takes its roots from activism, which itself is committed, socially and philosophically, to exploring and confronting the overwhelming presence of racial inequality in society. Its fundamental basis is the claim that social thinking and power relationships produce the construct of race and the practice of racism. Scholars in this field work to reveal ways in which the ongoing operation of existing power structures and the dissemination of assumptions unworthy of critique actually condone and propagate further racism.

The historical foundations of Critical Race Theory date back to the 1970s when Critical Legal Studies, a liberal legal movement, consisted of academic researchers attempting to deconstruct the conventional liberal paradigm for legal ideology to understand the ways in which inequalities were maintained and conserved from one generation to the next in American society (Tate 1997). It became clear that Critical Legal Studies had reached a point where it was no longer helpful with respect to racial progress because the group viewed racism as comparable to discrimination on the basis of class. That refusal to recognize the fundamental differences between race-based discrimination and class-based discrimination led to the development of Critical Race Theory as a separate movement (Crenshaw et al, 1995).

Critical Race Theory, to this day, has not formulated one cohesive position statement. As research and study continue to move forward, there is ongoing refinement and revision as theorists find additional paths for study in legal doctrine and policy conversation. Despite the lack of a cohesive position statement, there are some prevailing themes that can be identified across the branches of the Critical Race Theory movement. One is the **central nature of racism**. One of the fundamental assumptions of Critical Race Theory is "that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture" (Delgado & Stefancic 2000, xvi).

According to the tenets of Critical Race Theory, racism has worked its way so deeply into the fabric of society in the United States that people often assume that the way things are is organic and right. Thinkers in Critical Race Theory continue to assert that racism does not always take on such overt forms as marches by the Ku Klux Klan or laws separating the use of water fountains and bathrooms by ethnicity, but instead slide into more deeply embedded and more subtly expressed forms of oppression. In situations like this, one finds racism in the ways that processes and relationships produce outcomes that precipitate oppression, even when there is no explicit sign of racist intent (Gillborn 2005). A second theme found in Critical Race Theory is the assertion of the power that **white supremacy** plays in developing and then propagating the reality of subordination on the basis of race and ensuring that the idea of white privilege remains a normative element in American society. This is why a crucial part of Critical Race Theory is to expose and confront situations of racial inequality (Crenshaw et al, 1995).

The term "white supremacy" is often used to describe the overt activities of hate groups, but in this context, the term refers not to those groups but the power dynamic that is present throughout society. One way to describe this power dynamic is, as Ansley writes:

> "[a] political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (Ansley 1997, 592).

The primary difficulty at work in this instance is the fact that white privilege is such a deeply ingrained in American society. When white researchers take part in Critical Race Theory inquiries, they have to work constantly to analyze and confront their own white privilege while making incipient racism more visible (Picower 2009).

Another important element in Critical Race Theory studies involves hearing and analyzing the **perspectives of people of color**, particularly with regard to the experiences and perspectives that people of color have of their oppression. One often problematic factor with these perspectives is that the often are all the same, but Critical Race Theory practitioners do not assume a homogenous perspective – or even a narrative form. Many times, these accounts appear as narratives, which might take an

autobiographical form or else a less literal, more figurative aesthetic. The practice of telling stories can give oppressed minority groups a way to "speak back" to the voices of power and bring about a sort of "psychic preservation" (Tate 1997, 220). This set of experiences can bring empowerment and counteract the debilitating impact that a life lived under oppression can have. Telling stories can also serve as a counterpoint to the racist ideology commonly accepted by the liberal institutions (Rollock 2012). Derrick Bell (2009) is one of the most prolific scholars with respect to using figurative stories as a way to examine the injustices within the system.

Since no one possesses an identity with but one defining element, understanding the ways in which oppression works requires the possibility of **intersectionality**. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) uses this term to describe the ways in which different systems of oppression coalesce, working simultaneously against the same person. Allowing for an intersectional analysis provides ways for researchers to analyze the differences going on among members of groups. Using sociopolitical and historical contexts to study situations that include racial inequalities –as well as other differences –informs this to a significant degree (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

The majority white culture often takes advantage of the existence of multiple groups of color to turn some against others. This refers to the notion of differential racialization, which detracts from white oppression and pits oppressed groups against each other. One example of this relates to affirmative action debates in the realm of education. In such debates, students of several Asian backgrounds, including India, China, and Japan are presented as members of minority groups who have managed to succeed despite the reported presence of discrimination and racism in the wider educational system. One question that is commonly asked in this context is why black students and members of other ethnic minorities need affirmative action protections while members of these Asian groups, despite also being white, have greater success, as a whole, in terms of the metrics that the majority white culture has determined are necessary to gain admission to universities (Gillborn 2005).

The last element commonly discussed with respect to Critical Race Theory pertains to **the convergence of interests**. The primary effect of racism is to ensure that white supremacy remains embedded in American society, preserving a system that permits white people to retain their power and privilege while maintaining outcomes

that are not equitable for members of minority groups. This means that white people do not have much incentive to fight racism, because fighting racism would compromise or diminish their own privilege. There are times, however, when improvements in racial equality actually benefit white people, and it is at these points of convergence that progress can occur. Derrick Bell (1980) argues that "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (523). One can argue that when blacks have experienced progress toward equality, those events have "always coincided with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite whites. Sympathy, mercy, and evolving standards of social decency and conscience amounted to little, if anything" (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, 18).

When using Critical Race Theory in the analysis of literature, understanding the ways in which authors embed themes of oppression into their works is an essential element of the interpretive process. Wanda Brooks (2008) performed this type of analysis in her work on *The Land*, a novel by Mildred Taylor that won the Coretta Scott King Award in 2002. The novel is a work of historical fiction, and one of the primary motifs related to Critical Race Theory relates to the importance of land ownership. Brooks (2008) explores the presence of three themes related to land ownership in the novel: inspiration and adoration, entitlement and privilege, and freedom of security. When Brooks published her study, she noted that the application of Critical Race Theory to the practice of literary analysis was still somewhat rare. However, she pointed to such works as *Tears of a Tiger,* by Sharon Draper, and the writings of Patricia C. McKissack as helpful examples of literary criticism informed by Critical Race Theory. She noted that:

> "[t]hese scholars found CRT useful because as an aspect of analysis, critical and cultural critiques provide literary interpretations contextualized within multifaceted and often racialized macro systems" (Brooks 2008, 37).

Brooks' study incorporates three interesting interactions between Critical Race Theory and literary analysis with respect to *The Land*: the use of counter-storytelling, the use of property ownership to establish white privilege, and ongoing racism in contemporary society.

For the purposes of this discussion, we will look briefly at these three interactions. As discussed earlier, the use of narratives and counter-narratives are a way for members of oppressed communities to speak out against that oppression and move toward a position of healing. Their purpose is to "respond to racism and its dominant ideology by calling into question normative depictions of everyday living that ignore or discount structural barriers to equality faced by people of color" (Brooks 2008, 38). Brooks (2008) argues that *The Land* is a counternarrative in its entirety, with respect to the ways in which the land ownership system functioned to perpetuate oppression. The use of the property rights systems in the United States to inscribe white privilege into the fabric of society has represented one of the most pernicious, and most permanent, methods of ensuring that the cycle of white supremacy remains unchallenged. When the United States first began as a nation – and even during its time as a colony of Great Britain – many black people were atual property, owned by others. However, "when the practice of slavery was abolished, other ways of maintaining status and privilege were enacted by some Whites" (Brooks 2008, 38). The central conflict in *The Land* relates to the question of which people in the story even have the right to purchase and own property. There is a link between land ownership and such other elements of the human experience including voting rights, individual prosperity, and even such ancillary themes as physical health. Initially in the United States, only free white men could purchase and own land – and only they could vote, a system that took much conflict to change.

Interpreting such works as *The Land* (as well as the works under analysis in the present study) offers a number of benefits for Critical Race Theory. Studies of reader response in literature have demonstrated that children and adolescents can devise complex understandings of stories that include characters participating in a society that features elevated levels of racism (Moller & Allen 2000). Brooks (2008) suggests three essential outcomes from taking advantage of this interpretive ability that children and adolescents demonstrate in their encounters with literature. One essential outcome is that understanding specific conflicts that were a part of the establishment of white privilege in colonial America and the early days of the United States provides a way for readers to understand some of the philosophical underpinnings of racism. In *The Land*, for example, the ways in which property ownership embedded white privilege in American society would be part of classroom conversations in analysis informed by Critical Race Theory. While the laws that precluded ownership of land for people who are not white

or male were dissolved long ago, that gap remains as pronounced as it was during the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960s. According to a study by the Urban Institute, the gap between black and white households in terms of home ownership rate was as large in 2019 as it had been in 1969 (Choi, McCargo, Neal, Goodman & Young, 2019). The researchers analyzed such tangible factors as income level, credit score, marital status, and education, but still found that approximately 17 percent of the gap

> "…remains unexplained by observed variables and could be caused by differences in parental wealth, information networks or the vestiges of policies and structures that have made it difficult for black households to obtain and benefit from home ownership" (Choi et al, 2019, n.p.).

The very language of the researchers' findings points the reader back to one of the key assumptions of Critical Race Theory: that the structures in place serve to normalise oppression and make financial inequalities or disparities appear innocuous. Such requirements as income level and credit score sound like metrics that make sense for banks to consider, as extending mortgage loans represents a financial risk for a lending institution. However, as Sarah Ludwig (2015) notes, the system of credit reporting is not neutral to race but instead serves to "embed existing racial inequities in our credit system and economy – to the point that a person's credit information serves as a proxy for race" (n.p.). Her argument is based on the fact that many banks have denied conventional loans to clients living in majority-minority and/or lower-income neighborhoods, and that institutions offering high-cost loans focus disproportionately on people of color. These financial products, with their more intricate and complicated repayment schedules, "predictably lead to higher delinquency and default rates than non-predatory loans" (Ludwig 2015, n.p.). Consequently, people of color end up with lower credit scores – and it is easy, especially if one wants to overlook racism, to argue that people should not take out loans they cannot afford. However, the lack of credit at reasonable rates of interest extended to people in these communities increases their probability of default on the loans they can find, so one sees endemic racism perpetuating cycles of oppression in ways that seem perfectly legitimate.

A second essential outcome is that everyone involved in literary analysis through the Critical Race Theory perspective can gain understanding of the long-term influence of racism from the point of view of the oppressed. The counternarrative makes the

description of the experience a valid way to express what has happened in one's life. A third essential outcome is that the reader gains insight into connections between the past and present. While it is helpful to study history and gain insight into racist institutions in the past, Brooks (2008) notes that there is a tendency to overemphasize or exaggerate past incidents of racism, which has the effect of suggesting that racism has dissipated with the passage of time. She also notes ways in which

> "…a lack of home ownership in poor communities of color disproportionately affects the quality of education children receive because of a diminished tax base…reinscribing the racial and class-based stratification present in parts of today's urban and suburban areas" (Brooks 2008, 43).

Discussing racism in the United States all too often presents the work and progress wrought by figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the end of oppression in the nation, but there are swathes of evidence suggesting that racism remains, just in a subtler fashion. Identifying and challenging these newer, more pernicious manifestations of racism is the work of Critical Race Theory practitioners.

1.2. Masculine Gender Theory

Gender theory first emerged as an interpretive lens in literary analysis as feminist theory; however, in more recent years it has expanded to consider all categories and identities associated with gender and sex. Feminism re-emerged as a political movement in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s, and feminist gender theory emerged as a concomitant entity (Kumar 2018). From a political standpoint, this was the "second wave" of feminism and had as its focus practical issues with respect to women's rights in contemporary social contexts, the identity of women, and the way women found representation in culture and the media. Elaine Showalter developed the term "gynocriticism" for the junction between political feminism and feminist gender theory with respect to literature. The purpose of this area of study was to emphasize the inclusion of literary works by female authors in the canon of accepted literature as well as the representation of women in canonical works written by men.

Masculine gender theory has emerged to focus primarily on the development of male gender identities, analyzing historical, literary, and social accounts. Because of the position of power that men hold in mainstream society, there is none of the activism

associated with feminist gender theory; in fact, a great deal of masculine gender theory serves as a critique of typical practices associated with masculine identity. When it comes to the theoretical dimensions of masculine gender theory, researchers are primarily looking at the connection between masculine and queer theory. Queer theory asks questions about the established categories of gender identity and the paradigms that have been established as "normal" for society. If one undertakes a "queer" act, one is crossing the accepted boundaries of sexual identity in some way.

The work of Camille Nurka (2012) is instructive in the consideration of masculine gender theory with respect to the writings of Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle. She takes the two words *shame* and *disgrace* and argues that the first is applied to women while the second is applied to men. She begins with the claim that:

> "the primary difference is that where shame is embodied, or an emotion fundamentally *of* the body, disgrace is facialized and thus able to rid itself of the body in its capacity as the privileged representative of the face…[due to] the promise of transcendence unavailable to shame because it is able to unburden itself of the restrictions of materiality" (Nurka 2012, 310).

Consider two figures who emerged in a scandal from the late twentieth century in American political culture: Bill Clinton, the former President, and Monica Lewinsky, his intern and erstwhile mistress. President Clinton's perjured statements about his affair with Ms. Lewinsky led to his impeachment and, ultimately, the forfeiting of his law license. Ms. Lewinsky, now almost three decades later, has no other referents in public life. Clinton has gone on to amass significant wealth in his post-Presidential career, thanks to lucrative speaking engagements and access to investment opportunities. Clinton's name, when attached to investment projects, has brought in significant money, while Lewinsky's name has no such positive associations. The image of the blue dress that Lewinsky had saved with physical evidence of her affair with Clinton may be the best manifestation of Nurka's claim that the feminine experience remains within the body (or the garments of the body) when it comes to shame, while the masculine experience, termed disgrace, is possible to escape.

Nurka (2012) breaks down the difference between disgrace and shame to the level of denotative meaning. Her comparison of the Oxford English Dictionary meanings for distrace and shame reveals that shame is "described in explicitly emotional

terms" whereas "[t]he disfigurement implicit in disgrace concerns only the external appearance or figure" (Nurka 2012, 311). She contrasts the emotional elements of shame with the lack of involvement that disgrace has with a person's internal workings. Disgrace, she argues, comes from the outside, reducing a person's status for a time. While disgrace "is concerned with image management," shame "exposes a vulnerability within personhood itself (Nurka 2012, 311).

If we retreat from this contrast to Nurka's claim about the association between shame and the feminine, and the association between disgrace and the masculine, we see that disgrace is a factor that diminishes the impact that guilt has on men from a long-term perspective. Even while Bigger understands what he has done in *Native Son*, in the murder of Mary Dalton, he sees what he has done as an opportunity to embrace the stereotypical portrait that the majority white culture had already set up for them. There is scant evidence in the text that he feels any sort of internal compunction about what he has done. Instead, the impact that what he has done has on him seems largely external; he runs from the practical impact of this disgrace rather than from a sense of shame.

Maurice Wallace (2003) writes about ways in which the concept of black masculinity is a problem for modernity because, "historically considered, the terms *black* and *masculine* tend to operate as mutually exclusive signifiers in the modern period without a great many black men seeming to notice or acknowledge it" (72). The primary basis of this argument comes from the ways in which the masculine is associated with a sense of autonomy – and ways in which, for black men, that autonomy has largely been removed from their lives through generational cycles of oppression. The end result is a sense of drift and unredeemed trauma that keeps many black men from achieving validation in their own lives.

1.3. Double-Consciousness

In his work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois developed the notion of "double consciousness." On the one hand, it stands for the inescapable boundaries that lie in the path of the goals and aspirations of African-Americans on the basis of racial segregation. It also hinders members of the majority white culture from understanding the philosophical background and the importance of African-American ways of life that have emerged in response to this set of boundaries. These are ways of life that have

grown in response to generations of poverty and lowered expectations juxtaposed with moral bravery, artistic expression, and deep faith (Kirkland 2013). This juxtaposition leads to a general conflict in the perspective that many African-Americans have with respect to the possibility of fulfilling their aspirations in spite of the existence of this inexorable barrier.

With respect to Du Bois' idea of Double Consciousness, Charles Lemert (1994) claims that the idea "deserved a prominent place in the lineage of self theorist which, from James and Baldwin through Cooley to Mead to the symbolic interactionists, has been one of sociologist's proudest traditions" (389). Du Bois recognized that Double Consciousness played a powerful role in the development of self-concept for many within the African-American community, and he used this recognition to analyze how people develop autonomy in the context of a world divided by matters of race.

One essential point in the formation of the self that Double Consciousness touches on relates to the way that communication is influenced by this system. Du Bois asserts that the line between the majority white culture and people of color leads to differences in the formation of self among majority groups and racialized groups (Lemert 1994). William James (1890) was one of the first theorists who addressed the development of the self, and he asserted that "[n]o more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof" (293). In fact, recognition provides such a fundamental basis to one's understanding of the world that it is possible to develop a unique social identity for each individual who recognizes us. This is why many people behave differently depending on the particular social situation in which they find themselves.

George Herbert Mead (1964) defines the autonomous self as "an object to itself" (200). Over time, the self develops as an amalgamation of the interactions that a person has with those around them. This means that people internalize the view that others have of them and use that internalization to devise a sense of self. This begins in childhood, as children take the viewpoints of such influential individuals as their parents, and thereafter also learn to internalize the views of others as well as those of the wider society.

Mead (1964) chooses the metaphor of a game to explain how the process works. Over time, we learn and remember how to play particular games as we memorize and internalize the rules. The more familiar we become with a game, the more easily we can appropriate or adapt ourselves to any particular role within the game because we understand the expectations. Mead (1964) asserts that a person does not develop an autonomous and coherent self until he "takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs" (219).

For Mead (1964), the important part of the process is the capability of the human mind to turn signs into symbols, or to apply general meanings to events, people, and objects that go beyond the current situation. Symbols separate human communication from that of other species, and they also permit individuals to understand the approach that their community takes to different positions and decide whether or not to assimilate that approach. When people do not receive the recognition that meets the standard of basic reciprocity, Mead (1964) argues that this can keep that person from reaching full autonomy. While Du Bois focused on the ways in which construction of race in the United States influenced the self-formation of African-Americans, Mead was focused on caste society as it influenced feudal Europe and India.

Another influential theorist in this area was Charles Horton Cooley, particularly with respect to researching the impact of a lack of recognition on people who are oppressed due to their racial background. Cooley (1956) devised the term "looking glass self" to refer to the way in which individuals form concepts about themselves based on meta-perceptions –that is, how they imagine that they appear to, or are perceived by, other people. He asserted that all of us require "fellowship and that appreciation by others which gives his self social corroboration and support" (Cooley 1956, 261). Applying this notion to race, Cooley (1956) went on to argue that "[t]here is no understanding [the experience of oppression] without realizing the kind of self-feeling a race must have who, in a land where men are supposed to be equal find themselves marked with indelible inferiority" (262). Cooley suggests that, for a race undergoing oppression on the scale experienced by black people in the United States for centuries, the collective lack of recognition by the majority white culture would have traumatic effects, not just on individuals, but on the entire group of people.

In *Dusk*, Du Bois (1940) writes that "had it not been for the race problem early…enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born" (27). This suggests that Du Bois developed an interest in Critical Race Theory on the basis of his own experiences as an oppressed individual within an oppressed community. In *Souls*, he first explores his theory of Double Consciousness. He describes the experiences for black people in the United States in this way, with each person as:

> "…[a] sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1903, 2).

There are three important parts of this theory: the presence of the veil, the duality and second sight. The first is the notion of the veil, that boundary between the two races. The veil separates the majority white culture from people of color, and people living on the two different sides of the veil view the world differently as a result. For the majority white culture, people on the other side of the veil are not visible – at least not as individuals. This makes it impossible for members of the majority culture to go to the other side of the veil and live. Instead, white people project their own stereotypes or preconceptions of black people up onto the veil, considering those images to be the reality when they are not. On the other side of the veil, people of color see those images and are forced to incorporate them in their own development of a sense of identity.

The duality that emerges within this theory influences people growing up under oppression. They live within the black world, which they develop on their own side of the veil, as well as within the white world, which tears down that which they have worked so hard to develop because of their failure to recognize black people in their own right.

Finally comes the idea of second sight. As Dubois (1903) pointed out above, the oppressed people of color could only "see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world" (2), which necessitates two reponses: deal with the dehumanizing effects of the lack of recognition from the majority white culture, while also getting an

unvarnished glance into the world of the majority white culture. This can help in ameliorating the effects of seeing the white view of black people up on the veil, because black people can see clearly what white culture is like. However, the trauma is ongoing. As we see in the forthcoming chapters, the works of Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle offer much for those interpreting the literature through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and the theory of Double Consciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

NATIVE SON

2.1. The Picture of Racism in *Native Son*

It is worth noting that from the outset of *Native Son* both black and white people view one another in stereotypical or caricatural ways. The specter of racism means that, whether a white person is overtly racist or ostensibly progressive (but still distant), s/he still views black people through the lens of the stereotype of the potentially harmful individual. On the other hand, black people tend to see white people as harbingers of hostility and undeserving bearers of power. The corrosive logic of racism means that neither group can view the other as comprised of individuals, instead adopting collective grotesques of the other.

The factor that can change perception from stereotype to one of individual respect is sympathy (Ayan 2011). Without sympathy, it is impossible to view people outside one's own group as anything other than the caricature. It is not until Bigger meets Boris Max, the public prosecutor, that he comes to understand that white people are individuals, rather than the abstract figuresof stereotypes. The novel emphasizes the manner in which racism among white people has pushed black people into a mindset that is dangerous to themselves and marked by pressure. The structure of poverty forces black people to act as though they are inferior to the members of the majority white culture, and the media portrayal of black people as brutal beasts without any sort of impulse control serves to propagate this. The end result is Bigger's violent reactions toward both black and white people, which is rooted in the fear that his situation has instilled within him.

The novel opens with the sounds of the angry voices of Bigger's sister and mother, along with the ringing of an alarm clock. It is the voices that awaken Bigger, who lives inside a one-bedroom apartment with those two, along with his brother and a rat. The opening scene details the infinitesimal contribution of the rat to the larger story, as Bigger and his brother, Buddy, trap the rat and end its life. One can view this as a microcosm for the larger action of the story, because Bigger will spend the novel trying to escape the trap that his community sets for him. Bigger feels that the world around

him has been rigged to favor members of the majority white culture, and so he hates white people because he feels that they benefit from this system through no merit of their own other than the arbitrary fact of the color of their skin.

Bigger wants wealth and freedom from the restrictions that he finds around him; it is the fact that he feels that he has so few choices in life that frustrates him perhaps the most. David Sibley (1995) describes his feelings as "belonging and not belonging to a certain space" (24). As Bigger's frustration grows over time, his anger extends beyond the white community to other black people, as well as to his own family, because all around him he is confronted by expectations simply to obey, rather than opportunities to live freely. Nothing satisfies him, including his immediate surroundings.

One rhetorical effect of this initial frustration is the expression of the ways in which geographical and physical boundaries put in place by racism precipitate aggression between black people, instead of against the system. Because black people felt that they were shut off from the rest of their cities, they thought that "it was much easier and safer to rob their own people because the white policemen never really searched against other Negroes who committed crime against other Negroes (Wright 1940, 20). If black people crossed the racial lines and committed crimes against white people, the punishment would be swift, severe and emphatic in its scope and duration.

One scene that demonstrates this feeling of enclosure happens when Bigger and Gus, his friend, meet outside one day. They look up into the sky and notice an airplane skywriting a message in the sky. Bigger looks up at the plane with awe and says, "God, I would like to fly up there in that sky" (Wright 1940, 21). It is clear that Bigger would enjoy life with fewer limitations on his movements. After that pleasant thought, Bigger comes back to reality and starts to vent his frustration: "They do not let us do anything…the white folks..But I just cannot get used to it. I swear to God I cannot. I know I ought not to think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat" (Wright 1940, 22). Bigger claims that he wants to stop thinking about his own lack of freedom, but it keeps coming back to him and torturing him emotionally. This shows the reader how Bigger begins the narrative as a victim, long before he takes the life of another. His victimhood is rooted in the fact that he grows up in a culture that has placed very real boundaries around the life that he is allowed to lead. Those boundaries are geographical, in terms

of the places where he can go safely; they are cultural, in terms of the expectations he has to fulfill in order to pacify members of the white majority culture; they are economic, because the majority white culture will prosper off his poverty; and they are social, because there are people within society with whom it would be taboo for Bigger to interact. Over time, this becomes toxic because it corrupts Bigger's entire view of the world around him. He comes to view white people just as stereotypically as many view him. It is inconceivable to him that a white person would be kind to him; if such a thing were to happen, there would have to be an agenda at work that would justify his anxiety. This logic corrodes Bigger's social and emotional world in a number of ways.

Consider Bigger's reaction when Jan offers to shake his hand. The mere offer causes "Bigger's entire body [to tighten] with suspense and dread" (Wright 1940, 44). The proffered handshake sends Bigger into anxiety, and when Mary also treats him as though he is actually a human being instead of some sort of automaton, he has a similar shock. They treat him fairly, and it is impossible for Bigger to respond to them as individuals, because the racial calculus of the relationship between black and white people has left an indelible mark on his consciousness. Jan and Mary approach Bigger with the assumption that he will open up to their offer of friendship; they are unable to understand that Bigger has learned, all his life, to respond with anxiety and doubt when white people offer anything resembling friendship. This demonstrates the corrosive nature of racism from both the view of the black community as well as the white community. The story demonstrates that, even when white people have benevolent intentions, they bring prejudices to the situation that black people perceive, perpetuating the suspicion that black people have about their true intentions. Riding in the car with Jan and Mary causes Bigger to feel as though the two white people have him confined. The shock that he feels is such that he feels more confined than he had in his apartment. Wright notes that Bigger does "not understand them; he [distrusts] them, really [hates] them. He [is] puzzled as to why they [are] treating him this way" (Wright 1940, 46). The irony here is that their kindness is so unusual to him that it exacerbates the fear and uncertainty that Bigger would have experienced had treated him in the discriminatory and demaning ways more typical to that period.

When white people treat Bigger with kindness or compassion, he shrinks away from that behavior, because the society in which he grows up has not prepared him for

that view of himself. He understands that black people have received negative representation throughout mainstream white culture, and that historically, white people have treated black people with harm. Interent in the understanding of the way the world works is the acceptance or recognition of stereotypes. The behavior that Jan and Mary exhibit conflicts with his knowledge and experience of the way in which white people treat their black counterparts. Bigger's cultural logic of race assumes that Jan and Mary will treat him as a marginal, secondary, or inferior rather than a peer or an equal, and so when they welcome him, he does not know how to proceed. This fear leads to a breakdown in communication, and that lack of communication is the first step towards exploitation and, ultimately, violence. Bigger finds himself temporarily welcomed into space that belongs to white people. The end result is that he accidentally kills a girl who had treated him with kindness. White people are given free rein to come into territory associated with black people in order to exercise power, occupy territory, and earn money, which gives white people greater control over the black community. One commonality between the black experience on entering white territory and the white experience on entering black territory is that both groups see the other as a collection of objects, rather than people. Neither white nor black people can view one another through a clear, unadulterated lens because of the assumptions each makes about the other. For a short while, Bigger is briefly comforted after he kills Mary insofar as he believes that no one would suspect that he killed her because, to do so, he would have had to occupy a physical space (her bedroom) that typically would have been closed to him as a black man.

When Bigger hauls Mary's body down to the furnace in the basement, one can look at this choice in a couple of ways. On a literal level, it seems certain that he is afraid of facing the consequences of his actions and wants to make sure that no evidence remains behind him. On a figurative level, one can view this decision as a choice to take revenge on white people as a collective, rather than an individual. If one looks at this interpretation, the choice to stuff Mary's corpse into the furnace is his turning the tables on white people, who had confined him to a small, deadly space, restricting his freedom.

The first plan that Bigger comes up with, after he flees the scene and has time to contemplate his escape, is to blame Jan for the killing. After all, Jan is a member of the Communist Party, a group reviled almost as much as the black community in the society

in which the story takes place. It is a Communist (Boris Max) who ends up defending Bigger after he is arrested. One takeaway from this story is the idea that communism had a better, more effective system of justice for everyone than the American system, which long prided itself for preaching equality for everyone. According to Houston Baker (1972), "communism was…an ideology that fit Wright's fundamental cultural assumptions" (125). When Bigger turns around and tries to implicate Jan in Mary's death, this demonstrates the corrosive effect of the logic of racism on Bigger, because it turns him against those few people who would have been his friends. Initially, the ruse works and Jan finds himself under arrest. However, as things unfold, Bigger is unable to remember all of the details, and he eventually finds himself caught in the web of his own lies. At one point, he creates the impression that Mary was not dead but instead had been kidnapped, sending ransom demands to her parents. However, things fall apart when Bigger is brought to confront Jan during his questioning. At that point he runs to Bessie, his mistress, and makes her hide in an abandoned building with her, to assuage his lack of confidence.

Matters devolve further when he sends her to get ransom money that Mary's father was supposed to give him. However, he tries to light a fire and brings attention to that furnace, only to find that Mary's bones have been discovered. Bigger commits another murder at that point, because he does not want Bessie to end up answering questions for the police, so he kills her as well, hiding her body in an airshaft. This murder, interestingly, creates less angst for him than murdering Mary had. One could view this as a sign that it is easy to commit subsequent murders after one has done so already, but if one looks at this through the lens of race, it also seems true that Bigger has a lot less to fear, in terms of consequences, for murdering a black woman than he would for murdering a white woman, showing the differences in the way people from both ethnic groups were valued in society.

Bigger refuses to talk after he is placed under arrest – until he finds out the charges of rape and murder. He denies the rape and blames Jan for the death. However, the interrogation wears Bigger down to the point where he signs his confession. When the prosecutor has a chance to cross-examine Jan at trial, he not only questions him about the murder but also Jan's own thoughts about the impact of racism. The purpose of this line of questioning is to draw Jan's testimony into question by claiming that he held

unorthodox views about race. Eventually, Max objects to the racism that the prosecutor expresses through his line of questioning. Another element of the corrosive legacy of racism emerges when Max asks the landlord about why rents are so high in the building where Bigger lives, despite the fact that their apartment is unlivable due to rodent infestation. The landlord covers himself by claiming a shortage in housing, which created an ethical need for him to raise his prices in support of the law of supply and demand.

The purpose of this discourse is to demonstrate the self-perpetuating cycle of wealth for the white class (and poverty for blacks) as white owners of tenements agree to keep rents high together so that black families cannot escape poverty. When the time comes for Bigger to testify, the prosecutor presents Bessie's body as simply another piece of evidence in the chain of facts that connects Bigger to the murder of Mary. Bessie's body is not there because Bigger has been charged with her death; rather, it is there as evidence to support the claim that Bigger is capable of murder, pointing toward his guilt in Mary's death. Here, the body of the black woman is simply there as an object providing evidence instead of serving as an outrage in its own right. In the society portrayed in *Native Son*, Mary is the only victim worthy of turning the wheels of the legal system.

The defense that Max provides includes no witnesses. Instead, the lawyer gives a lengthy diatribe against the whole social structure in place in the society in the novel, essentially providing Wright a platform from which to assert his own philosophical perspectives on racism more directly. Max ends up asking for mercy by claiming that Bigger does not have total responsibility for what he has done, because the society in which Bigger grew up conditioned him to act in the way that he did. At the conclusion of the novel, Bigger becomes aware that the majority white culture is just as afraid as black people are because they are just as uninformed about the members of the other culture. This allows Bigger to offer a sort of forgiveness, but the responsibility that comes with power leaves that forgiveness somewhat hollow.

2.2. The Language of Animals: Instinct and Response in Bigger's Murder of Mary

The use of the language of animals to refer to African-Americans is a long-standing trope in majority white culture. One can look at the headlines of contemporary America, where one finds the co-chairman of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in the state of New York referring to then-First Lady Michelle Obama, a woman of color, as someone who was actually "'a male' who sould be 'let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe [to]live in a cave with Maxie, the gorilla'" and then claiming that his remarks were not racist (Helmore 2016, n.p.). One can also look back through history, where white people propagated specious claims about physiological differences about black people that made them worthy of the sort of oppression that, somehow, made it permissible to confine them to the holds of boats and then haul them across the ocean for use as slaves. In a study by physician Samuel A. Cartwright to the Medical Association of Louisiana, he reported that the reason so many slaves ran away from their masters each year was the result of a new malady that he called "Drapetomania," from the Greek words for runaway and for madness. He blamed this on the smaller blood vessels and brains that he claimed were typical of black people, and he told his colleagues that the best way to treat them was to keep them "benevolently in the state of submission, awe and reverence that God had ordained" (Ruane 2019, n.p.).

The description of a criminal as an animal is somewhat newer. It dates back to *Criminal Man* by Cesare Lombroso and published in 1876. This work criticized the contemporary focus on the crime in the prosecution process as opposed to focus on the criminal (Lombroso c2006). Lombroso's theories of criminal behavior focused on the animalistic characteristics that criminals shared;. By the time his work reached its third edition, he claimed that people were criminals on the basis of the outrages that animals and even some plants had committed. He argued that carnivorous plants "release the victim once dead and partially disted, thanks to an acid that is similar to our own pepsin" (Lombroso c2006, p. 167). He went on to argue that "crime, from its first manifestations in the lower species, is a product of any organism's physical constitution" (Lombroso c2006, p. 174). Consequently, when people are accused of committing a crime, they are also accused of acting in a less than human way.

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the interplay of criminality, animality, and race plays a significant role in the thematic expressions of the novel. Much of the conversation regarding race in the 1700s and 1800s centered on the similarities between black people and apes, with a view to using this similarity as a justification for the institution of slavery. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for example, Thomas Jefferson wrote that black people tend to demonstrate more "sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course" (Jefferson c1853, p. 150). In other words, the fact that the slaves living on Jefferson's plantation would sleep when not actively at work, for him, suggested that they were more like animals. Instead of spending time with leisure activities, like the white owner class did, they would sleep. It did not occur to Jefferson that the cause of the lethargy might be utter exhaustion.

The violence that Bigger Thomas commits in *Native Son* is considered a confirmation of a sort of animalistic nature intrinsic to black men. Within the novel, the Chicago newspapers portray Bigger as a "jungle beast" with a "lower jaw [that] protrudes obnoxiously," going on to call him a "missing link in the human species" (Wright 279, 280). The implication, of course, is that Bigger's blackness implies a lack of common ground with the rest of humanity.

Bigger is unfortunate enough to end up in the bedroom of Mary Dalton, a young white woman. He was hired to be her chauffeur, and her extreme intoxication makes it necessary for him to help her into her bedroom. However, Mary's blind mother happens to come in at the wrong time, and Bigger tries to keep Mary from making noise with a pillow, understanding that if he is discovered in her bedroom, he will end up facing allegations of rape. So he attempts to keep her quiet but ends up smothering her instead, and instead of rape accusations, now he is on trial for murder. Mary's body is later found in the furnace in the basement, and Bigger ends up accused of both rape and murder, even though there is no physical evidence that a sexual assault occurred. One reason why the charge of rape remains in place is that the possibility of miscegenation is, for the majority culture at the time, an outrage that extends beyond that of murder.

The fact that a human is viewed as an animal is an expression of the dehumanization of black men by the majority white culture. The attempt to dehumanize

and demean black man using animalistic terms and allusions is an attempt to reconstruct and reinforce the racial hierarchy that had served to justify slavery and continue to justify the Jim Crow laws. Sterling Brown, in "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," notes that the end of the Civil War and the years of Reconstruction led to a new stereotype of the black man, whose identity changed from that of the obedient slave to that of the "Brute Negro" –an attempt to suggest that freeing the former slaves led to the creation of an animal nature in black men (Brown 1933, 191).

The notion of accountability is also an issue that arises in *Native Son*. The public response to the murder of Mary Dalton, along with the case that the prosecution brings, relies on a fundamental paradox: the belief that Bigger is both an animal as well as an autonomous individual. This refers to the claim that Bigger lacks the humanity to act appropriately around the intoxicated young woman but also has the capacity to make his own decisions and follow through with his commitments. As such, while he lacks the means to follow rules of a moral society, he should still be held accountable for what he did.

Nietzsche argued that humans are susceptibile to following "bad conscience", which sets the species apart from the rest of the natural world. Inherent in this is the idea that all actions are undertaken by individuals who have the capacity to make decisions. One gains humanity when one is held accountable for a misdeed. Nietzsche ironically refers to this as the "privilege of responsibility" (c1989, 60). Nietzsche refers to humans as "semi-animals" and makes the analogy of the force of domestication of humans to the factors that forced sea animals to survive on land (Nietzsche c1989, 84). He suggests that the limitations of contemporary society have alienated people from their instincts, which, he argues, are both unconscious and unerring, and toward the capacity for reason, which he considers humanity's "weakest and most fallible organ" (Nietzsche c1989, 84). Therefore, when the reader encounters Bigger represented as both a human agent and an animal, one who is subject to accountability but also operating under the impulse of instinct, one sees a complex web of irony trapping him, as the claims both erase and demarcate the line between the animal and the human simultaneously. If Bigger is "just" an animal, then how could he be expected to follow human laws? How could it be ethical to hold him accountable? The fact that he is brought into court and put on trial instantly

places a patina of humanity upon him. However, right after this he is stripped of his humanity, referred to as a beast.

The murder of Mary starts a process of agency that cannot be reversed, at least not within Bigger's own mind. He feels the beginning of "a new life….something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (Wright 105). The demand of the community to hold him accountable for this murder offers him, for the first time, the chance for social recognition as an autonomous agent. The irony, of course, is that now that society has recognized him, it has also condemned him permanently as a threat to society. What for Bigger represents a sort of autonomous act –one that gives him an identity –he also results in others turning against him, making the racist assumption that he had committed many other similar atrocities in the past. Matters progress to the point where "[h]is crime [seems] natural; he [feels] that all of his life [has] been leading to something like this" (Wright 239). It does not matter, in one way, that there has not been an actual victim for him to murder at other points in his past. The latent racism in the assumptions that undermine Bigger's humanity make the other victims unnecessary, because according to that racism black men will commit acts of violence. That he "was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed" meant that, according to members of the white majority culture, "he had killed her" (Wright 106). What he would say in court, ultimately, would be inconsequential as the assumption had already been made. In other words, that Mary died in Bigger's presence makes the question of whether Bigger actually committed the crime moot. Within the racist paradigm in which Bigger exists, he was already the animal that the murder would later prove. To go even further, Bigger's ostensibly violent nature is blamed on a rumor about him having a mixed ethnic background, "which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature" (Wright 282). So not only is the racist trope of the black man as violent animal justified here, so too is the ongoing taboo against miscegenation, literally a mixture of species, which from the racist paradigm is the correct description of the procreation by one white and one black partner.

Max utilizes some of the same language of this racist trope to try and get the court to show some mercy to Bigger and spare his life, instead of enacting capital punishment. He argues that Bigger's actions happened "accidentally, without thinking,

without plan, without conscious motive" (Wright 396). By setting Bigger up as some sort of instinct-driven creature instead of one capable of rational thought, acting only through the spasms of the id and lacking the capacity for forethought, sounds from one perspective that Max is just as racist as Bigger's accusers. However, this can also be read as a rebuttal of the disingenuous structures through which it is possible to view Bigger as nothing more than an animal while also holding him accountable for actions as a human. The racist paradigm rests on a litany of contradictions, because it is impossible to hold other species accountable for their actions. Those who strip black people of their humanity because of their ethnicity cannot logically hold them accountable for actions according to human laws.

Writing about this passage, James Baldwin critiques Max's line of reasoning by saying that the claim that Bigger "is a monster is…a trap of making him subhuman" (Baldwin c1998, 31). If Bigger is supposed to serve somehow as a metaphor of a larger problem, then he loses the agency that he believes he has attained through this action. Ralph Ellison critiques Max's strategy here when he asserts that Wright's presumption starts "with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be" (Ellison c1995, 114). If one goes deeper than these two critiques, one arrives at Zora Neale Hurston's observation that "the Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself" (Hurston c1995, 838). Her implication here is that imitation and originality are not necessarily opposites. If one considers the racist assumption that black people are more reactive and instinctive than members of the majority white culture, one has to consider that imitation may be a gift – and that if the tables were turned and white people were the ones on the outside, what steps white people would take in order to gain recognition and agency.

Within the narrative context of *Native Son*, the white characters look at the violence that Bigger carries out as an expression of a truth that they believe applies to all black men. This suggests that his animalistic behavior confirms what they have assumed about him the whole time. So the mimicry takes an even darker turn, because given the racist assumption that he is both animalistic and accountable, he is mimicking the animal world through the violence of his murder. Note the name that Wright gives to him – *Bigger*. This may have many connotative implications. What is he bigger than?

Is this a reference to his physical strength? His sexual prowess? His phallic grandeur? The lack of a point of comparison leaves this question open – and possibly open-ended.

If one remembers that Bigger considers the murder of Mary as a sort of creative version of autonomy, one must also remember that he does not have the capacity to act as a completely autonomous individual. While it is improper to take Bigger's act and assume that it represents the same sort of act that all black men would undertake. However, the assumption that Bigger's murder of Mary can only either be a thoughtful human action or an animalistic reaction overlooks a third possibility: the reaction by a human. The human unconscious is a factor that makes it impossible to equate the idea of "response" with the idea of "responsibility." Jacques Derrida notes that it is the human unconscious that subverts the notion that there is a freedom in responsibility (Derrida c2008). There is a fundamental difference between the two words; the first connotes a mechanical sort of process, even when some forethought can take place. Responses start with a series of habits that will color the eventual outcome, even when reflection has the chance to take place. This means that, as Derrida indicates, it is important to question the establishment of an opposition between response and reaction, because that questioning is "not only a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse such and such a power to the animal…[but] also of asking whether what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man…what he refuses the animal" (Derrida c2008, 185). The lines of response and reaction are not as clear as some would claim. Those who use animalistic terminology to refer to black people take away the positive connotations of responsibility – namely, the same intellectual and emotional capacity of their peers in the majority culture to act rationally – while insisting on holding them accountable anyway.

As part of his argument before the jury, Max notes that, if one is to understand Bigger, one must go through "an unveiling of the unconscious ritual of death in which we, like sleep-walkers, have participated so dreamlike and thoughtlessly" (Wright 383). The implication is that the events of the novel may well resemble some sort of dream. Abdul JanMohamed claims that the novel is set up as a dream, which means that the reader should approach it that way, as opposed to a narrative worthy of the rigor of factual demands. Stepping back from the literal narrative, he claims, allows the reader to see the ways in which Bigger is "produced, bound, and motivated by structures that

have been in place throughout slavery and Jim Crow society" (JanMohamed 2005, 77). The many ways in which Bigger falls into unlikely coincidences and in which various instances and types of repetition appear, according to JanMohamed, take the novel out of the genre of realistic fiction and instead make it feel as fantastic and phantasmagorical as a dream world, with Bigger caught in forces well beyond his control.

One instance of repetition that JanMohamed claims is his assertion that Bigger actually murders Mary twice. The first time comes when he accidentally smothers Mary. After his discovery of her death, though, he cuts her head off and puts her corpse in the furnace to burn, a decision that "is quite deliberate and intentional" (JanMohamed 2005, 98). One could well ask, though, how different the acts actually are with respect to their overt intentionality? Bigger covers Mary's face with a pillow because he realizes that if he is discovered, death is almost certain for him because of the implicit consequences of being a black man found in a white woman's bedroom in that society. So the decision to cover her face is more of an instinctual response, but it is hard to say that the second is not also instinctual as well. There is some forethought in the recognition of his need to dispose of the evidence, but the ultimate failure of Bigger's decision to burn the body (because the evidence is eventually found) suggests that the logic of the situation is not all that different. He realizes that he absolutely has to do something to conceal the evidence if he wants to escape legal consequences, which is a similar logical calculus to the decision to cover her face in the first place.

Looking at the decision in this light, it is more difficult to see Bigger's decision to shove Mary's corpse into a furnace as any less of a highly instinctive response. If we look back at the racist assumptions by the society portrayed in the novel that Bigger has killed "many times before," (Wright 239), the repetition of his murder of Mary makes two interesting points. First of all, the blurring of the lines between Bigger the man and Bigger the animal – the person and the caricature that society creates –puts him in a situation that would not have affected a man from the majority culture. His mere presence in that bedroom put his life in danger, leading to two responses that relied heavily on instinct: first, the choice to put the pillow over Mary's face, her noise (or lack thereof) more important to him than her safety; and second, the choice to put her body in the furnace. Both decisions are made poorly, because they both end up failing to accomplish their purpose, which was to spare him from discovery and from

consequence. They both show the haste of instinct. Second, while the two decisions show haste, they do not imply simple animal reasoning; they show a human capacity to associate cause with effect. This undermines the racist assumption that the black man does not know how to act rationally, or to live by the moral code of the majority white culture. If Bigger really were the animal that the culture suggests, then he would not have known that noise would jeopardize him, and he would not have known the capacity that the pillow had to blunt the noise, nor would he have known to use the furnace to attempt to destroy the evidence.

2.3. Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory and Literary Intention in *Native Son*

Before 1940, when *Native Son* entered the literary scene, the vast majority of literature that had emerged from the African-American community made its rhetorical points behind the screen of the minstrel, behind the mask that Paul Laurence Dunbar made famous in his poem (Tuhkanen 2010). It is recognized for influences that it brought to the sociopolitical conversations regarding race relations and critical race theory. However, literary critics (as well as readers in the public) made reference to the limits in the perspective of the story itself. Many of the characters in the novel, for example, are not impressive as autonomous figures. Irving Howe (1963) notes that, with the exception of Bigger,

> "…who seems more a brute energy than a particularized figure, the characters have little reality, the Negroes being mere stock accessories and the whites either 'agit-prop' villains or heroic Communists whom Wright finds it easier to admire from a distance than establish from within" (357).

This does not consign *Native Son* to the dustbin of literature, to be sure; Nathaniel Hawthorne did much the same in his composition of *The Scarlet Letter*, using that tiresome triad of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth to establish the absolute lack of freedom at work in the Puritan way of life, which had ostensibly set itself up to bring religious freedom to a community that had not found it in Great Britain. Theme is the strength of Hawthorne's novel, which would unlock the inspiration within Herman Melville to write *Moby-Dick* (which is dedicated to

Hawthorne, even though the authors did not know one another at the time of *Moby-Dick*'s publication).

It is worth noting that Wright's focus was more on the establishment of theme in *Native Son* than on the creation of realistic characters. In his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright (c2008) "gave no more reality to the…characters than that which Bigger himself saw" (451). What makes this an interesting point is that, through the lens of Bigger's eyes, it is hard to argue that anyone could appear realistic; after all, the lens of fear is quite a distorting one. However, one must then ask whether this choice on Wright's part represents a failure on the part of the author, or represents an artistic gamble that either does or does not pay off. In that same essay, Wright (c1998) points out that he "restricted the novel to what Bigger saw and felt…[because] such a manner of rendering made for a sharper effect, a more pointed sense of the character, his peculiar type of being and consciousness" (454). Wright's instinct, then, was to create a narrative point of view that could only be Bigger's, rather than reflecting a more general (and simpler) omniscience. The implication here is that it is crucial for the reader to understand the ways in which black people living in this system of oppression viewed not only white people but also other black people, as well as themselves. So rather than call attention to the lack of realism in the characters in *Native Son* as a flaw on the part of the writer, it might well be more appropriate to view the construction of the characters as an effective conceit that shows the ways in which systemic racism and oppression compromised Bigger's ability to take in and perceive the world around himself.

This focus on perspective is not new in the work that Wright produced. In his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright (c1978) claims that:

> "[p]erspective…is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things" (45).

He also notes that "perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living" (Wright c1978, 46). In other words, a writer comes to a perspective of a situation through a variety of experiences, whether in person or through secondary experience, whether reading or viewing the experiences of others.

For Wright, getting perspective of the plight of black Americans requires that a black writer:

> "learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil" (46).

One sees that, for Wright, the interaction between races also has a highly economic element to it, as the primary means that the majority white culture has for oppressing members of minorities pertains to material advantage. So long as members of minority groups work constantly to meet daily needs, they have neither the time nor the energy for activism.

In the case of people living in Bigger's perspective, people who live in this sort of economic squalor do not have the leisure for rational thinking. There are other post-colonial writers who share with Wright the idea that perspective, for the writer, is the revelation of a sort of logical order that interprets the world for the subject. Bigger has a reduced capacity for understanding the world through a rational lens, because life has been a fearful experience for him from the very beginning. The Caribbean writer George Lamming (1991) has observed that "what a person thinks is very much determined by the way that person sees" (56). However, it is worth noting that much of perspective remains beyond an individual's control, particularly when one lives in a place of oppression.

What one can draw from this is that Wright uses *Native Son* as a way to move from the subject of a novel as the primary viewpoint to the subject of a novel as a sort of spectacle. Bigger is the protagonist of the story, of course; he is also, in a number of ways, the story. What this means is that Bigger is not just a man, not just a murderer. He is not even just a type; he is more than that. If one views, as Wright does, that "in the United States, such things as citizenship are determined to a large extend by how the subject – more precisely, his or her body – is positioned within the national perspective" (Tuhkanen 2010, 3) then one sees that the relative visibility that Bigger has within the United States as a whole makes it necessary that he becomes the story. No one in the majority white culture sees Bigger until he kills a white woman. Even the black woman

whom he later kills only turns up as evidence, dragged into court and splayed out for the judge and jury, rather than the cause of an entirely new trial for a separate homicide. In a world in which one feels invisible, leisure and reason are commodities that are too rich for him to afford.

This argument has progressed in more modern times in critical race theory. Robyn Wiegman (1995) asserts that:

> "[m]odern citizenship functions as a disproportionate system in which the universalism ascribed to certain bodies (white, male, propertied) is protected and subtended by the infinite particularly assigned to others (black, female, unpropertied)….[T]his system is itself contingent on certain visual relations, where only those particularities associated with the Other are, quite literally, *seen*" (6).

The degree to which Bigger is visible to wider society serves as Wright's criticism of the denial of Bigger's practical citizenship. The definition of people with respect to whether they are white or not, male or not, rich or not, bestows default citizenship on the basis of arbitrary characteristics, setting the stage for the justification of the denial of basic rights on the basis of the absence of those characteristics.

Because people of color do not have the ability to represent the "ideal model of bodily abstraction" they are separated from what Wiegman (1995) terms "the privileged ranks of citizenry" (94). In other words, people of color (and women) do not have the capability to suppress their own physicality. The irony that emerges from this is that, for Wright, a subject marked because of his racial identity remains invisibly visible. In other words, Bigger is seen, but only within the context of his difference from the white ideal. Outside of this context, he does not appear as a visibly autonomous individual, making his visibility subject to the interpretive and semiotic needs of the majority white culture.

The writing of *Native Son*, then, anticipates the ways in which critical race theory would connect the modern notion of "race" not just as a category of identity but as a category of visibility. Wright's ideas are primarily in agreement with the findings of critical race theory, outlining a structure of society (and of the assumptions about human sexuality) in which racial difference serves as a central element of the overarching taxonomy. This taxonomy places the white male at the top of the social hierarchy, with the degree of descent from that apex defined by the individual's distance from that

identity, both in terms of gender as well as race. The Daltons permit Bigger to manipulate his place within this structure, but only momentarily.

In order to get a sense of this, let us consider the scene in which Bigger first meets Mr. Dalton. Mrs. Dalton invites him to sit down and wait, and the anxiety that he feels shows the complexity of his visibility. At first, "she [is] staring at him and he [looks] away in confusion [and is] glad when she [leaves]" (Wright 1940, 34). Ironically, he feels better when she stops looking at him and even leaves the room; her attention makes him uncomfortable because he feels such fear in the presence of a white person. His experience has taught him that white people have harmful intentions toward black people, and so attention that deviates from those expectations causes him unease. Even in her home, with her out of the room, Bigger is still anxious. Even in the chair where he sits, his worry takes hold. At one point he sinks "down so suddenly and deeply that he [thinks] the chair ha[s] collapsed under him. He [bounds] halfway up, in fear; then, realizing what had happened, he [sinks] distrustfully down again" (Wright 1940, 34). The simple nature of this chair confounds him. He "[is] sitting in a white home; dim lights [burn] round him; strange objects [challenge] him; and he [is] feeling angry and uncomfortable" (Wright 1940, 34). The objects he perceives and which the reader can visualize –including a chair, a dim light, and music coming from a piano –do not sound all that different. The fact that he is in a home belonging to a white family represents the essential difference for him, rather than the actual difference between the objects he notices and the objects in his own home. This goes back to the notion of the difference that perspective makes on perception: it is Bigger's fear that informs his sense of difference.

When Mr. Dalton comes in the room, Bigger's anxiety does not ease. He slips and falls back into the chair at first, and when he finally stands up he sees "a tall, lean, white-haired man holding a piece of paper in his hand…gazing at him with an amused smile that made him conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (Wright 1940, 34). Because of Bigger's fear of white men, the smile does not ease his misgivings. Mr. Dalton might have wanted to put Bigger at ease, but it does not work. Instead, the smile makes Bigger even more aware of his racial identity. From a context of fear, Bigger appears to interpret the smile as suggestive of some sort of unknown menace that has not appeared in identifiable form. He feels his difference keenly, in the sense that he

is aware of his lack of whiteness and the peril in which his difference places him, in his own mind.

Wiegman (1995) notes that when the majority white culture enacts force on people outside that culture, "the body is made the productive agent, a sign wrapped in the visibility it cannot help but wear" (213). In other words, Bigger realizes that he cannot escape his body, cannot escape his blackness. In his mind, his own blackness has caused the appearance of the smile on Mr. Dalton's face. Earlier in *Native Son*, Bigger asks his friend, "'You know where white folks live?'…Bigger double[s] his fist and [strikes] his solar plexus. 'Right down here in my stomach,' he [says]. 'Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em,'"(Wright 1940, 18). During his visit to the Daltons, there is "an organic conviction in him that this [is] the way white folks [want] him to be when in their presence" (Wright 1940, 42). The use of the word "organic" here is interesting because it suggests that the idea has taken on a life of his own as a discrete identity. When he watches his sister eat, Bigger thinks that the "very manner in which she [sits shows] a fear so deep as to be an organic part of her; she carrie[s] the food to her mouth in tiny bits as if…fearing that it would give out too quickly" (Wright 1940, 93). Here, this goes back to the connection that Wright asserts between racial oppression and economic oppression. Part of the fear that people of color experience relates to economic uncertainty, and control of the economic apparatus by the majority white culture ensures that this fear will remain justified. The fear is not just present in Bigger; it is present in all of those around him, but his own fear causes him to interpret her movements in such an intentional way.

Bigger's racial identity goes beyond the visible in *Native Son*, which underscores Wright's notion that racial identity is more about what one is not than what one is. Mrs. Dalton is blind but can still figure out Bigger's ethnicity. If one understands that the notion of race had traveled beyond the color of the skin to other qualities of the individual, this makes sense. Even though Mrs. Dalton lacks sight, it comes forth that she "has a very deep interest in colored people" (Wright 1940, 41). This not only suggests the difference between Mrs. Dalton and Bigger but also the multiple levels on which that difference occurs. The difference between black and white is not just one of hue; it is a difference in terms of place of power, in terms of personality. When Bigger sees Mrs. Dalton in the kitchen, he feels that "she [can] see him even though he [knows]

that she [is] blind. His skin tingle[s]" (Wright 1940, 52). The intermingling of the physical and the other elements of this difference come together in that tingling sensation. There is no direct physical stimulus that causes this sensation within Bigger's mind. However, there is the emotional stimulus that arrives when he realizes that she is aware not just of his presence but also his identity.

In his book *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright (c2019) more directly describes the way that closeness to white people impacts African Americans. He asserts that "[t]he muscles of our bodies tighten. Indefinable sensations crawl over our skins and our blood tingles" (100). The connection between skin and blood is an informative one here, as it notes the role that blood is said to have in transmitting racial identity from one generation to the next. The definition, according to the majority white culture, of what it means to be black has always related to the percentage of one's ancestry that was black. This connection intimates that not only does the perspective of the majority white culture establish those racial distinctions that are visible to the eye but also imprints an awareness of those differences on other personal characteristics, linking them permanently to race.

When one is invisibly visible, as Bigger and other people of color are, they remain the focus of the majority white culture's awareness, but in a way that robs them of autonomy. This comes down to members of minority cultures knowing and understanding their "place" in society. The position that Bigger occupies is less perilous to him, in the Daltons' kitchen, than it is later, when he is headed to Death Row because of his conviction. However, it is that entrapment within his own visibility that makes the establishment of an implacable structure of difference the real tool of subjugation. It is not the whip; it is not the hangman's noose; it is not the shotgun that oppresses Bigger: those are the tools that the oppressor uses to bring physical punishment. The subjugation already happened long before those tools emerged. Bigger, from the moment of his birth (if not before), was already headed toward an existence in which he would be seen not for what he is but for what he is not, an existence in which he would be judged not for the things that he had done but for the things he was assumed to be capable of doing outside the realm of conventional white ethics , and an existence in which it it would be assumed that he was incapable of forbearance because of his subhuman composition. All of this encapsulates his subjugation at the hands of the majority white culture.

It is pertinent to mention Masculine Gender Theory at this point in the discussion. Camille Nurka (2012) argues that "the cultural and metaphysical meaning of shame takes on a feminine character through its association with the body…reinforced by the historical positioning of the female body as privileged representative of sexual shame" (310). She goes on to argue that the masculine equivalent for this is disgrace, which she defines as "a despoiled externalized image and a demotion in public stature or rank in the following" (Nurka 2012, 311). In this instance, there was no sexual crime. However, Bigger is aware that if he were discovered in Mary's room, the assumption would be that he had gone in the room to sexually assault her –an accusation framed by the white majority culture's racist assumptions about black sexuality.

The first chapter of this present study discusses the differences in experience between men and women with respect to the experience of what Nurka (2012) terms as shame for women and disgrace for men. The difference in gender continues at Bigger's trial, when Bessie's body is brought in as part of the collection of evidence designed to show that Bigger was capable of murder. It is hard to argue that Bessie's body would simply have been hauled in and set down had she been a white woman, but the point that Nurka (2012) makes about the female form as representative of shame resonates here with respect to gender theory as well: Bigger obviously could have killed a man, but given the physical advantages that Bigger had over Mary and Bessie, and the situational advantages (Mary was unconscious when Bigger smothered her, and Bessie had placed herself in an emotionally vulnerable position, not suspecting that Bigger would turn on her) also have connections to gender roles.

When Bigger heads toward his trial, he gains awareness that his invisible visibility is what has brought him down. In the courtroom, people crowd inside to see the killer – not to see Bigger, but rather to confirm their own assumptions about what the killer must be like because of his extraction. He reflects back on the moment when the posse of white vigilantes brought him in, and he thinks that if those men "had killed him that night when they were dragging him down the steps, that would have been a deed born of their strength over him. But he felt they had no right to sit and watch him, to use him for whatever they wanted" (Wright 1940, 237). The moment of his capture resonated more as an encounter between peers; there were more of them than there were of him, and so his death would have seemed logical.

Now, though, his visibility in front of the courtroom robs him of humanity in ways that the moment of his capture did not. His visibility is enforced by the law, and the same visibility would be in place for a white suspect on trial. However, the people who came to watch him did not come to see him as an individual; they came to see the man who differs from them in a crucial way. As he sits in the courtroom, he continues to feel resentment toward the audience just looking at him. He asks himself why "could they not just shoot him and get it over with" (Wright 1940, 313). There is a clear difference between the forms of oppression that a vigilante mob can bring and the forms of oppression that an ostensibly legitimate system of law can bring. When the mob comes for a person, that person can turn into the object of sympathy, because that mob operates outside the aegis of the law. When the legal system becomes the oppressor, though, there is scant sympathy for the victim because there is that assumption that the victim has committed some sort of offense to justify his or her trial and prosecution. Bigger feels the pain of being forced to sit in a courtroom, fodder for an audience, more than he feels the pain of capture at the hands of the mob, because in the hands of the mob he still feels like a person. In the hands of the legal system, he feels like a commodity laid bare for consumption.

Ironically, it is Bigger's "fixation on the idea of a collective white consciousness that allows him to manipulate the minds of the people around him" (Phipps 2015, 327). He views the world of the majority white culture as a "stormy sky looming overhead" (Wright 1940, 114) or a "looming mountain of white hate" (Wright 1940, 289). Over the course of the novel, through his interaction with the Daltons and with Boris Max, Bigger learns that there are different elements within the majority white culture, but from the outset his terror at his confrontation only continues to grow. Bigger gains an awareness of the role that the story of the American Dream and that mythology peculiar to the majority white culture in the United States plays in formulating the world the way that that culture views it. He comes to understand, for example, that many members of the majority white culture took, at that time, an extremely dim view of Communism and even labor unions. Those structures that people erected to protect themselves economically were derided by the majority white culture because of the ways in which they ran afoul of such notions as the myth of the individual, or the ideal of working hard and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps without the help of anyone or anything else (Phipps 2015).

The ways in which the majority white culture has turned the world into an industrialized space, complete with an elaborate infrastructure, comprises a significant part of Bigger's notion of the world in which white people move. When he looks up, early in the story, and sees that skywriting plane, he "stretche[s] his arms above his head and yawn[s]; his eyes [moisten]. The sharp precision of the world of steel and stone dissolve[s] into blurred waves. He blink[s] and the world [grows] hard again, mechanical, distinct" (Wright 1940, 16). It is not the physical word itself that is gaining and losing definition. However, what is changing in definition is Bigger's own perception of the material world around him. There is one level on which this is beyond his control, as in the physiological change described by the watering of his eyes. There is another level on which he recognizes the ways in which this watering influences his own perceptive abilities and understands that he can move beyond those changes, figuratively or otherwise. He also becomes aware of the central lack of control that he has over his life. Just as his eyes can water, changing his ability to perceive the world around him, so too can members of the majority white culture alter the circumstances of his life without any remedy that he can take.

Bigger "never receives the prosperity and promises of the material world at face value, but always perceives them from a position of humiliation and deprivation" (Phipps 2015, 328). This has, once again, to do with the systemic oppression aimed at people outside the majority white culture. However, the key to this claim is not about the oppression or about the impact of that oppression on his perception. Charles Scruggs (1997) observes that Bigger "is only able to define himself in opposition, by the act of murder, and that definition becomes so important to him that he will not give it up (168). Where Scruggs' observation falls short, though, from the perspective of critical race theory, is that Bigger can never surrender that definition of himself, because that is the one that the majority white culture has thrust upon him. He can reassure himself of his own worth as an individual and even work toward a place of relative prosperity, but from the perspective of the majority white culture, he will always be someone else and something else, lacking in terms of the definition of what the majority culture has deemed whole. When Bigger draws a sense of autonomy and power from the murder of Mary Dalton, then, the novel reaches perhaps the height of its irony. He observes that:

> "[t]hough he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had

> been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killer her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said" (Wright 140, 106).

This demonstrates that his feeling is not one of remorse. Instead, he moves into the identity that the majority white culture has already created for him on the basis of its assumption. Phipps (2015) asserts that Bigger "embraces this identity because it brings him close to the threshold of a goal – the opportunity to transform himself into an idea lodged at the core of white subjectivity" (329). This seems at first to be a most unusual goal, but there is some logic to this assertion.

Growing up in an environment in which he fears the prospect of punishment from the oppressive majority white culture and its legal system has left Bigger on tenterhooks. Now that it transpires that Bigger has actually committed the act that the majority white culture assumes he will do, simply because of his genetics, he

> "…wishe[s] that he had the power to say what he had done without fear of being arrested; he wishe[s] that he could be an idea in their minds, that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy" (Wright 1940, 130).

In other words, he wants to fulfill the stereotype, which seems counterintuitive until one realizes that Bigger understands what is going to happen to him now, no matter what he says in his own defense – what was going to happen to him as soon as he picked up that pillow and held it in place. Since his fate cannot change, he wants to embrace that fate as deeply as possible.

The private investigator that Mr. Dalton had hired to resolve to the mystery asks Bigger to draw what had happened at the time of Mary's disappearance. He realizes that "[t]hey wanted him to draw the picture…and he would draw it like he wanted it. He [is] trembling with excitement. In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him?" (Wright 1940, 158). The question here suggests that Bigger never had the privilege of creating his own narrative. In the past, the majority white culture had made the narrative for him, never bothering to see whether it was correct from his perspective. The only agenda at work in the creation of those prior narratives was to create a frame around Bigger that suited his place within society, from the perspective of majority white

culture. In drawing what had happened, Bigger would both justify the fear that informed the caricature, stereotype, or preconception that white people had of him, and demonstrate the intractable nature of that perception that, then as now, makes race such a frustrating category.

Considering this novel through the lens of masculine gender theory has created a variety of interpretive possibilities. Claudia Tate (1998) has argued that there is a great deal of psychosexual anger at work in the murder of Mary Dalton, and that anger has a lot to do with Bigger's anger at his own mother. Her argument is that Mrs. Dalton comes to serve as a sort of surrogate mother: "the maternal conflict is enacted in the castrative menace of Mrs. Dalton's Medusan face and searching hands poised to uncover Bigger alongside Mary's bed" (Wallace 2003, 72). If Bigger were discovered in Mary's room, as has been mentioned earlier, he would have stood accused of sexual assault on the basis of his mere presence in the room of an unconscious white woman. The violence that informs the murder of Mary and, later, the murder of Bessie, "is a direct consequence of having already 'caught sight' of [Medusa] and the primal trauma, sublimated deep in the filial unconscious, that seeing her uncovers" (Wallace 2003, 72).

Earlier in this chapter, the present study has analyzed ways in which Bigger is invisibly visible; in the case of Mrs. Dalton's perspective on Bigger, the invisibility expands somewhat because of her physical blindness. This alters her perception of Bigger; instead of seeing him as an individual, one can argue that she sees him as an idea. When Bigger is carrying Mary up the stairway, Bigger feels "strange, possessed…[as if] he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (Wright 1940, 52). One could view this apprehension and paranoia almost as a form of preemptive disgrace, reacting to the likelihood that he should be found and the assumptions that would ensue. It is only moments later that Bigger finds himself even more vulnerable, "defenseless in a corner of the room near Mary's bed, Mrs. Dalton groping at the bedroom door" (Wallace 2003, 74), which is when matters develop beyond what he can bear. Wallace (2003) argues that "it is the terror of the Medusa's face, a figure for the persecutory mother writ large" that drives him to the violence that ensues (74).

The appearance of Mrs. Dalton captures Bigger, who is "seized" at the appearance of this "white blur…silent, ghostlike" (Wright 1940, 52). The colour

symbolism here is revealing because while it connotes innocence and purity, it also connotes death, depending on the interpretive context that one chooses. He is paralysed as she approaches, "intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. His muscles [flex] taut as steel" to the point of pain (Wright 1940, 53). If one considers the impact that, from the realm of mythology, Medusa has on the physical body, the instant paralysis comes after a sensation of terror and before the viewer turns to stone. Here, the comparison is not to stone but to steel and paralysis. Mrs. Dalton's appearance torments Bigger because he antipipates her reaction, and of course the presumption of wrongoing. This adds to Bigger's urgency because he believes that "if Mary [speaks], [Mrs. Dalton] would come to the side of the bed and discover him" (Wright 1940, 52). Bigger understands that Mrs. Dalton is physically blind, but he is also aware of what Ralph Ellison (1952) described as "the inner eyes, those eyes with which [members of the majority white culture] look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3-4). It is these inner eyes that bring race into the conversation, and it is the additional terror that the Medusa-like figure of Mrs. Dalton brings that resonates with gender theory. Wallace (2003) argues that it is Mrs. Dalton's gaze that places Bigger under "arrest" long before the authorities detain him. He also argues that Mrs. Dalton may have had the practice of visiting her daughter's room as habit, but in this instance, the visit is "an inescapable indictment against black men as consummate sexual outlaws" (75). It is interesting, then, that it is an "hysterical terror" (Wright 1940, 52) that seizes Bigger at this point. The terms "hysterical" and "hysteria" refer to an ailment that afflicted women, going all the way back to ancient Greece and Egypt. It appeared in medical journals in the late nineteenth century and referred to an eponymous spectrum of problems that ranged from simple ennui to postpartum depression to insanity – and which was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 (McVean 2017). There can be no mistake that Wright chooses to use this word here to invert the gender roles, with Bigger perceived as being emasculated by the severity of the risk that he faces now that Mrs. Dalton has paralyzed him with her movement.

This interpretation of Mrs. Dalton's significance for Bigger renders the terror he feels when sensing her presence equivalent to the effect that the gaze of his mother has on him early in the novel. She glares at his back and looks at him with cold eyes before telling him, "Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life"

(Wright 1940, 17). When she asks herself why she had ever given birth to him, one can view this as the expression of a central trauma that plays itself out again in his mind, at least at the unconscious level. When Mrs. Dalton enters the room, consciously or unconsciously suspecting the presence of the young black man is in there with her daughter, the impact is the same to Bigger.

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK BOY

3.1. Critical Race Theory and Double-Consciousness in Wright's Memoir

As we shift from *Native Son* to *Bright Boy*, we also shift from fiction to memoir, as Wright dispenses here with the relative abstractions of literature, allowing his own experiences to issue forth from the work. As Albert Vogel (1966) notes, this work makes it "clear that Negro education can be divided into three parts: (1) the education that comes from poverty, regardless of race, (2) formal education, and (3) education for being a Negro in American society" (195). In his argument, Vogel (1966) focuses primarily on the third, arguing that "the poverty of the black man results as much from his race and from the social role assigned to him by the whites, as from the incongruities of modern society" (195). Growing up in the South without a father around, Wright really only had one path out of the cycle of crushing generational poverty at that time, which was to leave the environment into which he was born and head to a mysterious region, the "North," that offered little in the way of specifics. Regarding his father, Wright (1940) said that he "was a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and hope" (28) before abandoning the family. If one looks at the paradox that this sets up – a man who *endures* while remaining *indestructible* with neither *regrets* nor *hope*, then one sees a man who has been taken apart by life on his side of Du Bois' veil. The description reads of a man who has built up insurmountable boundaries around himself, creating a sort of hermetic environment within which he can eke out an existence. However, the seals on that environment do not allow inside the sort of existential oxygen or other nutrients that would allow that man to grow, to take care of others. The poverty in which he and his family live eventually become so crushing that he moves on, leaving his family to suffer even more in his absence.

Vogel (1966) describes this outcome for Wright's father as that of "a man fulfilling the role envisioned for him the white community" (196). In other words, the unending cycle of generational poverty for people growing up under the oppression of life in the black community was a source of stability for the majority white culture,

providing cheap sources of labor who would remain docile and on their own side of Du Bois' veil. Wright took the point of view that formal education would help him escape the future that lay in wait for his father, and many others growing up in their oppressed culture. Wright (1943) writes that he "went to school, feeling that [his] life depended not so much upon learning as upon getting into another world of people" (81). However, the education he received was rudimentary, particularly in terms of what a person planning a future in literature might need. What he found initially, in terms of literature, was a collection of "cheap pulp tales" (Wright 1943, 85) that, despite their crude composition, opened his eyes to a world well beyond the small radius in which he walked. He decided that he wanted to become a writer; however, when he discussed this ambition with others, he received little beyond discouragement. He had the opportunity to publish a story in a newspaper edited by a black man. Ironically, the editor thought that this would help Wright learn how to write, implying, as Vogel (1966) notes, that the editor did not expect the schooling that Wright would have had by that time to have helped him gain any sort of writing ability beyond basic literacy.

Once Wright's story appears, he did not receive adulation but criticism. When Wright was named valedictorian, the principal of Wright's school recognized the possibility of dissidence in Wright's character and gave him a speech that he had written for the occasion. He points out that Wright could not "afford to just say *anything* before those white people," (Wright 1943, 114), as the graduation audience would include both white and black people. Wright gave his own speech, which apparently did not offend anyone in the audience but showed Wright's growing sense of independence, his growing autonomy on his side of the veil.

It is interesting to note that Wright, when contemplating his own life, observes that "[s]omewhere in the dead of the Southern night, [his] life had switched onto the wrong track" (Wright 1943, 110). It would be difficult to argue that the word *wrong* here has a moral connotation. Rather, Wright realized that he had failed to settle into the pigeonhole that the majority white culture – and the leaders in his own culture –had selected for him.

When it comes to double consciousness in the life of black people in the South, Vogel (1966) notes that "[a]s the white boy looks back to the distinguished branches of his family, the Negro looks back to uncles and cousins who have been lynched by

whites" (197). Genealogy is a field of study that people in many different cultures prize, but Vogel's suggestion is that genealogy is a traumatic exercise for many people living under racial oppression. In Wright's experience, there was a definite sense of paradox as white and black people dwelt "side by side and never [touching], it seemed, except in violence" (Wright 1943, 35).

If one goes back to the ways in which race has transcended the physical, as was touched on in the first chapter of the present study, the definition of "black" in Wright's world had little to do with the way a person looked. He mentions that his grandmother could have passed, on a physical basis, for a white person, because of her light skin, but was classified as "black" because of her genealogy. The amalgamation of ironies under the aegis of ensuring ongoing white supremacy leads Wright, while still a young boy, to sense that the "touchstone of fraternity was [his] feeling toward white people, how much hostility [he] held toward them" (Wright 1943, 54). In other words, his degree of antipathy helped him belong with other black boys.

Over time, of course, hatred as a way of life is corrosive, no matter which side of the veil one lives. Racism was and remains corrupting to the ethic of the majority white culture, whether one considers the cowardice of white mayors and pastors donning the white robe and hood of the Klan in Wright's time, or the cowardice of white mayors and pastors donning the red #MAGA hats and cheering the internment camps holding people who are not white and who happen to have been born on the wrong side of an arbitrary political line. For those who are held in this oppression, hatred for the majority white culture becomes "a kind of immutable absolute, static and unchanging…[and] the implications for mental health are also clear, and a personality built upon such patterns cannot help but suffer (Vogel 1966, 197). This should not be taken to suggest that adopting this stance toward the majority white culture is a fully conscious and autonomous decision; the trauma that this stance takes on the psychological and emotional reserves of the oppressed should also be laid at the door of those enabling and condoning the oppression itself.

Even as Wright recognizes the oppression at work in his culture, at the same time he takes on the assumptions at work in the black establishment when he wrote *Black Boy*. He was not alone in his conflicts with respect to the proper amount of dissidence that should take place in the discussion of literature. Ralph Ellison argued that literature

should be evaluated in artistic terms on the basis of its aesthetic contributions rather than on its usefulness in "ideological battle" (Callahan 1995, 182). In counterpoint to this, LeRoi Jones (1965) argued that American black artists had as part of their mandate a responsibility to "aid in the destruction of America as he knows it" (251). When there is turbulence in society, it is difficult to create art without injecting some ideology, and it is difficult to interpret art without inferring ideology.

The present study has already indicated several instances in Wright's memoir that demonstrate the difficulties that Wright experienced in life as the result of racism. However, the case can be made that Wright expresses the beginnings of ideas outside the dual-conscious realm that Du Bois asserted in this memoir. By leaving the South, he attempts to work his way beyond that veil and move beyond essentialist considerations with respect to race relations.

The poststructuralist movement recognized that there is no such thing as a discrete subject, separate from the text. This means that no one approaches a work of writing as a *tabula rasa*; in fact, it increases the definition of *text* to include not just writings but also those who experience those writings. In *S/Z: An Essay*, Roland Barthes (1974) asserted that the person approaching a text "is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to occupy [but is rather]…a plurality of other text, of codes that are infinite or, more precisely, lost" (10). In other words, the reader already has a nexus of semiotic experiences through which a new text will be read, and the process of that engagement will lead to interpretation. The nexus will alter after reading this new text, leaving the reader in a new state when he encounters the next. If one considers how one's interpretation of the same film, book, or other text changes over the course of one's life, then one sees how this nexus changes.

If one views people as, at least in part, constructs of language, then the topic of race becomes additionally illuminating. Michel Foucault claims that the "individual, with his identity, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces" (Crampton & Elden 2007, 180). This suggests the existence of an enforced aesthetic and an enforced set of ideologies that people throughout a social structure are expected to support. From a poststructuralist viewpoint, then, race is not a matter of physiology or biology but is instead an arbitrary

construct established to maintain the dominance of one particular culture. It is no coincidence that the majority white culture has attempted to inculcate an ideology that attempts to turn a social construct into a biological reality. Louis Althusser (2012) defines ideology as a "representation of the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to their *real* conditions of existence" (123, emphasis mine). In other words, the ideology set up by the majority white culture is largely illusory, designed to establish a false connection between people and the world around them. This does not mean that the illusions have not become real; the tragedy is that so many people have taken these imaginary ideas and turned them into very real boundaries separating society. However, it does mean that there is no valid basis for the acceptance of the ideology that turns race from something arbitrary into something meaningful.

One function of *Black Boy* is to help the invisible become visible. Yoshinobu Hakutani (2006) argues that Wright criticizes the black community to "show that a racist system produced the way of life that was forced on black people" (88). One effect of the memoir is to demonstrate ways in which the social structures in place are not organic but instead have been created arbitrarily. Wright offers his critique to demonstrate the actual causes of inequality, and if inequality is to be overcome, it is necessary to move to a society that has transcended the artificial construct of race. This will require an overhaul of the economic and political institutions that serve to reward racist values and behavior.

If one can back away from the traditional definitions of race, one observes that its purpose is not to provide a meaningful connection between physiology and less tangible characteristics. Instead, it provides the majority white culture with justification to point its weapons of violence at subjects that they have determined are outside their culture. Over time, the ways in which this process works have become embedded in history, giving itself a toxic precedent in global culture. Analyzing social structures this way, as Wright suggests we should, allows one to deconstruct what appears true or real down into its component parts, which one can then modify to bring about improvements. Anthony Appiah (1992) made the claim that "there are no races" (45). If one accepts that formulation that race is a pure construct, then society turns into a scramble to set up the proper relations among people to create a workable power structure. This is what made what the United States termed Emancipation and Reconstruction less

fundamentally earthshaking than what one often learns in history classes. The fact that the majority white culture, as represented by Abraham Lincoln, issued a proclamation setting free the slaves at a particular point in 1863, made for resonant political theater. However, it kept the existing power relationship in place, leaving the majority white culture in place to administer the future of the black community in the United States. Instead of fundamentally shifting the relations, as erasing the definitions of race from the law would have done, it kept what Du Bois would term his veil of double consciousness in place but simply altered the legal status of people on the wrong side of it.

Looking at Wright's work through a post-structuralist lens provides additional insight into the way that *Black Boy* brings race to the reader's attention. The critique that Wright brings to the notion of race opens a new avenue for analysis in race theory, the goal being a society in which black and white people collaborate instead of remaining on either side of that veil. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1988) wrote that "the myths of black slaves and ex-slaves embody theories that Ralph Ellison calls the 'complexity' of the Negro's existence in Western culture" (xxv). It is this complexity that emerges at the very end of *Black Boy*. At this point in the memoir, Wright (1943) laments:

> "Well, what had I got out of living in the city? What had I got out of living in the South? What had I got out of living in America? I paced the floor, knowing that all I possessed were words and dim knowledge that my country had shown me no examples of how to live a human life" (240).

These questions demonstrate a self-awareness on Wright's part that he had not only left his antecedents far behind but also distanced himself so far away from them, at least in terms of actual inspiration, that they were no longer his antecedents. What Wright is left with is a desire to destroy dynamic between black and white people that had dominated his life for as long as he could remember.

There is a moment from the narrator's employment at a medical research institute inside a Chicago hospital that is worth noting at this point. One day, a white boy comes up to him as he is about to start his routine, holding a stopwatch. The boy's task is to time the narrator as he cleans a room in order to increase the efficiency of the institute. At the time, the narrator is "[s]tripped to his waist…moving steadily like a machine" (Wright 1943, 195). After timing him in the first room, the boy concludes that he can

clean every room in the same amount of time (17 minutes) and that he should be able to clean all seventeen rooms and five floors of stone stairs during his shift. The narrator notes that he had "never…felt so much the slave as when [he] scoured those stone steps each afternoon" (Wright 1943, 195). It is not the fact that the narrator is expected to work without pay, neither it is the fact that the narrator is subject to cruel physical punishment. Instead, it is the way that the boy acts, as though the narrator is a machine that can be calibrated to undertake a particular task in a particular amount of time. As Basu (2004) notes, the stopwatch serves to "register the changed temporalities of capital accumulation" (240). In other words, the narrator becomes a machine designed to suit the rhythms of the capitalist machine. Basu (2004) refers to the boy standing over the narrator as emblematic of a "scopic element in the vivid, chromatic display of the body as it is adjusted to chronometric time" (241). In other words, the process of the body turning into a mechanical object enacts a heavy toll on the mind and soul inside that body. When the narrator hears the footsteps of white doctors or nurses who would, at some point, make it necessary for him to clean those steps again, he realizes that it is the unthinking ease of white people that feeds his hatred.

The shift in oppression from the nineteenth century specter of the overseer of a crew of slaves to the experience that the narrator has here indicates, for Basu (2004), a "shift in the methods of supervision from 'driving' to timing'" (241). The visible signs of power have become less overt. There is no whip in the hand of the boy; it is hard to argue that a stopwatch can have cruelty inscribed in it to the degree that a whip might. However, the whip suggests that the overseer has to exercise control over a fellow sentient being. The stopwatch indicates that not just the humanity but the very life has been excised from the automaton under the boy's control. Instead, the stopwatch is there to measure the degree to which this newly minted machine will fulfill its requirements. There are plenty of other machines, of course, which would take the narrator's place in a heartbeat if the narrator decided that this job was not for him – or, perhaps more accurately, if the narrator failed to meet the requirements of that stopwatch.

Foucault (1979) asserts that, in Western Europe, society shifted from a focus on punishment toward discipline in the maintenance of order around the late 1700s. However, this shift did not arrive for people under colonial oppression, including African-Americans, until well into the twentieth century. It is true that legal slavery

ended at the end of the Civil War, but the brief period of Reconstruction brought in a new era of punishment called the Jim Crow era. It was not until the Civil Rights movement got underway in the 1960s that black people in the United States also gained a sense of freedom from the culture of punishment. In the aftermath of the two world wars, a movement toward globalization made the political structure that had led to the creation of empires suddenly unwieldy. Similarly, punishment became not just unwieldy but aesthetically displeasing. It became much easier – and much more palatable – to put down the whips of the overseer and take up the stopwatches of the managers. After all, the slave who endures oppression becomes a sympathetic figure, even a hero, through the eyes of literature. This leads to a shift in the balance between the oppressor and the oppressed, as "sadistic desire is displaced by an incipient economy of masochistic desire" (Basu 2004, 243). The people who carry the stopwatches and other measurement devices in service of the oppressive institutions are no longer the caricatures that they appeared in the narratives of the slave experience, or even in the narratives of lynching at the hands of mobs in the Jim Crow era. As Basu (2004) notes, "[t]his density and the dimensions of these characters are, however, increasingly dissipated and replaced by minimally descriptive terms, proper names, collective nouns, and so on. Agency is increasingly dissipated, and we are left only with scenes and images of discipline" (243). The impact is that there is no figure around which the resistance can rally in opposition, such as that Klansman in a hood, or that overseer clutching a whip. Without that figure, the possibility of resistance against an outward other dwindles significantly.

Moving from a regime of punishment to one of discipline entails a shift from the oppressed absorbing violence from the oppressor to the oppressed enacting violence upon himself in ironic complicity with his own oppressors. Early in *Black Boy*, the narrator and his mother visit an orphanage as the two of them seek charity. The orphanage puts the boys to work each day, getting on their knees to "wrench the grass loose from the dirt with [their] fingers" (Wright 1943, 25). After a time, the director, Miss Simon, asks the narrator if he would like to be adopted by her. She takes him inside to give him special privileges, such as an assignment to help her in the office instead of working in the yard, but each time she gives him an instruction, he freezes. When Miss Simon "reache[s] her hand to [his] face and [he twists] away…[she drives him] from the room" (Wright 1943, 26). Eventually, the narrator tries to run away from the orphanage but ends up getting lashed by Miss Simon. A similar progression ensues when Uncle

Clark and Aunt Jody adopt him. He runs afoul of his aunt's ideas about language, and when he curses after spilling a bucket of water, she has his uncle whip him with a strap, and he ends up back with his mother. The use of the lash here could be seen as resorting to a culture of punishment, rather than discipline. However, this needs further consideration. Miss Simon and Aunt Jody both try to bring a sense of order to the narrator's life in the form of discipline in a domestic routine. They both assume the role that the narrator's mother could not because of her paralysis. While the discipline of both of these figures results in physical punishment for the narrator, the fact that the purpose of these consequences is to instill order, instead of the arbitrary punishment of the slave and Jim Crow eras, makes the difference.

As Basu (2004) notes, "[t]he shift from punishment to discipline is a shift from a coercive to a contractual relation" (255). In other words, the fear that overseers and their successors created in the slavery and Jim Crow eras is no longer the primary purpose of their actions. Instead of using brute force, the figures of Miss Simon and Aunt Jody attempt to instill a sense of contractual obligation between the narrator and themselves, their aesthetics and ethics.

The conscious choice that the narrator in *Black Boy* makes to pursue literacy becomes the choice that brings him pain. While he is growing up, he hears from many that learning to read will not benefit him ethically or morally. The community of the African-American faithful in which he grows up cannot understand his desire for a greater lens through which to see and understand the world. After he moves to the North, one of the jobs that he takes is as a dishwasher, and there comes a time when his boss, who happens to be a white woman, notices him reading and is shocked to the point where she notes, "the colored dishwasher reads the *American Mercury*!" (Wright 1943, 175). Whether it is his grandmother or his boss looking down on him a reader, one sees that the choice for a black man, at that time, to enter the world of letters and ideas is the choice to take on a "mark of exteriority" (Basu 2004, 257). It is this mark of exteriority that the narrator, and Richard Wright, retain to the last.

3.2. Gender in *Black Boy*

There is a point in *Black Boy* when the narrator steps away from the narrative and speaks as the author as well, coming after a particularly awful experience while working at a whites-only hotel as a busboy. He observes that:

> "not race alone, not color alone, but the daily values that give meaning to life stood between me and those white girls with whom I worked. Their constant outward-looking…made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it impossible for them to learn a language which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others' hearts" (Wright 1943, 175).

This is an example of Wright criticizing the vacuous nature of American culture, essentially founded on hollowness. Here, it is white women that Wright uses as the target of his critique. One could argue that there is sexism is this approach that is mirrored in other areas of Wright's critique.

The memoir begins with Wright's description of his grandmother and mother as intimidating and aloof. He remembers his mother repeatedly telling him "to keep still, warning [him] that [he] must make no noise" (Wright 1943, 10). At the same time, he wants to run around and make noise, but "the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face…made [him] afraid" (Wright 1943, 10). One could view this as a statement that it was the women who were in charge of him who were the first to keep him from reaching his full creative potential. The image that Richard forms of himself in his early years stems from these two women along with Aunt Addie, who comes to help out when Richard's mother develops an illness and inflicts traumatic levels of abuse on Richard. Specifically, she hits him when he is still a child and leaves him afraid to speak in public.

Richard's problematic relationship with women also emerges when he comes to Chicago. He finds a room to rent with the Ross family. Bessie, the daughter, is seventeen years old and falls in love with Richard right when they meet. He is not impressed by the fact that she has not moved beyond elementary school in terms of her reading level. He is not sure how he feels about her, with his responses running the gamut from lust to scorn. He asks, "What could I do with a girl like this?...Could I ever talk to her about what I felt, hoped? Could she ever understand my life?" (Wright 1943, 140). At this

point, it seems that the narrator is ready to disengage from her. However, he likes part of what she means for him, as she is "warm, eager, childish, pliable," but eventually the narrator "disengage[s his] hand from hers [and looks] at her and [wants] either to laugh or to slap her" (Wright 1943, 141). Richard never stops to consider a black woman as suffering from the same sort of oppression that had held him in place. Instead, he focusses on his own fear, his own impression of the situation.

Later in the memoir, the narrator becomes involved with a poor young woman, but despite the fact that she suffers from the same oppressive system as him, he never views her as suffering with him. He takes a job as an insurance salesman, and he takes advantage of the fact that many attractive black wives would make moral compromises so that they would not have to pay a dime in premiums each week. The narrator engages in a "long, tortured affair with one girl by paying her ten-cent premium each week" (Wright 1943, 184). The narrator's condescension toward this woman is even starker in the next sentence, where Wright notes that this woman "was an illiterate black child with a baby whose father she did not know" (Wright 1943, 184). The words in that sentence drip with scorn, as he refers to her as "illiterate" and as a "child," presumably basing this epithet on the fact that she does not have the same educational background as him. However, the fact that she went through the (apparently) morally dubious process of having a baby with a man whom she does not know, he is not above using her for his own sexual purposes. The fact that she does not receive a name in this story underscores her dehumanization in this entire process.

It is true that the narrator is not the only insurance agent who acts in this way toward the desperate women in their clientele. Other agents would demand that wives perform sexual favors in order to receive claim payouts, and if the women did not provide what the agents wanted, the agents would return to their offices and claim that the women were "malingerers" (Wright 1943, 186). Many of the women would succumb to their own desperate situations. The narrator is never completely forthcoming with respect to his own complicity in this power relationship despite the fact that he works for the same company as these agents.

These two points in the story are the only anecdotes in which the narrator makes any direct account of sexual experiences. Both of the women are, from the narrator's perspective and descriptions, subhuman. In one conversation with the woman that he

was having an affair in exchange for her ten-cent premiums, she tells him that she likes him, and he responds that he could "kill her." When she responds that he is crazy, he replies, "'Maybe I am,'…angry that [he is] sitting beside a human being to whom [he] could not talk" (Wright 1943, 184). The language here is interesting because of the narrator's sense of superiority over women. Throughout the memoir, the narrator participates in a system that keeps the oppression of women quite real, despite Wright's critiques in other writings about the ways in which economic oppression and racial oppression work in concert. The way in which he demonstrates a sort of ethical myopia shows a gap in his own vision about society's flaws.

JanMohamed (1995) claims that one purpose of *Black Boy*, for Wright, is to undo the negation that racism has brought to him as an individual. The purpose of this, JanMohamed argues, is to provide a sense of autonomy and individuality for himself. Part of this has to do with showing the reader the oppressive nature of racism as a structure and arguing that the reader join Wright in resisting that structure. However, this claim runs into difficulty when one encounters the sexism rampant in the story. When the narrator does bother to bring up his mother, it is to describe the ways in which her illness causes problems for him.

The narrator witnesses a brutal attack on a black woman while working at his first job in the South. His boss and the boss's son take a woman into the back of the store and beat her. There is a white policeman observing when they take her inside, but he does not intervene. When she emerges from the store, "bleeding, crying, holding her stomach, her clothing torn," the response of the police officer is to accuse her of intoxication and to arrest her. When the narrator walks inside, he observes that the floor is "bloody, strewn with wisps of hair and clothing," and the boss says, "'Boy, that's what we do to niggers when they don't pay their bills'" (Wright 1943, 117).

The problem with the claim that JanMohamed (1995) makes –that one of the purposes of *Black Boy* is to reassert the humanity of black people as set against the inherent oppression of racism – is that he overlooks the distance the narrator creates between himself and the women he encounters. JanMohamed (1995) claims that the narrator "soon becomes a victim of casual violence intended to teach him 'his place'" (114). In other words, JanMohamed (1995) interprets the situation much as Wright does – as a threat toward Wright, and not toward anyone else. The fact remains that the

narrator does nothing throughout the entire attack, from the boss and his son dragging the woman inside to her emergence, clearly having been brutalized, to being dragged away by the police. He also has no response to his boss and his son in the aftermath of this incident. The implication is that Wright does not see sexism as oppressive in the same way as racism because of his own experiences with women – and his own interpretation of those experiences.

In the previous section, the present study makes references to ways in which the perpetrators of oppression take the form of people carrying out a regime of discipline in order to instill an oppressive framework on the life of the narrator. One instance was the white boy who held a stopwatch to measure the speed with which the narrator cleaned a room, and then to determine how much the narrator should accomplish in a shift – effectively turning him into an efficient machine. Many of the others, though, are women, beginning with his grandmother and continuing to Miss Simon, Aunt Jody, the narrator's boss at the dishwashing company, and the figure of Alma Zetkin, who dismisses him from the Negro Communist party in the North.

The relationship between the narrator and the women in his life is necessarily complex. If the relationship between Richard Wright and the women who helped form his personality had been more benign, it is unlikely that, as in the previous chapter, there would emerge such issues with the mother relationship in the world of Bigger. In the world of *Black Boy*, there is a significant amount of difficulty that the narrator experiences when negotiating the world around him, particularly in terms of finding his place as an autonomous individual. The fact that his father played such a negligible role in his life means that women played an unusually formative role. The paralysis of his mother led to others taking up that role in her stead, and having outsiders take on that role contributed to the trauma that he faced and had to deal with alone. It is clear that much of the resentment that he appears to have formed toward women takes as its basis the lack of empathy that he found in the situations that arose around him.

CHAPTER FOUR

EAST OF ACRE LANE

4.1. Alex Wheatle, the Brixton Riots and YA Literature

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Alex Wheatle describes how he became politically active as a result of the 1981 Brixton riots (Khaleeli 2016). At the time, Brixton was a part of South London that was rife with socioeconomic difficulty. In particular, the African-Caribbean part of the population had a disproportionately high rate of unemployment and crime and a disproportionately poor quality when it came to access to housing (Kettle & Hodges 1982). The riots were sparked when a house party resulted in a fatal fire. The exact cause of the fire remained a controversy, as authorities reported the fire was likely accidental and came from the inside of the house, while many in the community thought that the fire had been the result of a racist act of arson. Many in the community thought that the police had not investigated the situation sufficiently, and the result was a Black People's Day of Action, on March 2, 1981 (Cornish 2011). The march wound 17 miles through London, going past the Houses of Parliament and ending in Hyde Park. For the most part, the march was peaceful, but conflict broke out between marchers and police along the way. According to Les Back (2007), there was a disparity between the coverage that the local and national media outlets gave to the march. He wrote that "[w]hile the local press reported the march respectfully, the national papers unloaded the full weight of racial stereotyping" (7).

Tensions between the African-Caribbean community and the police in Brixton boiled over on April 10 and 11, 1981. A black young man named Michael Bailey was running from three other young black men, and a constable attempted to intervene. It transpired that Bailey had suffered a deep stab wound. The police constable attempted to help him (Waddington 1992). The constable followed him into an apartment and attempted to help him by taking him to a hospital. A crowd grew in the area, and as the police moved Bailey into a minicab and then into a police car, some of the crowd started to yell for Bailey to be released, believing that Bailey was under arrest. The crowd grew to the point where they were able to take Bailey back out of the police car, and Bailey died as a result of his injuries. Rumors from the area began to spread that the police had left Bailey to die or had just watched him lying in the street, leading to conflict between

more than 200 young people and the police. The end result was an increase in foot patrols by the police and the decision to upgrade what had been known as "Operation Swamp 81," which was a plan to increase uniformed foot patrols and to add plainclothes officers to the area (Kettle & Hodges 1982).

The following day on April 1, tensions grew even higher in the area. Two police officers searched a cab in the Brixton neighborhood around 4:00 P.M., and the surrounding area filled with a mob throwing bricks at police cars. In the melee, 46 police officers were injured, and looting took place in shops throughout the area, starting a couple hours after the initial search. A police van was set on fire; when the fire brigade attempted to put out the fire, they were also attacked with a hail of bottles and rocks. It took until the early hours of April 12 for the riot to subside, with as many as 2,500 police officers flooding the area (Kettle & Hodges, 1982).

Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister of England at the time, was dismissive of the idea that racism and socioeconomic problems had contributed to the rioting in Brixton. This position is not justified by statistics showing overall unemployment at 13 percent in Brixton, but at 25.4 percent for members of ethnic minorities. Among black young men, unemployment was estimated at 55 percent (Kettle & Hodges, 1982). Lord Scarman led a public inquiry into the Brixton riots, and his conclusion was that a variety of economic, political and social elements had laid the foundation for the events that took place. He also found that the police were using their "stop and search" powers with disproportionate focus on blacks people (Scarman 1981).

Wheatle dramatized these 1981 riots in his novel *East of Acre Lane*. His first two novels, also set in Brixton, were written with an adult evidence in mind, but he shifted toward the YA (young adult) literary genre with *East of Acre Lane*. He had received a Member of the British Empire for services to literature in 2008, but recognition in the literary world did not follow, as he only received one invitation to a literary festival in fourteen years (Khaleeli 2016). He had come to feel as though he were "this token black writer who writes about ghetto stuff" (Khaleeli 2016, n.p.), believing that "working-class characters are increasingly thin on the ground, while the handful of black writers who are feted often explore sweeping tales of immigrant experience, rather than domestic tales rooted firmly in one place and time" (Khaleeli 2016, n.p.).

Wheatle also takes some umbrage in the interpretation of the language that he uses in his novels. For example, he writes in his adult novels using vernacular language that clearly reflects the way that people in Brixton talk, particularly in *Brixton Rock*, but in *Island Songs*, the writing involves the use of Jamaican patois, the writing requires significantly different rhythms. However, the critical responses to those works do not appear to reflect an awareness of the difficulty involved in constructing that sort of language. When Wheatle encounters critical responses to his work, he believes that "'being a black male is something to do with not being taken seriously…[and since he] didn't go to university or on a fancy writers' course…the respect is grudging'" (Khaleeli 2016, n.p.).

There are some parallels between the experiences of Wright and Wheatle at this point, but there are also some points of disparity. Wright prided himself on his unrelenting pursuit of education, even in the face of opposition from his community, while Wheatle prides himself on the hard work he has put in to becoming a writer without pursuing the formal education which, in contemporary times, is often seen as a gate through which one must pass to be taken seriously. Wheatle takes some umbrage when he reads critical responses to white writers who have gone down similar avenues with respect to writing in dialect. In his interview with *The Guardian*, Wheatle points out ways in which *Pigeon English*, a novel by Stephen Kelman, was on the shortlist for the Booker Prize in 2011 and was adapted into a play. Wheatle takes the belief that "the merit of [white writers'] work [when creating black characters] is almost always elevated over black writers who have been writing in the same genre. It's a form of white privilege'" (Khaleeli 2016, n.p.).

Wheatle joins Wright in the claim that white privilege informs areas of life that bring oppression to them. Moving to the YA genre has brought him more opportunities, such as writing a series for the BBC about the history of the black community within England, alongside movie director Steve McQueen. However, it is worth noting that it took a shift to a genre often viewed as more based on narration and less based on literary artistry for him to gain that visibility.

When it comes to background, Wheatle also has some commonalities with Wright. Wright's father left when Wright was a young boy, and his mother suffered from a series of maladies that left her either angry, or unable to care for him, or both. Wheatle

went through a similar series of difficult transitions, although the gender roles were reversed. Wheatle's mother came to the United Kingdom already married and with four children. However, in Brixton she had an affair with a Jamaican teacher, and the two of them fell in love. Wheatle was the offspring of this affair; after his birth, Wheatle's mother went back home, and his father had a difficult time subsisting as a single father. Wheatle went to live at the children's home village in Shirley Oaks, the largest such facility for children in the United Kingdom at that time (Khaleeli 2016). Much like the experiences that Wright found in his early life, such as physical and emotional abuse at the hands of people who cared for him, Wheatle found himself hit with such objects as pokers. A doctor at the facility sexual assaulted him, and if he forgot to refer to orderlies as "aunt" or "uncle," the punishment was being stripped, put in a bathtub and having soap forced into one's mouth" (Khaleeli 2016). Wheatle's experience was to feel that "[t]o be told your parent left you, like you're a bag of rubbish – you believe it. It affects your whole way of seeing the world. You think you are totally worthless" (Khaleeli 2016, n.p.).

Whereas Wright managed to move into positions of employment and avoided trouble with the law, Wheatle dropped out of school and started a life of crime. He took part in the Brixton riots and ended up going to prison for four months as a result. His cellmate was the first person to see any degree of promise in him, encouraging him to dig into his heritage as a Caribbean – and one of the authors Wheatle plumbed was Richard Wright (Khaleeli 2016). Many of the elements at work in Wright's work make appearances in Wheatle's as well.

4.2. Critical Race Theory and Double-Consciousness in *East of Acre Lane*

Wheatle draws from anecdotal accounts from his friends in the construction of *East of Acre Lane*, along with information from the Scarman Report (Bentley et al, 2018). One element of the composition of the novel that makes it intriguing through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness is that the novel accomplishes two tasks simultaneously: bringing to life a significant historical event for the African-Caribbean community in the United Kingdom, while also writing a parallel history of that community within Brixton at the same time. This might seem

like there is no small amount of redundancy here, but it is worth noting that the stories of oppressed communities all too often lapse into invisibility when overshadowed by the official accounts of events.

One of the main characters in the novel is Brenton, already recognized as a "real life Brixtonian bad man" (Wheatle 2006, 17). This reputation will only grow over the course of the story, as Brenton, along with Biscuit and others, try to liberate Biscuit's sister, Denise, from a life of prostitution and kill Nunchaks, her pimp and a local drug lord. Another significant character in the novel is Jah Nelson, a Rastafarian. Everton Pryce (1985) notes the important role that Rastafarianism and reggae music have played in bringing together culture, history and style in Wheatle's works, arguing that "[r]eggae music…played the role of linking the style and form of Afro-Jamaican street-culture to the style and form of young Afro-Caribbean blacks in Britain, and, with the Rastafarian movement, gave these same youths an orientation" (37). Nelson tries to provide Biscuit with this sort of cultural connection, to help him "try fe do somet'ing better, and nah get 'imself moulded by de environment where 'im live" (Wheatle 2006, 27). This is why Nelson gives Biscuit an idea of the grand history of Africa, so that he can envision the broader context and backdrop of his life –a life beyond the daily hand-to-mouth existence that faces him, and the need to provide for his family by stealing and dealing drugs following his father's abandonment of the family.

At first, this does not seem successful, as Biscuit gets caught up in a series of incidents that result in the group's showdown with Nunchaks. Late in the story, though, Biscuit has Denise go see Nelson so that she can recuperate from the emotional damage of her abuse (and of seeing Nunchak's death). Nelson tells her that "[e]ducation is de key" (Wheatle 2006, 157). Biscuit serves as an intergenerational figure of transition, taking Nelson's ideas about education and preaching them to the point where his son, Dennis, will complain that it has become a sort of "mantra" for his father (Wheatle 2008, 4). Looking at this through the lens of Critical Race Theory, it is clear that despite Biscuit's words about education, the socioeconomic realities of life in Brixton prevent that ideal from reaching Biscuit's son in time to keep him from committing the sort of crime that had caught him in its grasp.

Wheatle's work follows the trend of other black British writers by keeping *East of Acre Lane* centered in what Paul Gilroy (1999) termed the "post- and neo-colonial

topographies" of London (61). The majority of texts by black British writers that have an urban setting take place in London. Part of this, of course, is due to the fact that the Brixton riots also took place there and informed much of Wheatle's early politicization. Part of it also has to do with the notion that the "city in contemporary capitalist societies provides the key social arenas in which the processes of racialization are manifested" (Cross, Keith & Cross 1993, 29). Within British parlance, language has changed to the point "where the inner city and 'black' have become synonymous" (Kelleher 2005, 241). Indeed, Fatima Kelleher (2005) agrees with Wheatle's own assessment of his critical reception, arguing that his writing, particularly in literary fiction, has been marginalized. Claire Alexander (1996) argues that "[b]lack youth in particular have been typecast into a role of almost pathological dislocation – culturally confused, alienated from both their parents and society at large, and implacably hostile" (5). While there is a great deal of confusion in the lives of Biscuit and his friends, the assertion that they bear a mien that is "implacably hostile" hearkens back to the idea of the veil that Du Bois envisioned between the white and black communities. The notion that black people have a sort of hostility that can never be assuaged is more a part of the majority white culture's construction of black perspectives than an accurate representation of those perspectives. Indeed, this representation of black perspectives can almost be viewed as an excuse for the majority white culture not to work toward remedying the inequities in society. Since black people feel a hostility that nothing can assuage, what is the point of moving to improve society? This allows the majority white culture to feel a sort of vindication that is just as false as the implacable hostility that they perceive.

When it comes to the political agenda of moving toward multicultural harmony, there is often a political agenda that does not square with reality. The idea of a postracial society, in which all people live together in harmony, does not appear to square with reality either, no matter how appealing that might seem. The problem with this perspective is that the underlying assumption that a movement toward a postracial way of life means a movement for all of those outside the majority white culture toward the aesthetic mores and ethical norms of the majority. Wheatle's work does not suggest that this sort of shift is possible. Instead, in *East of Acre Lane*, Nelson appears as a character to emphasize the importance of Rastafarianism in Jamaican culture, which is part of Biscuit's background no matter how long he lives in London. That culture informs his personality and is part of his identity, thanks to the antecedents in which he grows up. If

he tears away from those roots, he leaves himself without a foundation in a number of ways, particularly given the lack of welcome that white London has for him.

Instead, Wheatle attempts to create a realistic representation of the world in which Biscuit moves and lives. It is possible to create a system that is equitable while remaining heterogenous. One can have a city that has neighborhood enclaves in which particular cultural groups choose to gather and live, but when the oppression of certain cultural groups forces them to choose as their enclaves the least desirable parts of that city, then an equitable society has not yet been attained. One area of reality that Wheatle attempts to keep authentic is the heterogenous nature of the black experience. Just like there is no one homogenous experience for members of the majority white culture, people in other cultures also have individual stories as well. The idea that the experience of all black people in England is the same is just as condescending as it would be (shifting to an American perspective for a moment) to treat all African-Americans as though their own experience involved the overt cruelty of the slavery era or the Jim Crow years, as that paradigm has been replaced by the more subtle, more technically focused, normalization of oppression in the years since the Civil Rights movement.

One area of Wheatle's own experience that emerges in his works is a sense of abandonment. In *East of Acre Lane*, there is not the direct familial abandonment that happened in Wheatle's own life, but there is the sense of rootlessness in Britain for Biscuit and his friends. They do not feel welcome enough among the majority white culture in London to feel like they have found a new homeland, but they also do not feel like living according to all of their cultural mores, as that would keep them from a sense of belonging.

The imagery of the description of Brixton gives the sense that the colonial era never really came to an end but instead found outposts inside England instead of around the globe. Poverty, of course, is nothing new to London (or any other major city). Indeed, the writings of Charles Dickens offer an evocative portrayal of the outrages foisted upon the poor in such works as *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, leading to massive changes in the nineteenth century in terms of public policy. However, what one does see is the ghettoization of the poor within London, as the African-Caribbean community has a radius of activity that is quite small. Within *East of Acre Lane*, the central characters do not foray much beyond the few city blocks that comprise Brixton. Biscuit sells

marijuana on what is called the "front line" in Brixton. As James Procter (2003) notes, this "front line" converts "a passage into a border [and t]raveling space becomes an embattled frontier in need of defence from 'outsiders': the police" (78). The concept of such a neighborhood with such strict borders runs afoul of the neoliberal notion of the postracial society. However, all it takes is a visit to the neighborhoods of Brixton, as they appear in *East of Acre Lane*, to see that these borders are quite real.

The idea of a very real border comes out in the lyrics of Yardman Irie, as he holds forth at a party early in the novel. He opines, "De shitstem is bringing us down to our knees / But de politician dem nah listen to our pleas / Me seh life inna Brixton nah easy / Me seh life inna Brixton nah easy / Me don't know why we lef from de Caribbean sea" (Wheatle 2001, 10). Yardman Irie is dressed in army greens as he delivers this diatribe against what he calls the "shitstem." The combination of his rhetoric and his attire suggests a combination of hostility and helplessness; it seems obvious that Yardman Irie does not believe that there is any way for his grievances to be addressed in a meaningful way. As was addressed earlier in this chapter, this should not be taken to mean that the hostility in the thinking of many people outside the majority white culture is inexorable. What it means, though, is that there are many obstacles to be cleared before the concerns of the oppressed will be eased and society will have moved to an egalitarian basis.

In the aftermath of the riots, at another party in Brixton, Yardman Irie holds forth again, and there is a change in tone: "We cyan't tek no more of dis suffering / So we gwarn riot inna Brixton an' inna Sout'all / We gwarn riot inna Parliament an' inna White'all / You better sen' fe de army an' de 'ome guard / Cos we gwarn mash up an' burn down New Scotland Yard" (Wheatle 2001, 143). There are two changes worth noting here: the suggestive militancy symbolized in Yardman Irie's attire at the first party, and the optimism about the possibility of progress. One might draw a sense of alarm from the promise of rioting at all of the institutions of power in London, but what this is really represents is a call for progress. Later in this song, Yardman Irie says, "So listen Maggie T'atcher an' William Whitelaw / You better do somet'ing fe de needy an' de poor / Fe de ghetto sufferer you don't open any door / If you carry on dat way den we declare WAR" (Wheatle 2001, 143). What Yardman Irie is calling for is no different than what Charles Dickens had called for through his various portrayals of the poor in

England in the early nineteenth century. In his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which takes a look at the social conditions that led up to the French Revolution, Dickens' narrator describes a scene in which a cask of red wine spills onto the street in one of the Parisian suburbs. The denizens of the neighborhood are so hungry that they come out and lap up as much of this wine as they can, in a scene that is eerily grotesque:

> The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a night-cap than in it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees—blood (Dickens 1859, n.p.).

The connections between the wine on the street and imagery of blood are numerous, beginning with the stains on the hands, faces, feet and shoes of those who come to partake of the wine. Those who had consumed more deeply of the wine develop that "tigerish" smear, a description that suggests something of the predator, and there is another writing with the wine on a wall, which the narrator directly compares to blood. There were ways to assuage the concerns of the French poor in the years leading up to the French Revolution; there were ways to ease the fears of the English poor in the early nineteenth century; there are ways to soothe the anger in Brixton and elsewhere in the world where racial oppression remains a problem. Whether the majority white culture has the will to bring those ways into being remains to be seen, of course.

The complex interaction between economic fairness and oppression on the basis of race is another point of resonance between the works of Wright and Wheatle. When Jah Nelson says, "Der is nuff talk of ism, schism an' racism…But de main t'ing you affe worry yourself is wid de classism" (Wheatle 2001, 220), one could argue –and through the lens of Critical Race Theory –that this is a tacit normalization of racism by simply blaming the economic system for inequalities. Biscuit and his friends grow up in a context that is poor, in an isolated neighborhood separate from the majority white culture. They do have a dearth of economic opportunities, which is a situation that he and his friends cannot address on their own. They do, however, have the chance to

embrace Rastafarianism and take a more sanguine view of their own capabilities. Jah Nelson seems clearly based on Wheatle's cellmate, also named Nelson, who introduced Wheatle to Rastafarianism and helped Wheatle find his own gifts as a writer – after helping Wheatle see the potential that lay within him.

Paul Gilroy (1996) once bemoaned the "real surprise generated by the belated discovery that blacks could be ordinary" (59) and the amount of "work there is still to do in demystifying racial differences and reconfiguring Britishness" (59). One element of *East of Acre Lane* that is instructive when examined through Critical Race Theory and Double-Consciousness is the sheer ease that readers from all cultural backgrounds have when reading about Biscuit and his friends. In the outside world, if members of the majority white culture ran into people who looked and talked like Biscuit and his friends, they might well turn around or avoid contact, but in the book, they come across as "normal" people. If one looks at this through Critical Race Theory, it becomes clear how readily people in the majority white culture have adopted the idea that not only are black people different from them, but that the difference represents a degree of danger. This false image of black people is thrown up on the veil that separates the white world from the black world, and people on the white side of the veil look up at that image, making actual progress at tearing down that veil even more difficult.

What one infers from reading about Biscuit and his friends is that they actually have much more in common with people in the majority white culture, with respect to stated ethical values, than people on the white side of the veil might be led to believe. There is an ethical difference between the way that Biscuit operates and the way that Nunchaks, and the other actual gangsters, operate. This distinguishes people who engage in crime in order to survive because there are no other alternatives from those who resorted to crime as a serious enterprise in order to amass serious wealth. However, for those on the other side of the veil, the hustlers and the serious criminals are lumped together; when they happen to share a common color, that makes their amalgamation into one group even easier. Over the course of the story, Biscuit changes sides, initially working for Nunchaks but eventually working against him. This shift is a clear statement of the actual differences in a community that, to the outside, appears homogenous.

Biscuit ends up deciding to attend university while he is recovering from his injuries near the end of the story, pursuing the Rastafarian priority of self-improvement

through education. This expresses the view that black Britons are individuals, not members of a homogenous class that suffers, and will always suffer, from racism. In *East of Acre Lane*, Wheatle tells the story of a family struggling in living conditions that are Third World in their quality, even in the midst of one of the wealthiest First World cities. The children in the stories are vulnerable in ways that children in other parts of London are not, and the future is bleak for many of the teenagers in the stories. Wheatle, much like Wright, is less likely to blame race alone for this predicament but instead goes on to name economic forces as part of the difficulty.

One character worth discussing is Coffin Head, one of Biscuit's friends. He wants to avoid getting drawn into the chaos associated with working for Nunchaks, but he has no real prospects for himself as of yet. Because of that lack of prospects (and a lack of money for new clothes), he agrees to sell cannabis for Nunchaks on the Front Line. The police arrest him and ask him to turn into an informer on the drug network in Brixton. He declines, and the police respond by beating him up and telling him they will keep bothering him until he decides to inform anyway (Wheatle 2001). After his release, Coffin Head finds himself trailed by officers and has a difficult time sleeping at night, and in his fear (and desire for revenge against the police) he decides to purchase a gun. When the Brixton riots break out, he has the opportunity to gain his revenge by shooting a police officer, but he decides not to. He also has an opportunity to shoot Nunchaks near the end of the story. The differences in decision-making among the young black men in this story highlight the false nature of that image that the majority white culture has devised for their veil: the inexorably angry thug holding a gun.

Instead of that thug, Wheatle shows us a wide variety of characters on the other side of Du Bois' veil. It is problematic, though, that Wheatle's works often are relegated to the "Black Interest" section of bookstores, instead of being sold and marketed in the general fiction or literature sections. Alan Sinfield (2004) has some insight into this, noting that "[l]iterature is an institutional arrangement we have made to dignify some writing (at the expense of others)" (31). One can look at just about any period of literature and ask why some writers made it into the canon while others did not. For example, Willkie Collins was an early writer of mystery novels in the nineteenth century, but Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes emerged as much more memorable detectives from that time period than Collins' characters. Reading the works side by side does not reveal why Poe and Conan

Doyle's detectives have such a wider readership in our own time than Collins'. Sinfield (2004) also notes that "[w]e select and assemble 'art' to suit current needs," (31) which may explain the selection and product placement decisions more succinctly. There are visions of a postracial world that fit more ideologically with the needs of the neoliberal institutions. As previously outlined, those generally take the form of successful immigrant narratives or stories from the nineteenth- or early twentieth century, as opposed to stories of families attempting to make their way in the here and now when racism has allegedly been excised from the world and the only difficult transitions ostensibly involve moving from one place to another.

Diran Adebayo has another explanation for the sidelining of perspectives of authors such as Wheatle. She argues that "[b]lack English literature is often about themes to do with slavery and racism because they are issues where white people were involved as well" (Alberge 2005, n.p.). In other words, white people would have to be interested in stories to receive mass distribution. This might sound counterintuitive until one remembers that, from the perspective of the majority white culture through the neoliberal lens, society has reached a postracial point of stasis, and so literature should be engaging to everyone – that is, as long as "everyone" includes white culture, toward which members of other cultures are expected to adhere now that all of those barriers have been removed. Adebayo goes on to claim that "[t]he type of black writing that publishers are interested in is often more about white fears, white issues, white hopes, assuaging white guilt" (Alberge 2005, n.p.). In others, if black writers do not incorporate white people, or at least white expectations, in their stories, then their work will be considered problematic. This is a clear sign of the normalization of racism, as even now the feelings and perspectives of the majority white culture remain barriers for writers of color to overcome should they want their work to receive widespread publication.

This levels a critique at the philosophical attention span of the majority white culture. Caryl Phillips has expressed frustration with the expectation from the publishing community that a writer "redress the historical balance in one book" (Jaggi 2000, 179). Phillips goes on to note that "[n]ovels are not social engineering. They reflect the larger picture, but they're not the whole picture. They never can be" (Jaggi 2000, 179). There are books that attempt to bring some restoration in one volume, but those novels end up lapsing into polemic, in which the ratio of rhetoric to story is so high that it almost robs the story of its power. One could well ask, of course, if it is possible to write a novel that

is completely devoid of political content. After all, the events that take place in stories come from inspiration in the mind of the author, and often those sources of inspiration come from personal experiences that had political antecedents.

The idea that a novel that has a black main character must be political, suggests that one of the fundamental assumptions of Critical Race Theory – the normatization of racism as an assumption in wider society – remains true. If a book comes out with no reliance on the majority white culture in any of its events or themes, and it cannot find publication as a result, then this suggests that the society in which the book emerges remains stuck in the normativity of the majority white culture, no matter how fervently it may claim to have achieved a sort of postracial harmony.

The events that took place in Brixton and which inform the writing of *East of Acre Lane* cannot (and should not) be expunged from the history of England. Instead of ignoring or overlooking those events, it is important to remain cognizant of the progress that is needed for the black community in Brixton (and elsewhere in England, and indeed the world) to approach a status resembling equality and acceptance. Those two words do not include the idea of assimilation, because that suggests that the majority white culture is one that should take all other cultures under the umbrella of its aesthetic and ethical assumptions. Instead, these two words suggest a need for greater tolerance and acceptance of aesthetic and ethical choices that come from other cultural antecedents and have their own worth and value, even if they differ from what the majority white culture accepts.

4.3. Masculine Gender Theory in *East of Acre Lane*

Growing up as a young man in the 1970s and 1980s meant that adolescents moved from one cultural norm to the next in just a few years – or perhaps even just a few months. As Stephen Ross (2018) notes, “the 1980s sought to outdo the 1970s by charting new ground in how youth-cultural energies were dispersed, re-energized, adapted and countermanded” (n.p.). This is not a trend that Ross (2018) limits to any one cultural group; instead, it was a phenomenon that impacted the lives of everyone trying to develop a personal sense of autonomy. Finding personal identity has always been the central crisis of the adolescent years. As Ross (2018) also points out, such “perennial problems of masculinity [as] sex and sexuality, gender, class, economics,

ethnicity, history and…generational tensions" (n.p.) are also issues that young people must work through.

Biscuit and his friends are growing up in a difficult time in establishing an autonomous sense of identity –something that their peers in more privileged parts of London did not have to negotiate. The vast majority of adolescents outside such enclaves as Brixton do not have to support their families in the way that Biscuit does, and so they do not face the hard choice as to whether or not they should enter a life of at least petty crime. As Ross (2018) points out, Biscuit and his friends are "young black men who have no choice in where they live, lack fathers" (n.p.). Within Biscuit's own home, his mother has had three children with three men and has been left to fend for herself with all of them, raising them alone. Biscuit's encounters with men include harassment by the London police and danger from such gangsters as Nunchaks.

While Wheatle does not engage in the same sort of rhetoric with respect to these problems that Wright does in both *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, he does let the story speak for itself. The battle for personal survival in the novel is also a battle of masculinity. One of the central conflicts in the book is the fight to set oneself up as a man that others should leave alone. This cycle reaches a particularly dramatic point when Nunchaks and his fellow gangsters threaten to throw Biscuit off the roof of a building if he continues to refuse to returnsome things he took from Flynn's sister-in-law's place, for example. The cycle of destructive masculinity in Brixton can lead to death, of course, but it can also lead to status as an alpha male in the community. Brenton has already reached this status when the story of *East of Acre Lane* gets underway. The other way out for young men –that is, the less destructive path –is the one that Jah Nelson offers, following the Rastafarian emphasis on the pursuit of education and self-improvement, while resisting the temptation to elevate one's own standing at the expense of those around them.

If one looks at the Rastafarian culture that Wheatle brings into *East of Acre Lane*, one sees an interesting significance in the infusion of reggae music. As Dick Hebdige (1993) notes, reggae is "transmogrified American 'soul' music, with an overlay of salvaged African rhythms and an undercurrent of pure Jamaican rebellion" (118). In the time and place in which *East of Acre Lane* takes place, there are multiple youth cultures interacting with one another, and Wheatle "thinks *about* and *with* these overlapping youth cultures, focusing in particular upon the two poles of soul and reggae" (Ross 2018,

n.p.). For Wheatle, a binary system emerges, as soul and reggae gain associations with other important ideas. As Ross (2018) argues,

> "[i]n this system, soul is aligned with sex, the personal various forms of emasculation, and a perverse or abortive futurity. By contrast, reggae is associated with politics, the public, masculine assertion and the past" (n.p.).

Finding ways to bridge the gap between those two sets of ideas, those two types of music, is one of the journeys that Biscuit must negotiate over the course of the story, otherwise, he will not attain an autonomous and clear sense of self.

It is at this point that Jah Nelson becomes a crucial character for those examining the novel through the lens of Masculine Gender Theory. Developing a clear sense of one's identity as a man is a necessary element in the formation of a complete adult identity. The legacy of slavery and colonialism has complicated much of the original cultural context for the African-Caribbean community in Brixton. Jah Nelson injects elements of Rastafarian wisdom into the lives of Biscuit and his friends, constantly pushing the ideal of education and self-improvement on these young men who are growing up in a culture that, from all other directions, teaches them that self-actualization as a man comes through the gratification of short-term impulses.

Feeling a sense of control over one's life as an individual is an important step toward self-actualization for young men, and one area of life that the young men in Brixton can control is the clothing that they wear. The tension between soul and reggae (and the tension between those two sets of ideas) emerges in the fashion choices that the young men in the story make when they dress themselves for a night on the town. By the time Biscuit, recovering from his wounds, decides that he will attend university after all and find a way through life that requires more delayed gratification and discipline, he has traveled through a number of different emotional, mental and psychological permutations on his journey toward becoming his own man.

CHAPTER FIVE

LICCLE BIT

5.1. Alex Wheatle, the YA Genre, and the Language of *Liccle Bit*

When Alex Wheatle sat down to write his first YA novel, *Liccle Bit* (the first novel in the Crongton series), he took a great deal of inspiration from the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. In an article for *The Guardian*, Wheatle details his initial reluctance to read Tolkien (because of the size of the novels) but then changed his mind once he realized that the two writers had a common birthday (Wheatle 2016). Once Wheatle encountered the actual text, he:

> "…wasn't only stunned by the vastness of imagination, the never-ending cast of characters and the rich, intricate description of a different world [but also] was mesmerized by Tolkien's inventiveness of language [because h]e created new words, new phrases and indeed, two or three different languages" (Wheatle 2016, n.p.).

In the present study, the ways in which Wheatle creates authentic dialogue for his characters in *East of Acre Lane* was discussed previously. Wheatle (2016) decided, when he was going to write *Liccle Bit* and its sequel, *Crongton Knights*, that he "needed to leap out of [his] South London comfort zone and like Tolkien, stretch and bend the English language" (n.p.). In *East of Acre Lane*, Wheatle brings in elements of reggae and Rastafarian culture, through the use of lyrics and the wisdom of Jah Nelson. In *Liccle Bit*, he goes further, bringing to the vernacular of South London a combination of old school reggae, Jamaican dance hall, and American hip hop music. The result is a concoction of dialogue that is unique, as much a new creation as the language of the Elves in the *Lord of the Rings* cycle.

With respect to the story of *Liccle Bit*, there are a lot of similarities to the plot of *East of Acre Lane*. The town in which the story takes place, Crongton, is a fictitious one, which makes the story different from Wheatle's novel inspired by the Brixton riots in 1981. "Liccle Bit" is the name that people in the neighborhood have given to Lemar, because he is the second shortest young man in his grade at school. He has two friends, Jonah and McKay, who are constantly telling him that he will never get anywhere with

girls, primarily because of his diminutive height, but that does not stop him from forming a crush on Venetia King. Within his family life, Liccle Bit lives with his mother, who experiences constant harassment (as well as economic issues that arise when the father runs out). His sister has gotten trapped in the same cycle, a single mother on her own. Liccle Bit is caught in the trap that strikes many adolescent males at this point, a desire to make life better for himself and his family but with no clear path to achieve it. Venetia actually starts paying attention to Liccle Bit, and he thinks that he might actually have a chance. At just the wrong time, though, a gang war explodes in Crongton, and the leader of South Crongton's biggest gang has placed his eye on Liccle Bit, who starts running errands. Once someone gets killed in his public housing project, though, Liccle Bit has to decide whether he wants to stay on the path he has chosen or make a different decision for his life.

The plot, then, has much in common with that of *East of Acre Lane*. Biscuit has to negotiate many of the same choices that Liccle Bit faces in this story. However, the world of YA literature could certainly benefit from more stories like this that bring authenticity. It is a genre that had relied to some degree on tales of grit from such white authors as the sports journalist Robert Lipsyte, who provided tales of urban characters struggling to make their way. Authors of color struggled to break into wider publishing, and most authors writing YA have been "obsessed with vampires, dystopian visions or mawkishly sentimental stories" (Tucker 2015, n.p.).

The path of the YA genre has been an intriguing one, and one that authors a generation or two ago may not have expected. One of the first dystopian novels was Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, a winding tale about a global pandemic that ends up leaving one man alone in the world, the rest of the planet's population having died from the disease. This novel has not proven nearly as popular as her work *Frankenstein*. The advent of technology, with its simultaneous promise and peril, made dystopia much more accessible to the imagination of writers, beginning with the science fiction visions of H.G. Wells, and then continuing into the dystopian visions of such writers as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Ray Bradbury. The first half of the twentieth century featured one of the greatest compressions of mass killing in the entire span of human civilization, thanks to the expansion of technologies that could bring destruction on such an awful scale. It is chilling to contemplate how battles of the Spanish-American War,

fought in 1898, were conducted on horseback, between soldiers carrying rifles, but battles just two decades later, in World War I, featured projectile bombs, hand grenades, rockets, and mustard gas. Barely three decades later, humanity constructed the sort of atomic weaponry capable of causing global destruction. Of course, this technology also brought with it significant potential. The ingredients in mustard gas also played a role in the development of chemotherapy treatments, which have extended the lives of countless cancer patients. The technology that went into the atomic bomb has also been used to create electricity without using any fossil fuels or creating any of the greenhouse gases that lead to global warming. However, the downside of the encroachment of technology led to the appearance of dystopia as a literary genre.

Dystopia emerged as a popular genre for young people. Such works as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* have long captivated the reading interest of adolescents. The *Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins, was a blockbuster in the YA genre, and in the wake of that trilogy came the *Divergent* and *Maze Runner* series, which also found tremendous success. Some view the popularity of dystopian fiction among adolescent readers as a sign that "books set in either chaotic or strictly controlled societies mirror a teenager's life; at school, at home, with their peers and in the wider world" (Young 2011, n.p.). However, another theory, and one that brings us closer to understanding the resonance of such works as *Liccle Bit*, suggests that dystopian novels actually take the reader back into the world of myth and fairy tale. While the stories in dystopian novels are set in the future, they tend to follow much of the epic cycle, beginning with a call to action and the beginning of a quest that takes the protagonist (and often some of the protagonist's friends) along for an adventure into the unknown. The adults in the story generally serve as figures of oppression, while the children serve to bring freedom. Internally, the heroes of the story have a lot in common with their readers. As Young (2011) points out, "[t]hese are no cartoon superheroes. They, like their teen readers, have to deal with recognizable concerns and problems, including friendship, family, betrayal, loss, love, death and sexual awakening" (n.p.).

This brings us to a point of resonance between dystopian fiction and such works as *Liccle Bit*. Lemar has to traverse some difficulties that most readers in his age group would be able to understand. Readers growing up in a neighborhood like Lemar's – and

especially those who, like Lemar, come from a cultural background that has brought them oppression –are more likely to engage with the story. As we begin to consider interpreting the story through our three lenses, remembering this resonance will play a key role.

5.2. Genre and Critical Race Theory

When one thinks of YA as a genre, it sounds at first quite simple to resolve. It occupies the place between children's literature and "adult" literature, although many people outside the adolescent years read and enjoy YA literature. As Leah Phillips (2018) notes, YA as a signifier is "the metonymic moniker of a field comprising literature, media and culture" (48). If one considers the age range between ten and eighteen years, then one sees that this sort of literature finds readers in one of their most formative phases. Kokesh & Sternadori (2015) assert that YA fiction can prove significant in the formation of identity for adolescents. After all, the stories that authors construct suggest "frameworks for living and being" within the real world (Phillips 2018, 47).

However, there is a problem of representation for those outside the majority white culture. If one looks at the best-selling titles between 2006 and 2016 in the YA genre, in the United Kingdom, the main characters were white, cisgender, and heterosexual, without any disabilities (Ramdarshan Bold & Phillips, 2019). There are some exceptions, of course. In the spring of 2019, Angie Thomas' novels *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up* both occupied spots in the top ten of the *New York Times Best Seller List (Young Adult Hardcover)*. Thomas is a woman of color, and both novels feature characters who are people of color. *The Hate U Give* was on the list for 104 calendar weeks, moving into the top slot when the film adaptation was released. So there are exceptions to the rule, but one common truism about exceptions is that they tend to prove the rule.

The question as to the impact of YA genre's lack of diversity on people who are not in the majority white culture (or who do not subscribe to these same norms with respect to gender identity and/or sexual orientation) is a valid one. The impact on adolescents who are in the majority white culture but who interact on a regular basis with people outside their culture (and outside those norms for gender and sexuality)

presents a valid question as well. If people who live (or live with peers who are) outside the majority culture and its norms, how does the lack of access to YA narratives that present those perspectives impact their development of interpersonal and self-supportive strategies?

Alex Wheatle's work in the Crongton series has been identified as writing for the YA readership that is aimed at people outside the majority white culture and outside "traditional" nuclear family norms. In both *East of Acre Lane* and *Liccle Bit*, the protagonists grow up in families that no longer represent the normative institution of two parents (one male, one female) married and working together for the good of the family. They also do not interact with white people, which means that there is no opportunity in either story for white readers to access the story and then gain a sense that members of their culture have reached out to people on the other side of Du Bois' veil and done some sort of good.

When one thinks about the norms that works such as Wheatle's travel beyond, one thinks about the pillars that have been drilled into the ground to hold Du Bois' veil in place. Lindsey Averill (2016) refers to norms as values which are "afforded regular representation and affirmed with positive feedback in terms of acceptability" (30). In other words, characters who appear in YA novels and find acceptance have subscribed to the norms of their culture. There is some unpacking to be done here, before we can move to a specific discussion of *Liccle Bit*.

Averill (2016) argues that the very idea of a "norm" suggests "a determined social construct, boundary, or othering" (30). In other words, when there is a "norm," that also means that there is an "other" which does not meet the criteria for that norm. If we think back to Du Bois' notion of Double-Consciousness, the establishment and propagation of norms play a crucial role in developing and supporting the veil that stands between whites and blacks, and upon which whites have projected a vision of what blacks must really be like.

Consider the "norm" of home ownership. If a child or adolescent reads a novel in which the protagonist's family lives in a home that they own, while that child or adolescent lives in a rented house or apartment, or moves from one home to another because that child's parent(s) have not been able to find stable housing, that reinforces the idea that the child's family is somehow "less than" the normative society. However,

the idea of "Generation Rent" is one that has taken hold in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the developed world, because even in the majority white culture, more young people in the United Kingdom are renting residences for longer periods of their lives than the previous generation (McKee et al, 2017). This provides an example of ways in which YA literature can exacerbate emotional difficulties in children and adolescents who are already failing, at least from their own point of view, to live up to the norms of their society.

When it comes to promoting diversity in the British YA market, though, there is a heightened homogenization – and that homogenization comes from across the Atlantic. Three out of four of the bestselling YA books published in the United Kingdom between 2006 and 2016 had been written by American authors (Ramdarsdan Bold & Phillips 2019). So if a British adolescent of color goes to the YA section in a bookstore, seeing a like cultural voice is unlikely.

The impact of bestelling YA fiction is one that involves the establishment of norms. When the majority of YA novels are written by white American authors and feature white characters (particularly in the most important roles of the story), that perpetuates the ongoing marginalization of people who do not belong to the majority white culture. If one considers the large number of activists that are already beginning to emerge outside the majority white culture in the rising generation, then one sees that there is a considerable amount of potential with respect to increasing the diversity of voices in leadership. As Ramdarsdan Bold & Phillips (2019) point out, such notable youth leaders as Marley Dias –who founded #1000BlackGirlBooks, and Malala Yousafzai, and won a Nobel Peace Prize for her activism promoting the education of girls and young women in countries where the prevailing ideology does not permit or even support that sort of activity –already stand out as leaders for the next generation in terms of activism. This means that writing of Alex Wheatle, for example, is a form of activism in that it brings voices and experiences that were not part of the normative publishing culture out into the open, allowing them to receive greater representation and, perhaps more importantly, undermine the "norms" holding that veil in place.

Without this sort of literary activism, then there is nothing to challenge the veil that the majority white culture has draped across the border, separating itself from people of color. Stories such as the experiences that Biscuit and Lemar go through on the way

from childhood to adulthood are important for everyone to read. They are important for members of the majority white culture to read since they promote the formation of more accurate, less stereotypical or caricatural images and perceptions of people on the other side of the veil. These stories are also important for black adolescents to read as well, because in a literary environment in which one's own culture receives just scant representation, life can begin to feel isolated or marginalized, particularly in the sense that the culture and country in which one grows up is largely alien from one's own culture. Stories such as Lemar's experiences help readers whose backgrounds and backstories are similar to Lemar's understand that they are not alone, that there are other people who have been where they have been.

5.3. *Liccle Bit:* Application of Double-Consciousness

Du Bois' double consciousness helps delineate the duality of the African American in the American social context. The theory presents the extent of the challenges of the black person in an unjust system where their identity and individuality are constantly questioned. While the black man tries to strip off the layers of the racial prejudices and biases embedded in his body, he has to assume a new perception to legitimize his identity. It is highly challenging for black writers to evade the crucial connotations of the theory. For instance, Storhoff and Heinze (1994) point out that Toni Morrison faces a significant dilemma regarding her authorship because she writes for two readerships: white and black. Her work reflects attempts to accommodate the expectations of the white and the black. In this process, Morrison follows literary conventions and at the same time reinvents and transforms abstract categories which the white reader takes for granted (Storhoff and Heinze, 1994). Likewise, in *Liccle Bit*, one could perceive the challenges that Wheatle faces in accommodating the expectations of black and white readers. Through the means of his well-developed characters, Wheatle shows the duality of perceptions that young black men must assume for the sake of their survival.

Although the story centers on Lemar, the character of Manjaro adequately delineates Du Bois' double-consciousness, as evidenced by how he presents the challenges that young black men face in high-poverty neighborhoods. His aggressiveness and hypermasculine behavior reflect the codes of the street enforced to

protect young black men from street violence. In a context where bloodshed and disorder are highly prevalent, young black men have to formulate specific codes to ensure their safety and security through brotherhoods and gang culture. The strength of this protective sphere is reinforced by the recruitment of more young black men, which eventually results in a cycle trapping them into an oppressive system where they are in constant conflict with law enforcement. Although *Liccle Bit* is a young adult novel, it firmly traces the undercurrents of racial injustice. It shows the continuous social imbalances and inequalities impacting inner-city black neighborhoods.

Wheatle's story contains the deeper undercurrents of the sad truth of racial inequality within a language embellished with humor, openness, and utmost sincerity. When McKay, Jonah, and Lemar discuss Tavari Wilkins getting caught selling weed in the library, their discussions unveil the unjustness of a flawed criminal justice system that disproportionately disadvantages marginalized racial minorities. The young children talk about what would happen to Tavari after the arrest. They seem to have a detailed knowledge of a person's experiences if they were arrested. McKay claims that he would be taken to the vet station and beaten up (Wheatle 2015). When Jonah asks him if the feds do such things, McKay replies that they worsen if he were above 16. He claims that they would rape him "with a mallet, give him a serious injection, take out his kidney…" (Wheatle 2015, p. 15). Although McKay could be presenting an exaggerated explanation, there are traces of bitter truths underlying his statements.

The criminal justice system disproportionately disadvantages black people, especially black men. The inequity is highly evident in the statistics that reveal significant differences between white and black people in incidents such as police shootings, arrests, drug abuse, and imprisonment. According to research studies, police shootings of unarmed black people in America is more than three times that of white people, while black people are more likely to be arrested for drug abuse than white Americans (Reality Check team 2020). In this context, it is not surprising that the youngsters had developed an exaggerated view of police brutality that a black man would undergo if he were arrested.

In the current context, young black men are especially vulnerable to police brutality. Their bodies become sites for violations due to deeply embedded perceptions about their aggressiveness. Society presented black men as docile and meek during the

slavery system, whereas it demonized and oppressed them through stereotypes of aggression with social progress. Black men have been described as thugs, which perpetuates the negative stereotype that black life is less valuable (Smiley and Fakunle 2016). The killings of unarmed black men have raised concerns regarding the term's usage and how it reshapes perceptions of black life and black men (Smiley and Fakunle 2016). At the start of the institution of slavery, black males were perceived as docile and ignorant (Smiley & Fakunle 2016). Minstrel shows and blackface perpetuated stereotypes of black life as timid and comedic (Smiley & Fakunle 2016). However, after the Civil War, black people obtained social and political rights through the introduction of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments.

The new identity of black people threatened white supremacy and further instilled fear in the white population of the black people (Smiley & Fakunle 2016). Affluent white people were fearful about black people acquiring political power, and they further saw black people as capable of threatening their security in the labor force (Smiley & Fakunle 2016). The Jim Crow era led to the rise of stereotypes of black people as savage individuals (Smiley & Fakunle 2016). The 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* showed black men as savages who threatened the welfare of white women. The propagandist agenda of the Ku Klux Klan further reinforced the criminalization of blackness. With each improvement in black people's rights, the dominant group attempted to alienate them through the means of stereotypes and prejudicial perceptions. Furthermore, these stereotypes hinder black men from gaining employment. According to Nelson Jr (2015), African-American men had an uncomfortable relationship with men of other races. White men distrusted their black counterparts. In most cases, white men believed that black men were aggressive, and the fear of a lawsuit due to discrimination made them prefer Latinos and Asians. Perceptions of low-income black people on welfare and state employment service programs as lazy and lacking proper training discouraged employers from hiring black people. Furthermore, employers who looked for workers with good diction and mathematic and mechanical abilities avoided low-income black employees (Nelson Jr. 2015). Such forms of discrimination and prejudices disadvantaged black people, especially those from low-income backgrounds.

In *Liccle Bit*, Wheatle exposes the readers to the challenging terrains of the Black experience from the perspectives of young black characters. Their lack of awareness

regarding the inequalities they and their community face is ideal for presenting an uncritical and unbiased view of the general environment. Manjaro tells Lemar about school being a waste of time because "they" want him to go to university and then have a job so "they" can collect his taxes (Wheatle 16). Here, Manjaro refers to the white supremacist political system as "they," thereby distinguishing between them and himself. The line defines how black men are othered by the system, such that they had developed a strong distrust toward the latter. They do not perceive the system as fair to them, so they find it permissible to engage in unlawful activities. In this circumstance, the black men from disadvantaged backgrounds try to bypass the system by engaging in drug trafficking. Also, by emphasizing the separation between the system and himself, Manjaro tries to impart that sense of distrust to Lemar. In this way, criminality permeates society, affecting young black males' welfare and well-being.

The novel also portrays the striking reality of young black children in disadvantaged settings. Lemar, McKay, and Jonah are constantly exposed to the gang culture. In this regard, African American subjectivity is brought to a new framework as the youngsters face the challenges of navigating terrains determined by white consciousness and, at the same time, defined by the conflict that black people have to face. According to Gross (2017), black youths constantly have to face questions regarding the duality of themselves as they have to continually grapple with the reality of police shootings and threats to their lives. For example, Lemar's dad tells him that being an artist is not good for him if his family is not ready to support him (Wheatle 49). His dad says that English and maths are essential and asks Lemar to focus more on the subjects than enhance their artistic skills (Wheatle 49). Lemar's dad further adds that he wanted to be the number one rapper in the world when he was his age, but he could not make it (Wheatle 49). By forcing this reality into him, Lemar's dad is not demotivating him but wants to prepare him for the future world.

The reality is going to be harsh for Lemar because of his race. His dad tries to break his dreams so that he does not get disappointed in the future. He tries to show him the patterns of the social structure that would prevent him from gaining social mobility. This suffocating social structure is often responsible for black youths resorting to drug trafficking as they perceive it as the shortcut to financial prosperity. In addition, drug trafficking was further considered as a means to authenticate one's social status. Like

Manjaro's repeated assertion that school is not going to get Lemar anywhere, many black youths are disillusioned by the unfairness of the system. Instead, they perceive that the only way they could solidify their individuality in a world that tries to alienate them is by breaking the boundaries, thereby demonstrating their fearlessness and hardihood. The duality of the youth identity of African-Americans could be found within popular culture depictions of the black community.

In a world that seeks to emasculate them through racial injustices, black youths constantly have to formulate ways to legitimize their male individualities. Black men are not provided the privileges of hegemonic white masculinity due to their race. In this regard, they must struggle to attain the legitimacy of their masculinity that creates new conflicts for young black men. They resort to physical dominance and aggressiveness for formulating progressive black masculinities (Mutua 2006). As a result, young black men perpetrate violence against women, gay men, and among themselves to complete the process of legitimization (Mutua 2006). All men believed that they must be in control even if they had to use violence. However, their access to violence differs according to their race. For instance, privileged white men can manage the army and law enforcement, thereby legitimizing the use of force even though they do not have to be violent (Mutua 2006). White males could also employ structured violence in the form of sports (Mutua 2006). On the other hand, black men from working-class and poor backgrounds use weapons and their bodies as weapons (Mutua 2006). The media is highly responsible for the construction of physical dominance that eventually demonizes black men. In this regard, black men's bodies reflect the duality enumerated in the theory of double-consciousness. While the racial system turns them into animalistic individuals, popular culture and sports idealize black men for their physical strength and aggressiveness. This conflicting practice shows why black men have to see themselves through the eyes of the other. It is an attempt to legitimize one's masculinity.

The US culture sets a great store by encouraging the citizens to look for excitement and thrill in entertainment. Often, American media attempts to present the social realities of African Americans to thrill its audiences. In this context, media depictions reduce the community members to thugs, murderers, and rapists, thus reinforcing racist stereotypes (Perry 2004). Likewise, the hip-hop culture which emerged during the late 1980s witnessed record companies transforming African-

American gangsters into commercial instruments. The image of the likes of rappers such as Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dog are built upon the authenticity arising from their connectedness to black communities (Perry 2004). Thus, these rappers had to navigate the dual spheres of media and community constantly. The former required them to exhibit gangsterism.

On the other hand, the latter perceived them as successful individuals who had broken from the cycle of poverty. At the same time, their value within the popular sphere is only enhanced through their connectedness to the community. For instance, African-American professional athletes exhibit different values of acceptance and rejection in mass media through the construction of black men's physicality. Their bodies are simultaneously rejected and accepted. As a result, young black males who see themselves as role models also have to deal with the dilemma of this conflict. Capitalist organizations rely on black male models and athletes for selling shoes, music, and other products. In this regard, the double consciousness confers the significance of the duality of vision on the black man. While society alienates him for his aggressiveness emphasized in his black body, it also glorifies him for the same quality.

The glorification of the intimidating black male body permeates mass media narratives, but the dominant system essentially overlooks the system's unfairness toward young black men. The mainstream systems seem to require black men to stay within the traditional paradigms of stereotypes by reinforcing these stereotypes. This process also makes the general public believe that racial integration of working-class young blacks could result in undesirable outcomes. Furthermore, the stereotypes of the dangerousness of the black man's body cause the police to conduct random street searches (Mutua 2006). In *Liccle Bit,* McKay claims that the feds get away with anything and points out a past incident that had killed a person in their neighborhood (Wheatle 2015). He claims that the feds used a grenade similar to those in Afghanistan to kill him (Wheatle 2015). In this exaggeration, one could perceive that black men constantly fear being assaulted and killed by the police because of their appearance. Jonah further supports this statement as he claims that his sister's boyfriend was stopped and searched in a charity shop (Wheatle 2015). Later, Jonah describes that his sister's boyfriend has thick "arm muscles and a crazy bald head" (Wheatle 2015, p. 15). In this regard, Wheatle indirectly points out that the appearance of young black men leads to random street searches. These

men have to assume the duality where they legitimize their individuality through their appearance. This duality is reflected in the division between the neighborhoods. *Liccle Bit* reflects the setting of an inner-city neighborhood where young men often engage in conflicts. For instance, South and North Crongton engage in constant turf wars. The division could have been created as a result of the impoverishment and poverty that permeates this setting. These factors cause young black men to determine specific informal rules centering on respect. Manjaro is an example of how these men set these rules based on their influence and ability to intimidate others. Respect toward the influential person is essential for protecting a young African American man "from the interpersonal violence of the street" (Mutua 2006, p. 87). The street codes collide with the laws of the state. Nonetheless, these codes alienate young black men from their families. These codes govern the lives of Manjaro and his associates. It also impacts the young black youths, as evidenced by how Lemar is brought into the middle of the turf wars.

As the conflict rises, the reader can sense the unease in the characters. They seem to fear its outcomes and about losing their loved ones. In a black neighborhood, everyone has their own story of loss. Even children would have first-hand experiences of violence. When Lemar's mother asks him to walk Venetia home, the latter thanks him and tells that even though she had lived in the neighborhood all her life, she does not feel safe anymore because of the violence around them (Wheatle 85). When Lemar points out that a North Crong youth had been killed, she replies that people always forget what the families of these men go through (Wheatle 85). Venetia further adds that she had a cousin shot by a stray bullet (Wheatle 85). Violence is especially predominant in high-poverty neighborhoods. One of the primary reasons for the violence in black communities is due to black isolation. Young black people are excluded from the white economy and face limitations in gaining social mobility (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). In this regard, specific practices in the ghetto such as gang culture, aggression, and overt sexuality provide a conduit to express an alternative status system (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). The young black man presents themselves as physically tough through their hairstyles, facial expressions, and clothing (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). Even the young black man exhibits street-oriented behaviors such as linguistic patterns and a propensity to use violence (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). Adopting such behaviors could be perceived as a survival mechanism. The youngsters are keen on achieving an elevated status that

they believe can be attained only through criminality and aggressiveness. Furthermore, women in ghetto areas rejected the traditional notions of pregnancy following marriage. They perceived childbearing as a significant expression of status and recognition irrespective of marriage or financial stability (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996).

In *Liccle Bit*, Lemar's sister Elaine shares a child with Manjaro even though they have not reached the stage of financial stability. She lives with her mother, who assumes the burdens of familial responsibility. Likewise, in ghetto areas, mother-only households represent a significant share of the poor, revealing the intergenerational transfer of poverty (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). Research studies have shown that single-parent households are more likely to produce juvenile delinquents. There is a strong association between black female-headed households and the prevalence of black violence (Shihadeh & Flynn 1996). Although mothers are equally efficient in running families, the informal challenges associated with the social structure cause this issue. The rationale behind this trend is that the community's formal and informal capacities are weak in single-parent households, leading to high offending. Likewise, in *Liccle Bit*, Lemar's mother tries to push his father out of the children's life but at the same time realizes that she needs him to maintain stability in the family. For instance, she seeks his help when she feels that Lemar must eventually face the reality of life as a black individual. Lemar's father walked out on his mother, after which she found it challenging to make amends with him. However, the simmering gang culture forces her to seek his help. Similarly, Elaine refuses Manjaro's help in raising Jerome. She firmly believes that she could raise him single-handedly. In addition, Elaine knows that Manjaro would have badly influenced her child. Manjaro argues with Elaine when she refuses money from him. Accepting his assistance would mean that she would have to allow him to access him. This sense of insecurity seems to permeate the black mothers depicted in the novel. They constantly have to fend with the anxiety of the fathers corrupting their children. After the shooting incident, Lemar's mother expresses concerns about the safety of her family. She asks him to come straight home after finishing school. While she laments the shooting incident, sympathizing with the family of the bereaved, she adds, "That could've been any of us!" (Wheatle 2015, p. 75). Her fear reflects the anxieties of every mother in the ghetto. While Wheatle does not emphasize the significance of the mother's concerns, it is evident that they are not unfounded.

As discussed above, Wheatle's *Liccle Bit* might be a young adult novel, but it reflects the racial imbalance and injustice embedded within the American system in subtle ways. It shows the vulnerability of the young black men before the criminality in black neighborhoods. Furthermore, it reveals how these black men have to assume a double-consciousness to legitimize their authenticity. While perpetuating the image of aggressiveness, the young black youths try to attain legitimacy to equalize their status. In addition, violence and criminality are only an attempt to gain social status in a world that constantly tries to reject their masculinity. In *Liccle Bit*, Wheatle appears to reinforce the impressions of gang culture embedded in black neighborhoods. Nonetheless, these impressions reflect reality as black people must constantly fight against the structural inequities that disadvantage them in terms of the economy, politics, and social status. It shows that the gang culture permeates every aspect of society, impacting the welfare of women and children. Manjaro and his associates reflect the sad truth of black neighborhoods mired within gang culture and criminality that traps young black men within a cycle, preventing them from gaining social mobility.

CHAPTER SIX

CONSIDERATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Critical Race Theory, Masculine Gender Theory, and the notion of Double-Consciousness as suggested by W.E.B. Du Bois form the three lenses through which the present study has analyzed four works by Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle. The oldest of the three lenses is Du Bois' construct, which has served as a useful expression for the different ways that people outside the majority white culture have to assimilate within that culture in order to succeed. As was earlier noted, Du Bois developed the term "double consciousness" in order to give figurative expression to the "tragedy of racism particularly for the self-conscious individual, as well as his perceptions of being black in America" (Bruce 1992, p. 307). This happens within just about every vocational or social circle that includes members of the majority white culture. If one seeks to pursue a career as an attorney, there are generally divisions of that community on the basis of their particular specialization, or their membership in a particular bar association. After that, though, comes the requirement to "adapt their socialized world view to function in a culture different than their primaryone" (Sadao 1995, p. 31). In other words, for a lawyer of color to succeed, that lawyer must adapt his or her perspective of the world to meet that of the majority white culture, given the hold that that culture holds on the institutions of law. At times, there can be a gap in expectations that it falls on those outside the majority white culture to bridge on their own, instead of meeting in the middle. The burden of double consciousness is that the majority white culture sets the standards for professionalism on the basis of their preferences. The neoliberal assumption, of course, is that Western society has moved to a postracial, or race-blind, paradigm, but that is simply not true.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) observes that the process of divvying people up on the basis of their race means that the "American-centered social construct" (n.p.) has become the central paradigm. Viewing this through the lens of Critical Race Theory, a paradigm which will undergo review later, this social construct involves the embedding of racism within the social fabric, even though that society claims that racism is a thing of the past. When it comes to double consciousness, though, the dual process that professionals of color, students of color, and members of non-white cultures have to go

through if they want to succeed in any realm that involves dealing with the majority white culture, has more to do with problems that white people have with respect to relaxing their own mores and allowing others to enter enclaves that they had previously considered their own.

The idea of double consciousness first appeared in Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. The aggregate effect of the burdens of double consciousness on the black community has been to produce a combination of paradoxes. People living within the black community are more likely to suffer from poverty and have their expectations for their own future accomplishments lowered. However, they are also more likely to hold a profound religious faith, act with courage in ethical matters, and express themselves artistically (Kirkland 2013). The battle among these various affective and ethical factors is an ongoing one that is the product of a juxtaposition of self-knowledge and the influx of negative feedback from without.

According to Lemert (94), Du Bois' notion of Double Consciousness was one of the seminal ideas with respect to forming the self-concept, along with the paradigms that such thinkers as William James had developed. Du Bois understood how this dual burden would shape the formation of self-concept for enough of the African-American community for it to be considered quasi-universal. In a society that has a clear line between that area inhabited by the majority white culture and those areas inhabited by cultures of color, that line, for Du Bois, influences the ways people on both side of that line develop their notions of identity. The key for members of people outside the majority white culture is the question of attention in wider society. Recognition plays a profound role in the way people understand themselves and the world around them. Whether it is a small child asking a parent to take notice of the scribblings that the child considers an artistic masterpiece, or whether it is a black novelist seeking publication of a novel that he considers to be the next great story, the question of recognition is an important one.

As has been noted previously, both Richard Wright and Alex Wheatle dealt with this question of recognition. Wright grew up in the South, challenged by both whites and blacks for his desire to pursue an education and a career in the field of letters. Wheatle grew up in the United Kingdom and did not initially pursue an education; his choices to pursue petty crime landed him in prison. However, once he got launched in a positive

direction and began his writing career, he had a difficult time finding traction until he switched to the YA genre, because white publishers were having a hard time taking a black writer writing about problematic, contemporary black issues seriously in terms of potential sales.

George Herbert Mead (1964) used the metaphor of a game to describe the ways in which people could move toward recognition in wider society. As children grow up, they learn to play games of increasing complexity. Over time, they learn the rules of simple games and commit them to memory, moving on to more complicated games. As they gain familiarity with a game, they can take on more responsibility within the game, adopting multiple roles when possible. Once a person "takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs" (Mead 1964, p. 219), then he can move into a cohesive self-concept capable of independent existence. An essential part of this process entails understanding the symbolism at work in the various signs that they encounter, whether those signs are people, objects, words, or events. It is that appreciation of symbolism that separates humanity from the rest of creation, and the more people can grasp in terms of symbolism, the more they can understand the subtler forms of communication.

It is the question of the interpretation of signs, of course, that makes negotiating a world that involves double consciousness challenging, and this is where the notion of Critical Race Theory comes in. For example, there is a cartoon named Pepe the Frog that has changed, in a little over a decade, from a harmless drawing into a symbol used by right-wing hate groups. Pepe was the creation of Matt Furie, who started the comic "Boy's Life." In the comics, Pepe and some of his other animal compatriots act like stereotypical young adult males, eating pizza, making gross jokes, playing video games, and using marijuana (Roy, 2016). The comic started in 2005, and three years later, fans started putting images online. There was one particularly popular meme that showed Pepe with the quote, "Feels good, man." This twisted into different representations, including Pepe the Frog with angry, sad or self-satisfied faces. Pepe the Frog has appeared in anti-Semitic memes, and Nazi Pepe became a popular symbol for supporters of white nationalism (Roy 2016).

Pepe's role, going forward, remains ambiguous. Sometimes he appears in memes about how it feels to eat a cheeseburger. However, sometimes he appears in memes in

front of a concentration camp or some other location that suggests the hate of white nationalists. His role is an example of the figurative images that have become crucial elements within what Critical Race Theory calls the normalization of racism. If you accuse people of using Pepe the Frog for racist purposes, they point to the original comic or to the many harmless memes that include his image. However, the fact that he also appears in those other images without being pulled down overall suggests an ongoing comfort with racist rhetoric among the majority white culture – as long as there is at least some degree of plausible deniability involved.

Occasionally, people run afoul of public sensitivities just enough to suffer the consequences of their use of this type of trope. In Denton, Texas, an assistant principal self-published a children's book called *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede*, and he was subsequently removed from his leadership position at the school because the book caused enough of a distraction (Young, 2017). By the time Hauser published his book, Pepe the Frog had gathered enough of a following among racists who supported Donald Trump for the character to garner awareness outside the majority culture. In the book, Pepe and Pede fight an alligator named Alkah, who wants to take their farm. Alkah wears a beard. Parents at the school where Hauser taught found the book to be offensive enough to advocate for Hauser's removal from his leadership position. He was also sued by Furie (the creator of Pepe) for copyright infringement and ended up having to give any profits from the book to the Council on American-Islamic Relations in the settlement (Young, 2017). The point of this is example is to serve as a bridge to our concluding observations on Critical Race Theory, showing the progress that has happened to this point – as well as the progress that still remains to be made.

Critical Race Theory is a paradigm for understanding and interpreting the world, giving people a way to identify, analyze, and confront iterations of racial inequality as they appear within wider society. It assumes that power relationships and social formation generated race as a construct, leading to the ongoing practice of racism. Theorists who use this paradigm attempt to find ways in which structures in society that seem innocuous, at least at first, instead not only condone the presence of racism but work to perpetuate it. Rather than holding to a particular set of beliefs, though, thinkers who pursue Critical Race Theory tend to look for one or more of a common set of themes when they analyze phenomena within society. One of them is that racism is the norm in

American society, as opposed to some sort of ugly exception to the rule. Their argument is that racism has been part and parcel of the power structure in the United States since the colonial era and the establishment of that triangle trade that brought the first slaves to the continent. Obviously, it has been over 150 years since slavery officially became illegal in the United States, with that illegality not just established by statute but through amendments to the United States Constitution. However, it did not take long for the former Confederate states to dismiss with the brief and furtive machinations of Reconstruction and institute the Jim Crow system of laws that inflicted the same sort of hate on black people in the South. Only now black people, while legally free, were largely stuck working for a pittance for many of the same employers that had previously owned them, with the only protection in place the fact that they now had to provide for themselves in a system that still viewed them as less than human.

It took the threats that the Civil Rights movement brought to the economic security of the United States, through the threats of civil disobedience, to move the nation toward laws that provided greater of equality. However, while such practices as separate school systems (and separate water fountains and restrooms) for white and black may have passed from American culture, such racist practices as redlining on mortgage applications remain in place, only now they are better concealed in economic arguments. The caricature of the slave overseer has been replaced by the calm mien of the banker, shaking his head at the mortgage application of a black applicant who simply applied for a loan in the wrong neighborhood, according to the bank's actuaries.

In the background, Critical Race Theory assumes that white supremacy remains a staunch priority for the majority white culture, and even though the strategies to maintain that supremacy might have increased in subtlety, they have not decreased in terms of the commitment that the power structure has put toward their maintenance. When one thinks of the term "white supremacy," one often thinks of Ku Klux Klan marches, of crosses burning in front yards, or of racist alt-right Twitter pages. However, white supremacy also refers to a power dynamic

> "…in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (Ansley 1997, p. 592).

White privilege is a principle that runs all the way back to the founding of the American nation, at which point the only people who could vote were white men who happened to own property, and that privilege remains an important dynamic in American social fabric.

Understanding the viewpoints of people of color is also key in understanding Critical Race Theory. People who have lived through oppression understand the impact that it has on them, and taking the time to consider their perspectives is an important part of moving toward wider advocacy. Taking the time to listen to these perspectives is also important because the viewpoints of people within a culture are almost never homogenous. An essential part of Du Bois' idea of double consciousness is a veil that hangs across the line separating the majority white culture from people of color. White people tend to create an image of people of color based on their stereotypes, prejudices, and preconceptions, preventing them from being able to see the reality on the other side of the veil. Listening to the different perspectives of people of color shreds the veil, turns one image into an infinite number. When people read the work of Alex Wheatle, they encounter protagonists and other characters who challenge the stereotype of the veil, and they come across as having a lot in common, at least in terms of dreams and aspirations, with people in the majority white culture. The fact that there are such different philosophical paradigms at work in the black community in Wheatle's works provides important insight into the important truth that the black community, as in any community, is comprised of individuals, each with their own story, their own perspective, their own priorities – just like majority white culture. However, while that veil remains in place, this truth will not become widely recognized.

The questions of intersectionality and converging interests are also an important part of Critical Race Theory. Intersectionality has to do with the fact that there are multiple forms of oppression that can hold one person back at one point in time. Policies that serve the wealthy over the poor are not all racist in nature; sometimes, though, they combine with other policies that have as their target those who would move toward prosperity. When it comes to the convergence of interests, there have been points in history when making at least incremental progress toward racial equality also served the interests of the majority white culture. One of these moments took place during the Civil Rights movement, when social unrest in the United States reached a crucial juncture,

making some reform necessary for the common good (or at least the economic good). Moments of convergence of interest are not just a phenomenon of race relations. The Great Depression was a moment of great expansion of government, not just because President Roosevelt wanted to end poverty, but also because the mass numbers of unemployed people moving about the United States represented the potential for significant social disorder and upheaval. Adding a government jobs program on a massive scale gave these unlucky people something to do and a way to support themselves, and so their need to steal and cause other forms of disorder had vanished.

The third lens under consideration here is that of masculine gender theory, which came into being as the other side of the coin that first appeared as feminist theory. Gender theory has expanded since the 1960s and 1970s, when feminism was the primary gender theory under consideration. Masculine gender theory has not come into being with the sort of activism that has long marked feminism, because of the power position that men already occupy in mainstream society. Instead, masculine gender theory has focused on the ways that men form their own identity and has actually served as a critique of some of the more common iterations of masculine identity, pushing instead for practices that are less expressive of misogynistic assumptions.

The work of Camille Nurka (2012) proved crucial in the examination of the novels in the present study. She provides an intriguing analysis of the distinctions between two terms that, for some, are viewed as synonyms: *shame* and *disgust*. However, she differentiates between the external qualities of disgrace, as opposed to the internal qualities of shame. Disgust comes from without and may be applied to one's physical figure, at least from a visual standpoint, while shame comes from within and has more of an emotional component. Nurka (2012) equates shame with the female experience; when women break rules with respect to mores in society, they are expected to be filled with shame. When men break rules, they receive disgust from others, but that disgust can pass after a period of time. With respect to Richard Wright's protagonists, the formation of identities as men in their society represents an important theme for both of them. While Alex Wheatle's works are less ambitious in terms of scope than Wright's, thanks to their placement in the YA genre, his protagonists also have to make steps toward autonomy as a man in a difficult neighborhood, far from economic and ethnic privilege. In the cases of all four works, the characters have to go through experiences

where they have to shrug off disgust and move forward. In the case of Wheatle's protagonists, both of them emerge from that crucible whole. In the case of Wright's protagonists, the shame that the women in their lives attempt to project on them leads to an ongoing sensation of disgust that is difficult for them to shed and plays a significant role in the adjustment issues that they both face in the adult world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

When one considers the relevance of Critical Race Theory to literary analysis, as in the works of Richard Wright, one considers ways in which writing propagates the institutionalized racism that, since the Civil Rights Era, has become part and parcel of mainstream society. As mentioned previously, the transformation of the oppressor from the caricatures of the plantation overseer and the hooded Klansman to the young white man holding a watch, turning the black worker from a slave into an automaton while making the transformation seems like a positive development for all concerned, yet is one of the most corrosive changes in race relations in the years since the mid- twentieth century.

When one considers the relevance of Critical Race Theory with respect to works of Young Adult (YA) literature, one really moves beyond the niceties of rhetorical and literary argument and more to the transmission of values from one generation to the next. The vast majority of experiences of YA literature comes when the reader is in that formative time of his/her life when s/he forms beliefs about himself/herself and about others that will play an important role for much of life ahead. This means that Critical Race Theory also has significant implications when it comes to education. It is true that many adolescents read independently, but it is also true that the first experience with many novels comes in a classroom, under the guidance of a teacher.

Education has long played a role in determining attitudes about race relations. In some American states, the public school system was not segregated, but throughout much of the United States, for example, white and black people went to separate schooling systems even when they lived in the same community. The *Plessy v Ferguson* case, just a few decades after the Civil War and Reconstruction, established a schooling systems had to be "separate but equal" in terms of opportunity. In practice, this led to two systems of education in the same community, one for whites and one for blacks. While the one for black people had buildings and books, those facilities were often as distinct, in terms of aesthetics and practical usability, between those of the First World and those of the Third World, even when the schools only sat a few miles apart. It was not until the *Brown v Board of Education* decision that education became integrated for

students in the K-12 years throughout much of the United States. The idea of "equal treatment under the law" became an important principle that bolstered the self-concept of many people of color, giving them the impetus to advocate for themselves when majority white culture institutions failed to meet those requirements in local settings.

So when we consider areas for future research, interactions between Critical Race Theory and education come to mind. Choosing which novels to teach in a middle-school classroom (where most YA novels are taught) is an important part of curriculum design. From the viewpoint of Critical Race Theory, the establishment of an official curriculum for a school system provides the majority white culture with a way to maintain its own viewpoint as the official line that students learn. Swartz (1992) argues that writing one official curriculum "silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, white, upper-class, male voicings as the 'standard' knowledge students need to know" (341). This means that the stories of people outside the majority white culture do not receive the same hearing as stories within the culture – or, as has been mentioned previously, as stories that involve people outside the majority white culture but also involve interactions with the majority in ways that make the majority culture appear benevolent, or in ways that seem to suggest that past struggles have come to an end, and there is little need for further activism.

As has been mentioned earlier, there is a neoliberalist move toward discussion of a postracial society that is designed to accomplish two goals at once: acknowledge the existence of past injustices and difficulties, and suggest that those injustices and difficulties are now as archaic as the arrowheads that one finds in museums about Native American culture, instead of remaining as a latent portion of the structure of Western society. As King (1992) argues, one way that this happens in the social studies classroom is by "misequating the middle passage with Ellis Island" (327). The idea that everyone is an immigrant in the United States sounds pleasant, until one remembers that European settlers had a great deal more choice in the decision to come to the New World (unless they had been sent to the prison colony in Georgia), and even if they chose to make themselves indentured servants in order to leave Europe behind, they were not stacked in the holds of ships, were not involuntarily pulled from their lives in Africa, were not counted as three-fifths of a person for taxation and representation purposes, and were not considered property. Once they had fulfilled the terms of their servitude, they were

allowed to move about freely in society, instead of living under constant suspicion and oppression, as were freedmen who had had their slavery come to an end by one way or another. This whitewashing of slavery minimizes the outrage of the slave practice and makes a mockery of the oppression that continued during Jim Crow and still continues in our own time.

Another area of research that becomes relevant is instructional methodology, particularly in the English Language Arts classroom. When viewed through the Critical Race Theory lens, the present set of instructional strategies is based on the assumption that African-American students have some sort of deficiency, and so there is a constant push in education for classroom teachers to find a way to bridge the gap between African-American students and students in the majority white culture. This can read as pedagogical concern, but it can also read as a desire to bring students under control. Because so many African-American students learn in districts where they are automatically branded "at-risk" because of their ethnicity, they enter school already presumed to require remediation.

This is an example of the normalization of racism that Critical Race Theory seeks to bring to light and correct. The philosophical foundation behind these assumptions is to act as though race is not part of the educational calculus and that, instead, the welfare of the individual is paramount. This means that education is reduced to a set of skills that are supposed to work for everyone. When those skills do not pay off, it is the students who are viewed as insufficient in some says.

There are already some examples of instructional methods that are breaking away from the cookie-cutter approach. One is Jaime Escalante, a math teacher in Los Angeles whose innovative methods for teaching AP Calculus were made famous in the film *Stand and Deliver*. His belief that every student can learn flies in the face of the cookie-cutter approach, which teaches that every student should be able to learn, and those who fall by the wayside do so because of their own choices.

Another area in pedagogy that is worth further research has to do with the assessment that is conducted on students, particularly in the field of English Language Arts. One of the more intriguing types of assessment takes place over reading comprehension and asks a series of multiple choice questions about passages that students encounter. The difficulty associated with answering these questions is not just

a matter of Critical Race Theory; it is a matter of pedagogical concern for all students. One example came from Texas in 2013 and 2014, when the Grade 8 and Grade 7 STAAR Reading Tests, respectively, contained poems by Sara Holbrook. The printing of "Midnight" on the test contained a stanza break that Holbrook had not included in the original version; the break was there to make publication more convenient in terms of pagination. In an article for *Huffington Post*, Holbrook (2017) went through the questions asked about "Midnight" and found that she could not answer many of them definitively. She derides the high-stakes testing industry as consisting of "[i]diotic, hair-splitting questions, pertaining to nothing" (n.p.) – and these are tests that determine whether a student passes to the next grade or has to take remedial classes the next year in lieu of an elective.

The scholarship holding that standardized testing perpetuates a system of racial oppression is plentiful. As Steven Singer (2019) notes, the widespread system of standardized testing has been in place since the 1920s – a time when students could drop out at the age of fourteen, and students who had special needs were either shoved into separate classrooms and ignored, at least from a pedagogical standpoint. Nowadays, special needs students stay in the general education classroom as long as possible. The philosophy of discipline, which was punitive in his paradigm in the 1920s, has changed to one of counseling and restorative justice. Technology has gone from writing on slates to creating on tablets. However, standardized testing still remains basically the same slog, answering questions using a set of four possibilities, locking the students down to guessing instead of figuring out a complex answer.

As Singer (2019) notes, mass testing actually began during World War I, on soldiers. The Army Alpha and Beta tests were designed by a group of psychologists to determine which recruits had superior mental ability – and which recruits were inferior. The tests were written using assumptions that came from eugenicist paradigms, in other words, paradigms that suggest that some races have superiority over others. The research that emerged from these tests was used to justify everything from forced sterilization laws for people who possessed traits that were considered "defective" to Jim Crow laws and institutionalized segregation. The *Buck v Bell* decision in the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the constitutionality of the sterilization of individuals considered "feeble-minded," may have been the low water-mark in this debate.

The same people who wrote the Army Alpha and Beta tests wrote the first Scholastic Aptitude Test – the SAT. The purpose of the test was to ascertain which students would fare well in a university campus and which would not. In today's era, as it did back then, the test privileged students from the majority white culture over students from other cultural backgrounds. Just about every other high-stakes assessment test has been designed using the SAT paradigm (Singer 2019).

If one looks at this through a Critical Race Theory lens, one views standardized assessment and intelligence testing as part of an intentional campaign to provide concrete support for the myth of the African-American student as deficient, by whitewashing the prejudiced assumptions with numbers that make the prejudice look nothing more than rational (Alienikoff 1991). The idea that there is some sort of scientific basis for the control of black people by the majority white culture has been around a long time. According to Crenshaw (1988) the purpose of this ongoing practice is to keep alive "a mythology about both Blacks and Whites even today, reinforcing an illusion of a White community that cuts across ethnic, gender and class lines" (1371).

If one looks at a cookie-cutter classroom in which the pedagogical assumptions include the idea that students not living up to the approaches approved by the majority white culture must be deficient in some way, then we see plenty of ripe territory for investigation. Standardized tests tell us what students can and cannot answer (or guess) on a multiple-choice framework. However, most of the information from a standardized test is negative, in the sense that policy planners understand what skills students still lack from the outcomes. There is a failure to provide information on the positive side of the equation, which is to say that policy planners do not get much information about students do know and can do from a series of multiple-choice questions. Instruction in English Language Arts must include methodologies of instruction, curriculum design and assessment that transcend the antiquated – and intentionally aimed – assumptions that date back earlier than the Great Depression. Finding new ways to help all students learn, and to help students understand the systemic patterns of racism that govern American society, should be a central goal of English Language Arts instruction. No other discipline has such influence over a student's success, given the fundamental role that reading and communication play in student prospects down the road.

Richard Wright fought to get the education he felt that he not just deserved but needed if he were to escape the crippling cycle of racism and poverty that greeted him as a young boy at various points in the American South and followed him to Chicago, where he did not escape the labyrinth of low-pay, low-skill jobs until he established himself as a writer. Alex Wheatle did not pursue those same educational opportunities early in life, but as one can see through the ideas of such characters as Jah Nelson, education for all, particularly the oppressed, is crucial.

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